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## Title of Object

Red-and-blue-laced Suit of Armor from the Kii Tokugawa Family

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown Japanese; Artist: Helmet by Saotome Ichika

**Date of Object:** early 17th century

**Accession Number:** 2009.60a-s

**Material/Medium:** Iron, leather, lacquer, silk, wood, gold leaf and powder, bear fur

**Department:** Japanese and Korean Art

**Culture:** Japan, Edo Period

**Country:** Japan

**File Created:** 10/1/2016

**Author of File:** Jung Wendeborn

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 1/31/2017

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## Tour Topics

Symbolism; Fashion/Dress; Group 1 tour; Fashion, Style, and Trends; Patron; Ceremony; Power/Status; Leaders; Identity; Conflict/War

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

What have you noticed first?

This armor was likely used only for display and ceremony, representing the owner's wealth, artistic sensibility, and proud military identity. Which part(s) of the armor, do you find, represent(s) those qualities?

How would you feel if you wear it?

What would be your impression if the armor was made with single color?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

The suit includes a helmet, face-mask, shoulder guards, cuirass (breast plate and back plate), forearm sleeves, thigh guards, shin guards, and bear-fur boots. Specialized craftsmen laced together hundreds of lacquered metal and leather plates with red and indigo silk cords to give the suit its distinctive appearance and flexibility.

The helmet bowl consists of 124 plates, an unusually high number, designed in an upside-down acorn shape. A praying mantis, gilded with gold, is poised as if to strike its prey.

Several ancient civilizations considered the praying mantis to have supernatural powers; for the Greeks, it had the ability to show lost travelers the way home; in the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead the "bird-fly" is a minor god that leads the souls of the dead to the underworld. Two martial arts separately developed in China have movements and fighting strategies based on those of the mantis.[73][74] As one of these arts was developed in northern China, and the other in southern parts of the country, the arts are nowadays referred to (both in English and Chinese) as 'Northern Praying Mantis'[75] and 'Southern Praying Mantis'. [74] Both are very popular in China, and have also been exported to the West in recent decades. (Wikipedia)

The helmet is signed by Saotome Ichika, a famous armorer during the late 1500s and early 1600s. This is a tailor-made suit and based on its integrity, quality, and artistry it was designed for a specific, high-ranking wearer: The Kii Tokugawa family and given its age, might have belonged to Tokugawa Yorinobu (1602-1671), founder of the Kii Tokugawa family branch. He was the tenth son of Ieyasu. Yorinobu was daimyo (feudal baron) of the Kishū Han.

The armor has probably never worn in battle. In the early centuries of the feudal period there was frequent warfare among the lords of the samurai. But during the Edo period (1615-1868) Japan was, for the most part, stable and peaceful. During this period, some samurai paraphernalia was more ceremonial than functional.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Although an emperor reigned in Japan since ancient times, by the late 1100s powerful military leaders were challenging the power of the imperial court. From the thirteenth century on, Japan was ruled through a dual government structure. While the emperor retained cultural and religious sovereignty over the nation, the military elite during this period assumed political and economic leadership. This system of governance remained in place until the late 1800s.

Samurai became the military nobility of Japan, their chief duty to protect and honor their master. One samurai wrote, "When one is serving officially or in the master's court, he should not think of a hundred or a thousand people, but should consider only the importance of the master." To have a selfless, at times senseless, devotion to their master brought honor to the warriors and their descendants. (Wikipedia)

With Japan at peace from around 1615, armor was used for ceremonial occasions and for the regular compulsory processions from a daimyō's regional domain to the capital of Edo (Tokyo). These processions were an opportunity for a daimyō to display personal taste and the size and splendor of his cortège were recognized as an outward indication of his status. Most of the armor produced at this time

was made purely for procession or parade purposes. They were relatively light and, being made of lacquered leather rather than iron, were far more suited to processions. However, important defensive sections of these suits were still made of iron, and the helmets – the most important part of a suit of armor – were often remodeled from earlier periods to be both decorative and effective. (V&A)

Samurai teachings remain embedded in modern Japanese life. Karate, Judo, and Aikido stem from the original samurai combat tradition. (Wikipedia) The ruling military elite were expected not only to master the arts of war, but also to acquire literary and administrative skills. Many senior samurai were well versed in poetry, were patrons of painters and sculptors, and attended the literary salons held by imperial court nobles and monks. (V&A)

The Tokugawa clan's triple hollyhock crest (Tokugawa aoi), similar to a three-leaf clover, appears on the hand-guards and the gyōyō, the leaf-shaped plates that protect the fastening cords of the cuirass. The crest indicates that the armor belonged to a Tokugawa family member. Tokugawa Ieyasu was the founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan; which effectively ruled Japan from 1600 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

When Samurai became in power and were in position to be commissioning art, they wanted to display their wealth, status, and heritage. So, art of Samurai arms and armors became very beautiful.

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### **Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

This magnificent suit of Japanese armor in exceptional quality and pristine condition came out of the Kii Tokugawa family and given its age, might have belonged to Tokugawa Yorinobu (1602-1671), founder of that family branch. Specialized craftsmen laced together hundreds of lacquered metal and leather plates with red and indigo silk cords to give the suit its distinctive appearance as well as its flexibility. The suit includes a helmet, face-mask, shoulder guards, cuirass, forearm sleeves, tassels, thigh guards, shin guards, and bear-fur boots.

This is a tailor-made suit and based on its integrity, quality, and artistry it was designed for a specific, high-ranking wearer but probably never worn in battle. In 1927, it was acquired by the Idemitsu Museum of Art in Tokyo, a private institution founded by an oil company, refocusing its collection on Chinese ceramics and Japanese paintings, it deaccessioned it in 2009.

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### **Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)**

Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokugawa\\_Ieyasu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokugawa_Ieyasu)) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantis#In\\_mythology\\_and\\_religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantis#In_mythology_and_religion)

Asian Art Museum's Education Website (<http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/artwork/samurai-armor>)

The Art of Armor (Samurai armor from the Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Collection) by The Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Museum

Khan Academy website (A brief history of samurai armor, from Asian Art Museum, video): <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/art-japan/kamakura-period/v/samurai-armor> And an Introduction to the Samurai: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/art-japan/kamakura-period/a/an-introduction-to-the-samurai>

Christie's, entry for suit of armor (see lot essay): <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/red-and-blue-laced-gold-lacquered-honkozane-nimai-do-gusoku-armor-5253831-details.aspx>

Artsmia.org: <https://new.artsmia.org/teaching-the-arts/japanese-samurai-armor/> AND <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/108860> AND <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/stories/601> And a video, on how to put such a suit of armor on: <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/stories/599>

Victoria and Albert Museum: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/samurai-japanese-arms-armor>