WHAT IS THE ‘WAY OF THE WARRIOR’?

The exhibition Samurai: The Way of the Warrior focuses on the design and function of samurai weapons and armor. Samurai were the warriors of feudal Japan, whose origins were traceable to the 10th century. With a name meaning “to serve,” samurai were tasked with defending and serving Japan’s emperor and daimyo, or powerful landowners.

The samurai were not only an organized military group, but also a powerful class of people within Japan’s social hierarchy. These warriors valued honor, loyalty, bravery, and self-sacrifice. Eventually, those values were codified in a set of behaviors called bushido—“the way of the warrior.” According to the code of bushido, a samurai was expected to be both a fearless fighter and cultured thinker.

Samurai played an important role in shaping Japanese culture and society. As you explore the exhibition, you’ll see examples of fine craftsmanship while learning more about the beliefs and practices of these famous warriors.

HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Japanese history is often divided into periods spanning many years, marked by the transition from one ruling group to another.

- **794 - 1185: HEIAN PERIOD**
  *Birth of the samurai. The Heian Period is a long span of peace when the arts flourish and imperial power is at its height.*
  
  1002 Murasaki Shikibu’s Tale of Genji is the world’s first novel.
  1180 Genpei War begins between the powerful Taira and Minamoto clans.

- **1185 - 1333: KAMAKURA PERIOD**
  *Marks the rise of the samurai caste and Japanese feudalism. Shoguns become Japan’s de facto rulers.*
  
  1192 Shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo establishes a military government supported by samurai.
  1274 Mongols invade Japan, but are defeated by samurai.

- **1333 - 1465: MUROMACHI PERIOD**
  *A time of instability, with changing leadership and competition among the daimyo.*
  
  1400s Training centers are established to teach Japanese swordsmanship.

- **1465 - 1615: SENGOKU PERIOD**
  *Continued instability and warring among provinces.*
  
  1467 The Onin War breaks out, initiating the decline of shogun power.
  1542 Portuguese traders introduce firearms to Japan.

- **1615 - 1868: EDO PERIOD**
  *A period characterized by economic growth, strict social order, and isolationist policies.*
  
  1700 The 47 Ronin (leaderless samurai) avenge the death of their master.
  1853 U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry forces Japan to open its ports to foreign trade, beginning a period of modernization and eventual decline of the samurai.
THE ORIGINS OF BUSHIDO

Japan was the home of samurai culture, but the principles that guided samurai warriors were drawn from moral and spiritual belief systems that flourished across Asia. The three philosophies described below were particularly important influences on the samurai way of life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Originated in</th>
<th>Key belief</th>
<th>Influence on samurai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BUDDHISM</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Individuals are reincarnated after death until they transcend all suffering and desire.</td>
<td>Warriors were expected to tolerate suffering and have no fear of death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFUCIANISM</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Virtue in human relationships leads to harmony in the world.</td>
<td>Warriors showed total devotion to the master they served.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHINTOISM</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Rituals tie individuals to ancestors and local spirits.</td>
<td>Warriors revered their country, clan, and emperor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FEATURED OBJECTS

As you move through the exhibition, keep in mind the objects on display represent the responsibility, honor, and sacrifice that samurai warriors incorporated into aspects of their daily lives. The discussion starters below will allow students to imagine what living the Way of the Warrior entailed.

ARMOR

Samurai armor could serve both ceremonial and practical purposes. The armor shown here has many different components, including a helmet, mask, shoulder pads, arm and leg guards, and a breastplate. All the pieces were attached to the suit separately to allow as much flexibility as possible.

Much like European knights, samurai were charged with fighting for a lord. Compare the samurai armor in the exhibition with the armor shown in this Italian portrait.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How do these suits of armor differ in structure and materials? How are they similar?
What would be the advantages and disadvantages of each type in battle?
Why might something practical (like armor) be made with decorative or artistic elements?
ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM
Want to extend the samurai experience into your classroom? Try one of the hands-on activities below.

DESIGN A SAMURAI MASK
Many samurai helmets had detachable masks that protected the face and frightened the enemy. Have students sketch their own samurai masks, considering the following questions:

- How much of your face will your mask cover?
  More coverage means more protection, but it can also make it more difficult to see and move around.
- What facial expression will your mask have?
  Think about what kind of reaction you would want an enemy to have when looking at your mask.
- What colors and materials will your mask contain?

Using an assortment of construction paper, markers, and other art materials, students can make prototypes of their samurai masks. Use a hole punch and twine to complete the masks. Discuss as a group: Would wearing your mask make you feel more confident in battle? Why or why not? Are there activities we do today that involve wearing a mask? What similarities and differences can you see between samurai masks and masks that are worn today?

TRAIN LIKE A SAMURAI
Samurai took their training and personal development very seriously. From a young age, daily training in swordsmanship and other battle skills was an important part of the samurai warrior’s routine. How can training help improve skills? Have students keep a training journal to find out.

Each student should choose a skill, sport, or hobby that s/he would like to learn or improve. For two weeks, students should record information about their training in that activity – how long they spent practicing, what they did, and how they felt after practicing. At the end of the week, have students evaluate any progress they made. Share results as a class, and discuss any patterns that they notice. What effect did training have on their skills?
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Want to learn more about the samurai? Check out these sources.

BOOKS

Juvenile Fiction:
- *The Smallest Samurai* by Fiona French
- *Three Samurai Cats* by Eric A. Kimmel, illustrated by Mordicai Gerstein

Historical Fiction:
- *Of Nightingales that Weep* by Katherine Paterson
- *Heart of a Samurai* by Margi Preus

Non-fiction:
- *Inside Story: A Samurai Castle* by Fiona Macdonald
- *Samurai: An Illustrated History* by Mitsuo Kure

FILM

*NOVA: Secrets of the Samurai Sword*, 2008. 56 minutes.

WEB

*Curriculum Unit: Arts of the Samurai*, Asian Art Museum, [http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/no-keys/42](http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/no-keys/42)

*Imaging Japanese History: Lesson Plans for High School*, The Program for Teaching East Asia at the University of Colorado at Boulder, [http://www.colorado.edu/cas/tea/curriculum/imaging-japanese-history/](http://www.colorado.edu/cas/tea/curriculum/imaging-japanese-history/)

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Bushido** “Way of the Warrior,” the samurai code of conduct and honor.
- **Daimyo** A powerful lord who ruled over a large amount of land.
- **Kabuto** A samurai’s helmet.
- **Kami** A divine being in the Shinto religion.
- **Katana** A long, single-edged sword.

- **Lacquer** A liquid that dries to form a hard protective coating for wood, metal, and other substances.
- **Ronin** A samurai whose master has died or lost power.
- **Shogun** The title for hereditary military rulers who governed Japan between the 12th and 19th centuries.
- **Tsuba** A decorated sword guard typically made of steel.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

Visit [www.ringling.org](http://www.ringling.org) or contact Bonnie Thomas, Scholastic Programs Coordinator, at bonnie.thomas@ringling.org or 941.359.5700 x3705.

This exhibition is organized by Contemporanea Progetti, Florence, Italy in collaboration with the Museo Stibbert. Support for this exhibition was provided in part by Sarasota County Tourist Development Tax revenues; the Amicus Foundation Endowment; the Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Foundation Endowment; The Japan Foundation, New York; and The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Foundation.