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# JAPANESE ARMS AND ARMOUR

## History of the Samurai - 'those who serve'

From the 9th century AD, landowners with links to the Japanese Emperor rose to prominence and attracted armed supporters or 'retainers' who became the *buke* (the upper classes). From this social elite were drawn the samurai, a noble caste that included women, children and non-combatant men as well as warrior males.

Over the next two centuries, two clans – Taira and Minamoto – clamoured for power, a struggle that culminated in the Genpei Wars. Taira and Minamoto samurai warriors wore red and white, the families' respective colours, and carried fans displaying a rising-sun symbol. These became Japan's national colours and emblem. They can be seen today on the country's flag, which represents a red sun disc on a white background. Victory for Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1185 led to him becoming the first shogun with nationwide authority. The feudal shogunate system supported the samurai as a martial aristocracy and the vehicle through which military power was exercised. The Emperor's role was retained but he was reduced to a mere symbolic figure for nearly 700 years.

Samurai favoured rigorous Zen Buddhism and followed bushido ('the way of the warrior'). This training included archery, horsemanship and swordsmanship. It also taught adherence to a strict moral code emphasising frugality, self-control, courage and loyalty until death. This often resulted in a samurai committing *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment) upon the death of his lord. During the medieval period many of the greatest samurai heroes appear. Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–89) and Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336) both died heroes' deaths and are still regarded in Japan as epitomes of the samurai ideal.

Later, in 1702, another event further enmeshed the *samurai* code into Japanese life. A group of 47 samurai sought revenge for the suspicious death of their lord by killing the perpetrator and placing his head on their lord's grave. As a final act of conscience and loyalty, these *ronin* ('masterless' warriors) all committed *seppuku* and were buried at the Sengaku-ji monastery in Tokyo.



Print of the legend of the 47 Ronin; 1989.44.87

The story of the '47 Ronin', entered over time into folklore, a mythical metaphor for the moral qualities to which all good Japanese people should still aspire. This theme of self-discipline, sacrifice and devotion was embodied by the kamikaze pilots of the Second World War.

However, the samurai ideal was not always upheld. During the Sengoku ('Warring States') Period (1478–1615), Japan experienced ongoing civil strife. A samurai's *giri* (obligation) to his lord was often forgotten when treachery and opportunism became necessary to survive. Three great 16th century *daimyo* (feudal lords) – Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu – successively ended this chaos to create a united Japan. As grand minister in 1588, Hideyoshi codified the samurai caste as permanent and heritable and forbade non-samurai to carry weapons. These laws sought to prevent peasant uprisings and effectively end the social mobility that had hitherto characterized Japan and which had, ironically, enabled Hideyoshi's rise to power from his lowly origins.

By 1615, Tokugawa had suppressed the *daimyo*, eliminating potential threats to his power and ushering in the peaceful Edo period (1603–1868). Many retainers of dispossessed *daimyo* had to swap their warrior roles for posts as diplomats or administrators, whilst around 500,000 samurai became wandering, redundant *ronin*. By the 18th century, bushido had almost disappeared, but a few strove to keep the code alive. Miyamoto Musashi, probably Japan's greatest samurai swordsman, developed a school to teach his unique techniques. His *Book of Five Rings* (1645), a treatise on sword strategy and philosophy, is still studied today.

During the 19th century, dissatisfaction with the old shogunate order resulted in civil war. Upon the restoration of Imperial rule in 1867–8, the special status of the now-archaic samurai was retracted. However, the rapid modernization of the Meiji period (1898–1912) rekindled an enduring nostalgia for the samurai as a symbol of Japan's glorious past and traditional culture.

## Japanese Armour

The distinctive appearance of Japanese armour derives from the padded styles imported from China and Korea during the first millennium AD. By the late Heian period (10th century), the box-like *o-yoroi* ('great armour') appeared. It comprised a *dō*, a body armour that wrapped in a 'c' shape around the body, and a *haidate*, an armoured thigh-guard apron. These were made of varying-sized strips of lamellae (small plates or scales arranged in overlapping horizontal rows) or iron plates, held together by silk lacing. Protecting the head was a large, multi-plate *kabuto* (helmet) fitted with a wide *shikoro* (neck guard) and large *fukigaeshi* (turn-backs). These hallmarks of Japanese armour design were to remain largely unchanged for centuries, bar certain refinements and cosmetic alterations.

The early samurai were, first and foremost, mounted warriors, the bow taking precedence over the sword. To prevent *o-yoroi* being too heavy to wear on horseback, leather was used to cover less vital areas of the body. Accompanying the armour were fabric undergarments and animal skin boots, mounted with brass splints to prevent cuts to the feet. The *bushi* warriors observed a rigid hierarchy in footwear materials, only generals or *daimyo* being permitted to wear the highly prized bearskin. Soft leather, mitten-like boots were worn underneath.



Stenciled leather inner-boots;  
1901.46.1.16-.17



*Kabuto* with crescent moon crest;  
1942.1.375.1

In 1543, the Portuguese introduced firearms to Japan. This resulted in a demand for simpler, sturdier armours that could be produced *en masse* to feed the internal conflicts between rival provincial states that dominated Japan until the early 17th century. These new armours reflected considerable European influence in their use of chain mail, a hinged plate cuirass (breastplate and backplate) and a three-plate, morion-style helmet known as a *hineno zunari kabuto* or 'head-shaped helmet'. *Kabuto* often featured crests such as a crescent moon, the Buddhist symbol of the impermanence of life.

As an added protection, *kabuto* were also worn with a *mempo* (face mask). These could be embellished with moustaches, teeth and fearsome expressions. However, they could also cause fatal misidentification on the battlefield prompting the use of other identifiers such as *sashimono* (banners). The *zunari* helmet and *mempo* are said to have inspired Darth Vader's helmet in the Star Wars films.

During the peaceful years of the Edo period (1603–1868) armour became more decorative than functional. On alternate years the *daimyo* were obliged to travel to Edo (modern Tokyo) seat of the *shogun*. They took large samurai entourages with them on these long processions, which were dressed and equipped in a way that declared their lord's power and prestige. Armour was a tableau for displaying messages. Many were adorned with sacred or cultural symbols and *kamon* (circular heraldic badges). Some very ornate armours were presented as diplomatic gifts.



Display armour, Edo period;  
1901.46.1

In the early 18th century, the master armourer, Arai Hakuseki, expressed his dissatisfaction with these showy, impractical armours and a nostalgia for the grand *o-yoroi* armours of the past. His treatise, *The Armour Book in Honcho-Gunkiko*, heralded a shift back to the past in armouring styles. Whilst it is generally possible to date European armours to within a 10–20 year range, it is more difficult to pin down exact manufacture dates for Japanese armour. This is due to more subtle stylistic changes, the mix of old and new and the extremely high quality of the *tosei-gusoku* (modern armours) that revived archaic forms.

This suit was made in the 18th century by the Unkai school but superbly imitates the style in fashion during the late Muromachi period (late 16th century). For example, the pared-down *zunari kabuto* (helmet) discussed above has been replaced by an 18-plate *suji-hachi kabuto* reminiscent of that era.



▲ *Tosei-gusoku* armour, c.1700; 1941.4.58

Japanese armour possesses a unique beauty and it is thus not surprising that suits and accessories became especially collectable after 1868 and the decline of the samurai. Many examples now reside in museums and private collections around the world.

## Japanese Archery

Mounted archery was the primary and most respected mode of Japanese warfare until the introduction of firearms in the 16th century. As a reflection of this, archery equipment was beautifully crafted, the quivers and specialized deerskin gloves often bearing decoration and *kamon*. Quivers were typically made of basketwork, paper and leather and contained arrows of bamboo and bird feathers. Unusually, the quiver was sealed at the top. Arrows were stored nock downward and pulled out through a flap at the base. This may have been to aid quick retrieval in battle or to prevent rainwater getting into the quiver.



Black and gold lacquered quiver with arrows, marked 'Japan, Yokohama, 1873'; 1992.16.3

The *yumi* was the longest bow used anywhere in the world, measuring 2.2–2.7m long. Although ostensibly similar to the English longbow, its limbs were in fact asymmetrical, the grip being positioned one third of the way up to enable use on foot or horseback. Such bows were 'composite' and usually comprised three layers – a rigid wooden core sandwiched

between flexible bamboo on the back and belly. These layers were then glued, bound with cane strips and lacquered. The art of *kyudo* ('Way of the bow') is the oldest of Japan's martial arts, while *shajutsu* (military archery) was a vital skill of the samurai. Training included *kasagake* (aiming for a hat on a pole) and *inouemono* (shooting at dogs in a fenced-in paddock) whilst galloping on horseback. The master archer, Heki Danjo (died 1502) maintained a philosophical approach, stating that a great Japanese archer must possess the correct focused mental attitude as well as skill.

During the Kamakura period (1185–1336) samurai also practised archery for purposes of sport or ceremony. For example, *toshiya hiyakazu*, the ability to stand and shoot arrows continuously along a roofed gallery from dawn until dusk, was considered a great entertainment skill and also provided a great public spectacle.

Bows continue to play a significant role in Japanese culture. They are used to celebrate New Year and a baby's birth while the sound of a bowstring being plucked is said to ward off evil spirits.

## Japanese Staff Weapons



Detail of *jumonji-yari* (trident spear), shaft inlaid with abalone shell and lacquered. Retrieved from Utsunomiya battlefield, Tokyo, 1868, when the Imperial army routed the shogun's men; 1936.12.3

Japanese staff weapons were used by *samurai* and ordinary foot soldiers. Spears or *yari* date from early times and were generally not for throwing. Their blades ranged from 15cm to 64cm (6–25 inches) in length whilst the poles ranged from 1.8m to 2.4m (6–8 feet) and were sometimes lacquered and inlaid with shell. The most common weapon of this type was a pole affixed with a sword-like blade known as a *naginata*, traditionally used by samurai women defending a fortification while their men were away.

## Japanese Swords or *nihon-to*

Japanese blades assumed their trademark curve by the 10th–13th centuries when it was discovered that a curved sword could be drawn more quickly and provided a more effective cutting angle. However, their single-piece steel construction lacked durability, a weakness exploited by the tough leather armour of the Mongols in the invasions of 1274 and 1281 when only violent typhoons saved the Japanese.

The legendary sword-smith Masamune Okazaki overcame this problem by developing the classic two-piece blade, formed by 'sandwiching' *shingane* (a soft low-carbon core) within *kawagane* (a hard jacket steel). Generally, only *tanto* (a 'dirk' or long dagger) remained single-piece constructions from this point on.

There arose five main sword traditions, each with their own smithing method – Yamoto, Yamashiro, Bizen, Soshu (founded by Masamune) and Mino – from which

hundreds of smaller schools derived. More than 30,000 smiths appear in recorded Japanese history, with around 300 active today. Many of these modern smiths take part in a competition in Masamune's name to create an exceptional sword.



*Tachi* blade and *shira saya* (wooden storage sheath). Mino school, c.1350  
The *tachi* is the only Japanese sword worn and displayed blade down;  
1938.35.1436

Making a Japanese sword is a complex process. It takes a smith two weeks to forge a blade since the jacket steel may be folded up to twenty times. Forming the *kissaki* (point) requires the utmost skill, explaining why a sword's value is largely determined by the quality of the *kissaki*. To achieve its famed hardness, the blade is heated to 800°C, then plunged into cold water, a process that actually alters the atomic crystalline structure of the metal. Polishing takes another two weeks, using polishing stones of ten or more different grades of roughness. This fully exposes the beautiful products of the forging process, such as the *jihanda* (wood-grain effect) or the *hamon* (the 'temperline' on the cutting edge).

Japanese swords are usually displayed horizontally, the blade facing upward, so that the *hamon* can be seen and appreciated. Specialist craftsmen make the furniture worn by the blade. This comprises the *koshirae* (soft mounts) and the *kodogu* (metal mounts). The *saya* (decorative sheath) often has small pockets for *kozuka* (knives) and *kogai* (skewers).



Single-edged *kozuka* (scabbard knife) with bronze handle, embossed with gilded dragon, mountain and clouds;  
1934.25.56



Warriors practised with wooden swords to avoid harm to themselves and the precious blades. A blade's sharpness was tested up to sixteen different ways. One of these involved cutting through the bones of the corpses of criminals. The results could be inscribed on to the *nakago* (known in English as the 'tang'; the extended part of the blade that forms the handle). Other inscriptions on the *nakago* could include the signature of the smith, his place of work and the date of manufacture.

Example of an *oshigata* (rubbing of *nakago* inscription) giving the date of blade manufacture. It uses a *nengo* (dating method) that refers to Japanese historical periods. The inscription reads, 'KANEI JU SHI NEN HACHI GATSU KICHI NICHI', which means, 'A lucky day, 8th month, 14th year of Kanei era', i.e. August, 1637.

(Image courtesy of Richard Fuller)

By the 1390s, Japanese swords had become lighter with long, slender blades and Samurai were seen in civilian dress wearing the *katana*. This long sword was said to represent the soul of the samurai and only they were permitted to wear it. It was usually worn as a *daisho*, that is, paired with the *wakizashi*, a shorter sword. The *daisho* came with a variety of decorative mounts to suit the occasion. Samurai also wore paired swords in combat, usually favouring the *tanto* (dagger) and the *tachi*, the original Japanese long sword worn blade down, traditionally for use on horseback.

The *katana* eventually succeeded the *tachi* during the civil wars of the Sengoku period (late 15th–16th centuries) as it was slightly shorter in length (averaging 70 cm) and worn blade up in the girdle, making it easier to draw in close combat and wield on foot. The *tanto*, on the other hand, survived longer in common usage. These rather plain and functional weapons were intended for stabbing and committing *seppuku*, the ritualised suicide demanded by bushido to prevent enemy capture and the shame that accompanied defeat. The *tanto* were still carried, and *seppuku* still practised by officers during the Second World War, many of whom were descendants of old samurai families.



*Daisho* (pair of swords) made by Echizen Kuni Kanenori c.1670;  
1929.17.3

*Tanto* (dagger); 1925.10.1.1

There are several parallels between the historical trends in sword making and armour manufacture. The mass-produced armour of the 16th century civil wars was paired with lower quality, rapidly-produced swords, known as *kazuuchi*. The records of this time show one smith producing thirteen in a single week. The social upheavals also led to some merchant and lower classes wearing short swords, a trend deemed dangerous by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1588. His famous ‘sword hunt’ policy forbade peasants from owning weapons, returning that exclusive right to the *bushi* (warrior) classes.

The peaceful Edo period (1603–1868) favoured well-made, highly decorated swords to accompany ostentatious armours. This heralded the Shinto (‘new’) era of sword making. Just as the 18th century beckoned a return to the antique styles of armouring, it also witnessed a revival of sword-making in the classical Koto (pre-1596) tradition. This became known as the Shinshinto (‘new new’) sword era

which, fuelled by the bubbling nationalism and militarism of the 19th century, resulted in the production of many fine, robust and practical blades.



Mounted *katana* with black lacquered scabbard incised with cloud patterns; 1936.12.6

After 1868–77, sword making as a craft virtually ceased to exist, as the samurai were abolished and the carrying of swords banned. Many were sold to, or collected by, Europeans and Americans. Japanese soldiers began to carry machine-made, western-style cavalry sabres. The huge demand for swords during Japan's expansion into Asia and the Pacific in the early Showa period (1926–1945) meant munitions-standard arms had to be supplemented by *gendai* blades, that were modern in concept yet hand-crafted in the traditional way.

## Further Reading

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## Websites

Glossary of Japanese Armour

<http://www.blackhydraarmouries.com/Glossary/Glossary2.htm>

Richard Stein's Japanese Sword Guide

<http://www.geocities.com/alchemy/nihonto.htm>

### Objects featured in this factsheet can be found in the following cases:

<b>Upper Gallery</b>	<b>Case U6A</b>	<b>leather boots kabuto (helmet) suits of armour jumonji-yari (spear)</b>
<b>Upper Gallery</b>	<b>Case U10A</b>	<b>unmounted tachi blade kozuka (knife) daisho (pair of swords) tanto (dagger) mounted katana sword</b>
<b>Upper Gallery</b>	<b>Case U14A</b>	<b>quiver</b>

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