

Bun and Bu: Balancing Military Prowess and Artful Living

THE HISTORY AND TRADITIONS OF THE SAMURAI

Samurai Military Gear: Swords

Although usually made for battle, armor and weapons were mostly used for ceremonial and symbolic purposes. The types of weapons that samurai were permitted to carry depended on their status and role. Look at the following samurai arms and armor and read the description to answer the questions. Use the accompanying image descriptions for further information.

In early periods foot soldiers used lances, while mounted samurai carried bows and arrows, spears, and long swords slung blade down from the belt. In the Edo period (1615–1868), the sword slung from the belt continued to be worn by daimyo and high-ranking samurai. The key symbol of the samurai during this time was a sword worn tucked with the blade facing up into the belt. Only members of the samurai class were allowed to wear this type of sword. It was often paired with a shorter sword, as seen here.



Short Sword (*wakizashi*) and Long Sword (*katana*) with blade mountings. Japan. Muromachi period (1333–1573). Forged and tempered steel, sharkskin, black lacquer, gold on bronze. *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B64W7 and B64W8.

Q. The samurai's sword was a work of art as well as a highly effective weapon. How did the design of the sword and the use of it in battle allow a warrior to satisfy the code of the samurai?

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Samurai Military Gear: Guns



Matchlock pistol (*bajozusui*). Japan. Edo period (1615–1868). Iron, wood, lacquer, gold, and silver. *Gift of Dr. and Mrs. William Wedemeyer, 2004.39.*

A major change in weaponry took place around 1543 when the Portuguese brought the matchlock gun to Japan. The introduction of firearms resulted in developments in both armor and architecture that could withstand gunfire. The gun proved very difficult to use, especially when trying to shoot from horseback. The matchlock pistol could only shoot four bullets per minute, and samurai would have to lock and load in between each shot. Imagine how difficult it must have been to load a gun and shoot with precision on a galloping horse.

Q. How and when did the gun become part of the weaponry of the warrior?

Q. Why do you think the samurai continued to use swords when guns were available?

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Samurai Military Gear: Armor



Suit of armor. Japan. Edo period (1615–1868). Black lacquered iron plates, leather, textile, and silk cord. *Gift of Mr. R.P. Schwerin, B74M7.*

Samurai helmet with a half-face mask, approx. 1615–1650. Japan. Edo period (1615–1868). Iron, leather, laminated paper, lacquer, and textile. *Gift of Dr. William A. Galeno, B87M22.*

Samurai armor was made in several styles and was constructed chiefly of leather and small iron plates. The plates were layered to form horizontal tiers, to which lacquer was then applied, making the armor strong and waterproof. Sections were laced together with thick, colorful silk cord.

Samurai armor evolved along with military tactics and weapons. Early types were suitable for fighting on horseback but too heavy for foot soldiers. By the late 1600s, lightweight suits of armor covering the whole body were the fashion, however, daimyo continued to wear earlier types of armor as symbols of status during ceremonies.

Q. How would you feel if you were wearing the helmet with the mask and armor during battle?
Give examples of how the armor and helmet integrate beauty and design with function.

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Samurai Military Gear: Camp Jacket



Military camp jacket (*jinbaori*; front and back shown), 1700–1868. Japan. Edo period (1615–1868). Brocade, wool, fur, and ivory buttons. *Gift by transfer from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1988.3.*

The military jacket was worn over a suit of armor. It offered protection from the elements, but was also a fashion statement. Its bold patterns, rich materials, and striking color contrasts were designed to leave a memorable impression on enemies. The military jacket spoke volumes about the wearer's rank, identity and wealth.

Q. This jacket is from the Edo period (1615–1868) when the role of the samurai was often ceremonial rather than military. How does this jacket reflect this peaceful time in the history of the samurai?



War fan (*Gunsen*), 1800–1850. Japan. Edo period (1615–1868). Iron, bamboo, paper, colors, and lacquer. *Bequest of Frank D. Stout*, F1998.40.2.5.



War fan (*Gunbai*). Japan. Edo period (1615–1868). Bronze. *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B62M37.