

Samurai: A life of art and war

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さむらい

侍
samurai
warrior

よろい

鎧
yoroi
armour

かたな

刀
katana
sword

ぶん ぶ

文武
bunbu
cultural and
military virtues

Samurai were the warriors, rulers and aristocratic elite of Japanese society for more than 800 years. From the twelfth century through to the Meiji Restoration and modernisation of Japan in 1868 the Shōgun, regional lords and their warrior retainers (all samurai in their own right) ruled the country and lived to a strict code of ethics. This military aristocracy of feudal Japan aspired to a life of spiritual harmony that not only perfected the art of war but also embodied an appreciation of the fine arts that established their life as an art form itself.

The origins of samurai culture can be traced back to ancient ceramic figures of warriors and actual surviving suits of heavy armour from the Kofun era (300–710). However, it was during the Heian period (794–1185) that individual warrior clans developed a characteristic style of Japanese armour and weaponry, along with the ethical code of *Bushidō*, the 'Way of the Samurai'. The Heian period came to a violent end with the Genpei War (1180–85). Screens and woodblock prints of this turbulent time show samurai in full battle regalia, sprinting into battle on horseback or engaging one another in man to man combat that reveal the magnificence, bravery and pageantry of the warriors themselves.

The end of the Genpei War ushered in the beginning of the Kamakura Shōgunate and marked the rise of military (samurai) supremacy and the suppression of imperial power, a situation that lasted for the next six centuries. This monumental period in Japanese history saw the samurai in times of war and peace, pursuing achievements in the realms of culture (*bun*) and arms (*bu*).

During this period the samurai held art in the highest regard. They commissioned the world's finest metal smiths to forge swords and wore ornately designed armour with decorative helmets. They rode horses with brilliantly designed lacquer saddles, stirrups and woven bridles. Because they risked their lives in battle, these warriors cultivated a consciousness for living life as richly as possible, which led to a deep reverence for the arts and literature. Not only were they skilled swordsmen and archers, they were also great patrons of the masked Noh theatre, and famous for their practice of Zen philosophy, calligraphy and tea ceremony. The tea ceremony became a fundamental part of facilitating political strategy, negotiating alliances and was often seen as a peaceful way to soothe confrontational situations between families or rivaling factions. The Samurai were renowned as custodians of classical literature; they took great pleasure in the sophisticated noble pastimes of falconry, incense games and poetry games, and many became accomplished poets. Their philosophical approach to life and death can

be found in the practice of death poems, which samurai would write in their final hours.

Empty-handed I entered the world
Barefoot I leave it.
My coming, my going –
Two simple happenings
That got entangled
Kozan Ichikyo, d. 12 February, 1360

The sword is often called the 'soul of the samurai' and was deemed sacred as the symbol of the warrior. The technical mastery achieved in Japanese steel making, where metals were blended, heated, folded and hammered over and over again, produced the sharpest cutting implements in the history of armaments. This, combined with their elegant curving shapes, mirror-like texture, icy blue-grey colour and ornate sword guards, made them universally admired and culturally important.

The other great symbol of the samurai was their distinctive and evocative armour, which was used for both protection in battle and as a way to express their personality and presence on the battle field. Several styles with striking ornamentation developed over the centuries using a combination of solid, large, curving metal plates (as seen in this armour's chest plate), and many individual hardened iron or leather scales connected with leather or silk cord (as seen on the shoulder guards, neck guard and apron). Further distinctive features include solid helmets with decorative insignia, and highly expressive face-plates. Such dramatic armour not only evokes images of ancient warriors on the battle field but also has had a great impact on creators of our own times: film makers George Lucas (*Star Wars*), Steven Spielberg and Quentin Tarantino all describe the strong influence of the samurai films of Akira Kurosawa on their own work.

In 1868, when Japan signed trade treaties with America and European nations, the feudal system in which the shōgun and regional lords controlled the country came to an end. The new parliamentary style government forbade samurai from carrying swords and removed the privileged social status on which their lifestyle depended. The era of the samurai came to an end. However, to this day their virtues of honesty, courage, benevolence, respect, self-sacrifice, self-control, compliance with duty and loyalty, coupled with participation in a culturally refined life, are a model to many.

JAPANESE

Suit of armour (Yoroi 鎧)
Edo period 江戸時代 1600–1868 Japan
metal, wood, pigment, lacquer, gold
paint, silk, cotton, leather, metal thread
(a-k) 136.0 x 56.0 x 45.0 cm (overall)
Gift of Mrs Henry Darlot, 1888
(2066.a-k-D1A)

