

Samurai: Art of Armor

SAMURAI WARRIORS RULED JAPAN FOR NEARLY A millennium, from the twelfth through the nineteenth century. Their armor and other battle equipment, once functional military gear, evolved to become coveted symbols of wealth, status, and power. These materials focus on the special exhibition *Samurai: Japanese Armor from the Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Collection* (on view through February 1, 2015). It features both the practical armor used from the Kamakura (1185–1333) through the Momoyama (1573–1615) period as well as the largely ceremonial objects of the Edo period (1615–1868). Educators and students will learn about the samurai, one of the most iconic warrior figures of all time, as well as his role in the wider context of Japanese culture.

The legendary samurai, still frequently depicted in art, literature, and film, symbolized courage, loyalty, and honor. The fierce yet refined imagery of samurai is perhaps one of the reasons they still captivate us today. The name "samurai," stems from the word *saburajū*, meaning "to serve by one's side." These warriors followed a code of idealized behavior known as the "way of the warrior," or *bushido*, which focused on seven virtues: honesty, courage, respect, benevolence, rectitude, honor, and loyalty. *Bushidō* also prescribed acceptance of death, as exemplified by the fact that samurai preferred to commit ritual suicide by disembowelment, known as *seppuku* or *harakiri* rather than seem disloyal or suffer a stain on their character.

The elaborate armor and battle gear of the samurai speaks to their duties as both warriors and statesmen. A suit of armor could withstand the rigors of warfare but was also an aesthetic object appropriate for public display.

The armor and trappings of a samurai comprised his *omote dōgu*, or "exterior equipment," and often had extravagant and expensive decorations finely crafted by skilled artisans. Elaborate elements, such as the deer antlers on the helmet illustrated in this packet symbolized a warrior's bravery and sometimes made it easier to identify him on the battlefield. More than just practical outerwear, *omote dōgu* signified the samurai's status as a warrior, member of an elite class, and man of honor.

Bu and Bun

At first, samurai practiced only the art of war. Later, during peacetime, their responsibilities grew to include administrative positions, and samurai had to master literacy and learning. The warriors were expected to be well rounded; they trained their bodies and hearts for war; and their minds for intellectual pursuits. The ideal samurai thus combined *bu*, killing and the art of war, and *bun*, the art of learning. Elite samurai warriors patronized artists, writers, and scholars, often sponsoring playwrights and poets. Many samurai also composed their own poetry, studied the art form of calligraphy, practiced the delicate art of the tea ceremony, and sought mentoring in etiquette from priests.

During the Muromachi period (1392–1573), shogun (although appointed by the emperor, they were the de facto rulers of Japan and samurai were loyal to them) exerted a profound cultural influence. They amassed impressive collections of paintings (one of which is included in this packet), enthusiastically supported theater, and sponsored the construction of beautiful temples and gardens in Kyoto. Many warriors practiced Zen Buddhism. Its emphasis on discipline, the transience of life, and acceptance of death—complemented the samurai code of honor.

Historic Rise . . . and Fall

Samurai, part of the elite members of society, represented only eight percent of the population. The rise of this warrior class in Japanese culture initially resulted from the inward focus of the emperor and his imperial court, neglecting many administrative duties. Gradually, Japan became fragmented into small, feudal domains controlled by provincial lords or daimyo. The system was similar to European feudalism, with castle lords and their vassals. The daimyo in turn cultivated samurai to help protect and maintain his lands. The increasingly number of samurai created a surge in demand for arms and armor as several craftsmen were needed to make the many different elements required to outfit men and horses. The imperial court would become largely ceremonial, and by the end of the twelfth century, Japan was governed by a military government led by the shogun, or chief military ruler. Eventually, the dress, cultural values, and traditions of the samurai came to dominate Japan.

In 1543, a group of Portuguese sailors, whose ship had been blown off course, landed on the coast of Japan. With them, they brought the matchlock gun, and Japanese warfare and samurai armor were forever changed. Suddenly, traditional armor was ineffective. In response to these new weapons of war, small leather and iron plates gave way to larger, full-frontal iron sheets similar to the armor worn by European knights.

The Edo period (1615–1868) was a time of relative peace accomplished by the Tokugawa shogunate that would prove lasting. Samurai remained ready for combat and kept their privileged status, but they served more as bureaucrats and civil leaders than active warriors. Armor became a leading symbol of pageantry and prestige. Samurai would dress themselves and their horses in full armor and carry weapons for parades and the mandatory biannual processions between their home domains and the capital, Edo (present-day Tokyo). Since the size and splendor of the convoys reflected a daimyo's status, significant resources were invested in creating pieces of great artistic refinement meant to impress, as seen in the included images of samurai cavalry.

In 1853, American Commodore Matthew C. Perry landed on the shores of Japan. He demanded trading rights and forced the weak government to sign a treaty with the United States. This opened Japan to the US and the world. The Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown during what became known as the Meiji Restoration. In 1876, samurai were forbidden by law to wear swords, something that had previously been required and visually designated samurai as part of the elite class. The samurai class was officially dissolved during the Meiji period (1868–1912), but the samurai's experience in government and administration allowed them to make vital contributions to the emergence of a new, modern Japan.

Four images of samurai armor and accoutrements are provided here.

Credits

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Evenings for Educators is made possible by The Rose Hills Foundation, the Joseph Drown Foundation, and the Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation.

Education programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are supported in part by the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education and the Margaret A. Cargill Arts Education Endowment.