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侍 SAMURAI

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

INGRAM GALLERY

NOVEMBER 4, 2016–JANUARY 16, 2017

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Samurai: The Way of the Warrior

explores many of the codified traditions surrounding members of an elite military class that dominated Japanese politics from the late twelfth through most of the nineteenth century. The term *samurai* roughly translates to “those who serve” and, as early as the eighth century, samurai existed as armed supporters of regional wealthy landowners. The imperial court came to rely on these professional warriors to squash rebels in outlying areas. Over time, the samurai and the lords to whom they pledged their allegiance (*daimyō*) consolidated enough political power and financial resources to rival those of the emperor. The Genpei War (1180–85) established the primacy of the warriors over the nobility and led to the emperor’s appointment of Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199) as the first *shōgun*, or military commander. The *shōguns* and their followers would rule Japan until 1868, when, in the wake of Commodore Matthew Perry’s forceful opening of the country to the West, the emperor was reinstated as the supreme head of state and shogunate rule was abolished.

The prominent position of samurai for nearly seven hundred years profoundly affected Japanese art and culture. This exhibition includes over ninety beautifully ornamented functional and decorative objects that relate to samurai life. Many are directly

connected to their military role, including nine full suits of armor and twelve *kabuto* (helmets). Armor for upper-level samurai was very striking, intricately constructed with materials such as bearskin, buffalo horn, horsehair, ivory, lacquer, and silk. Yet it was also highly functional, providing exceptional protection as well as freedom of movement. Additionally, the armor expressed the individuality and power of the warrior and, when not in use, was often displayed in his home. The long curved *katana* sword is the weapon most associated with the samurai and perhaps the most important part of a suit of armor. The extreme sharpness of the blades has become legendary, but *katana* are also noteworthy for beautiful embellishments on the hilt, scabbard, and *tsuba* (guard).

The Edo Period (1615–1868) under the Tokugawa shogunate brought 250 years of stability and isolation to Japan, causing the samurai to lose much of their military function. Instead, they focused their attention on bureaucratic duties and adopted pastimes such as poetry, music, and tea ceremonies. Many luxurious lacquered, inlaid, and gilded objects were made, reflecting the more aristocratic administrative role of samurai in this era of peace.

All these magnificent objects are drawn from the Museo Stibbert, a museum primarily devoted to arms and armor in Florence, Italy. The Stibbert’s Japanese collection is considered one of the oldest, largest, and most important outside of Japan.

