

Construction of the Small-sword

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Using a small-sword requires great skill and precision. Many masters have written treatises on the principles of using this light, elegant and lethal weapon. In addition to principles on use, they have written on what to look for when having one constructed for oneself. Here are few comments from the treatises of L'Abbat, Liancour, Blackwell, and Angelo.

In terms of length, at least two of the masters, Liancour and Blackwell, prescribe 36 inches as being the maximum blade length. Angelo says that the sword should be proportional to the height and strength of the swordsman and that it should not exceed 38 inches in length from pommel to point. If the swordsman is giant or diminutive in stature, though, perhaps it would be better to use L'Abbat's prescription for the length of a small sword as measured relative the body:

“The length of the blade ought to be proportionate to the Stature of the person who is to use it: the long sword, from point to pommel should reach perpendicularly from the ground to the navel, and the shortest to the waist...”

(Monsieur L'Abbat, *The Art of Fencing or the Use of the Smallsword.*)

All the masters, except for Blackwell, take great care to emphasize the correct way of mounting a sword. They are especially alert to the danger of filing the tang too thin in order to save time in filing holes in the guard and pommel. The resultant empty space between tang and guard and tang and pommel is filled up with many pieces of wood. When this is done, according to L'Abbat, the “sword is not firm in the Hand.” Liancour put it this way:

“When filing, it is necessary that the guard and the pommel be well filed and pierced inside, because its better that the opening in the Guard and the hole in the pommel be big rather than altering the tang of the sword. This is the steel that is at the end of the blade, and we enter it into the guard, grip and the pommel. The fourbisseur will only put a little bit of strong wood in order to hold it firmly. Ordinarily if we take the guard and file the tang too much in order to save filing, and then put wood all around on the inside of the Guard and the pommel to fill the empty space, the sword is never truly firm. This is what is necessary to make the guard. I advise you look to mount it as such. A lot of swordsmen have had great accidents when the sword came apart in their hand from the least parry or beat.”

(Sieur de Liancour, *L'Exercice de L'Epee Seule dans sa Perfection*)

Of course, riveting the tang to the pommel is mandatory for Angelo, L'Abbat and Liancour.

Once one knows how the small sword is assembled to assemble the small-sword properly (that is, properly sized holes in the guard and pommel, a properly sized tang, and only a little wood stuck in the assembly to keep it firm), then it is time to test the blade. There are several tests recommended by the masters. After looking for flaws in the blade across and lengthwise (flaws traveling across the blade are more dangerous than those traveling lengthwise, according to Angelo, Liancour and L'Abbat), then it is time to test the temper. The most common test, to be found in Angelo, L'Abbat, and Liancour, involve pushing the blade against the wall. A second test is recommended by Liancour and L'Abbat, in which they advocate breaking the point.



Testing against the wall involves pushing the blade against a wall or other barrier. If the blade bends at only the tip, it is faulty. If it bends in a semicircular manner and springs back to being straight, then it is a good blade. If it bends and springs back to a slightly deformed shape, then it is not perfect, but not so bad that we would not use it. Its bending in the first place indicates soft tempering. Blades that are hard and stiff and do not give are likely to break, since they are hard-tempered.

The other test is to break the point of the blade and investigate the end of the broken blade. Both Liancour and L'Abbat say that if the break is gray, then the tempering is good, and if it is white, then the tempering is poor.

Each of these masters offer further tests for the blade that the other does not. Liancour offers something called the "Cat's Tour," ". . . leaning the blade strongly against the wall or other barrier making a tour of the blade by making a double circle, and then letting it fall via a movement of your wrist." (L'Exercice de L'Epee Seule dans sa Perfection.) The reference to a cat may possibly come from the tail-like convolutions of the blade. L'Abbat, for his part, recommends striking the blade with "a key or other piece of iron, and if it gives a clear sound, there is no hidden fault in it."

Blackwell recommends against using Spanish tucks. Although they are "the best blades for fencing," "they are too heavy for dueling." He recommends the light German blade. Angelo prefers the hollow blade "because of its lightness and ease in the handling." Both Liancour and L'Abbat tell us that we must not force the bend, as it may cause the blade to be weakened and break upon use. Liancour says that, "sometimes the blade does not break with these tests at the time we perform them. But having been weakened by our original efforts they may fail at the first trying." It would seem to be common sense not to bend the blades too much when testing them, as they might be weakened and fail in a serious encounter.

When it comes to canting the blade, Liancour states only one way--straight. L'Abbat does not state his preference, but allows for variety. Angelo recommends canting the blade:

"Some men choose straight blades, others will have them bending a little upwards, or downwards; some like them to bend a little in the forte, and others in the foible, which is commonly called the tour de breteur, or the bully's blade."

(Monsieur L'Abbat, *The Art of Fencing or the Use of the Smallsword*.)

"You must observe that the gripe of the sword be put on quite central to the heel of the fort of the blade, which should have a little bend above the fingers, when in hand, and let the whole mounting be turned a little inward, which will incline your point to carte. This way of mounting you sword will facilitate your disengagements, and give you an easy manner of executing your thrusts."

(Domenico Angelo, *The School of Fencing*)

Finally, the masters offer advice on grips and guards. Both L'Abbat, Blackwell and Liancour prefer long, flat grips. L'Abbat and Liancour allow the reader to make his own choice regarding round or square, flat or rounded, long or short and two lunettes or one. Both L'Abbat and Liancour prefer two lunettes on the guard, although they ultimately leave the matter up to the reader.

"But I am of the opinion that each should choose according to his inclination; because if the backside is advantageous against the coups d'estramacon and protects the fingers, then it can be dangerous when it comes to seizures."

(Sieur de Liancour, *L'Exercice de L'Epee Seule dans sa Perfection*)



“Some like square handles and others choose round; the square are better and firmer in the hand but as this difference depends on Fancy, as does also the Bow, which in some cases may preserve the Hand, but may be a hindrance in closing, I shall leave it to the decision of the fashions.

(Monsieur L'Abbat, *The Art of Fencing or the Use of the Smallsword*)

Whatever your preferences, take heed of these masters' advice when testing blades and choosing small-swords. L'Abbat, Angelo, Blackwell, and Liancour were all in the business of preserving their students' lives. Everything which is contained in their treatises concerning using the small-sword is for naught if it bad workmanship is involved.

