

KNIGHTS IN ARMOR



JULY 1-OCTOBER 10, 2022

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Mounted figure with equestrian bard: Italy (Brescia). Suit of armor, 1560–65; Europe. Chanfron, mid-16th century; Europe. Bit and bridle, 16th century; Europe. Stirrups, 16th century; Europe. Elements of barding (peytral and crupper), 19th century



Surrounded by an air of danger and mystique, a knight in shining armor captivates people of all ages. He embodies notions of adventure, bravery, honor, and romance. Although part of a bygone era, he is a recurring hero in our books, movies, and video games to this day.

As a mounted soldier who fought in battles, jousts, and tournaments, a knight required special cladding to cover his body from head to toe. This exhibition serves as a grand introduction to the role of the knight in European history and the arms and armor created to protect and adorn him and his horse during the Renaissance. Drawn from the world-renowned collection of the Museo Stibbert in Florence, Italy, it presents more than one hundred works of art, including helmets, shields, swords, and paintings. Through arresting objects and engaging didactics, the exhibition encourages an appreciation of the form, function, and decoration of arms and armor.

The origins of the knight can be traced to the age of Charlemagne (747–814). During the Middle Ages, knights wore *chain mail*, armor made of a mesh of interlocking rings. This exhibition focuses on a later chapter in their history that began in the Renaissance. Just before 1500, knights transitioned almost completely to wearing plate armor, which provided superior protection by encasing their entire bodies in a dozen or more shiny metal plates. Wearable sculpture and fashionable dress as well as defense, plate armor was produced in sophisticated shapes and enhanced with etched and embossed ornament and inscriptions. Horses were elegantly outfitted in it too. The widespread diffusion of plate armor brought about a change in how knights fought one another on the battlefield. Against plate armor, swords—the weapon most associated with knights—were less effective, which led to a greater emphasis on the development of guns and cannons. As firearms became better and more common, the utility of full armor in turn gradually declined. To be bulletproof, plate armor had to get thicker and thicker, until it became so heavy that it was impractical to wear. By the second half of the seventeenth century, it was no longer being worn by combat soldiers; during the eighteenth century, many of Europe's great armories, such as the one assembled by the Medici family of Florence, were auctioned off and dispersed.

A new interest in historical arms and armor emerged during the Gothic Revival, a nineteenth-century movement characterized by an admiration for the culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. With tremendous enthusiasm, the Anglo-Italian art collector Frederick Stibbert (1838–1906) began assembling his collection in 1859. This exhibition provides an extraordinary occasion to see in the United States many of the finest examples of Renaissance arms and armor from his one-of-a-kind museum, housed in a villa perched on a hillside above Florence.

COVER: Northern Germany, Close helmet, ca. 1550
All works: Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy

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