

## Take One Samurai Suit of Armour

# ASHMOLEAN

This Ceremonial Suit of Samurai Armour is on display in Gallery 37, Japan 1600 - 1850

A zoomable image of the suit of armour is available on our website:

[www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources](http://www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources)



These guidance notes are designed to help you use this suit of Samurai armour as a focus for cross-curricular teaching and learning. A visit to the Ashmolean Museum to see your chosen object offers your class the perfect 'learning outside the classroom' opportunity.

Photo courtesy of the Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford

### Starting Questions

The following questions may be useful as a starting point for developing speaking, listening and enquiry skills with your class.

- What do you think this suit of armour is made of?
- How is it decorated?
- Who might have owned the object?
- How would you feel if you met someone wearing this armour?
- How would you feel if you could wear the armour yourself?
- This armour was made to wear in peacetime. Why might someone need armour in peacetime?
- The helmet is much older than the suit of armour and was worn in battles. What qualities do you think a warrior would need?



Inspired by the National Gallery's  
Take One Picture programme

## Background Information

### The Object

This suit of armour was made during the peaceful Edo period (1603-1867), when samurai wore armour only on ceremonial occasions, to show off their rank and wealth. It is made of small plates of lacquered metal laced together with silk cords. The armour is tough, flexible and much lighter than a European steel suit. The helmet would have been worn in battle and is older than the rest of the armour; an inscription inside dates it to 1560.

### The Historical Context

In Japan, the samurais were a class of military men who were believed to be fearless and highly skilled warriors. They rose to power in the eleventh century as elite warriors in service to their feudal lords called 'daimyos.' The word samurai literally means "to be on one's guard."

Samurai employed a range of weapons such as bows and arrows, spears and guns, but their main weapon and symbol was the sword. They alone had the privilege of wearing two swords. Their armour was made up of small metal plates laced together to overlap. This made the armour like the scales of a fish. They married only among their own class and they passed their privileges on to their children.

Samurais were supposed to lead their lives according to the ethic code of bushido (Boo-shee-doh), a combination of words: 'Bushi' meaning 'warrior' and 'Do' meaning 'way' which when combined meant, "the way of the warrior". The code highlighted loyalty to one's master, self discipline and respectful, ethical behaviour. It is a way of maintaining peace with the use of strength.

The Samurais were so committed on fulfilling their code that when they failed they would resort to Seppuku (the formal term for Hara-kiri or ritual suicide) They believed that their suicide would atone for the disgrace they had brought upon the house. According to the code, a samurai warrior must live and die with his sword in his hand.

Samurai students were taught reading, writing,

martial arts and games of strategy and a sword master would teach fighting. Between the age of 12 and 18 they would train to become a Samurai, then they would change their name and start their duties.

### The Bushido Code

武士道

Bu shi do

There are seven core virtues that make up the Bushido code:

義 Rectitude (GI) This is about doing the right thing or making the right decision, not because it's easy, but because it's ethically and morally correct.

勇 Courage (YU) is the strength of mind that makes a human face danger. This character can also be translated as brave, daring, fearless, plucky or heroic.

仁 Benevolence (JIN) This word can be also be defined as "charity" or "mercy". For example, one should pay alms to the poor, take care of others, especially those in trouble.

礼 Respect (REI) Respect is about speaking and acting with courtesy. Treating others with dignity and upholding the rules of our family, school and nation.

誠 Honesty (MAKOTO) This character means truth, faith, fidelity, sincerity, trust and/or confidence.

誉 Honor (MEIYO) This version of honor is about having or earning the respect of others and about your reputation. It is the status of being worthy of honor and not about doing honorable things or specific actions

実 Loyalty (CHUGI) This is a Japanese way to write "Loyalty" - it also contains the ideas of being faithful, devoted, true, and obedient.

## Ideas for creative planning across the KS1 and KS2 curriculum

You can use this object as the starting point for developing pupils' critical and creative thinking as well as their learning across the curriculum. You may want to consider possible 'lines of enquiry' as a first step in your cross-curricular planning. Choosing a line of enquiry may help you to build strong links between curriculum areas. After using strategies to help children engage with the object and using questions to facilitate dialogue about the object you can work with the children to develop lines of enquiry that will interest them.

Here are a few suggestions of possible 'lines of enquiry' using this object:

- Samurai life including gender roles
- Leadership qualities
- Protection
- Japan
- War and Peace

Using one or more line of enquiry as your starting point consider how you can work in a number of curriculum areas to build strong and effective crosscurricular links.

### Using 'Samurai life' as a line of enquiry

Here are a few ideas of how you can develop a range of learning opportunities to engage pupils with this line of enquiry. Each activity can link with the others to build on pupils' learning across the chosen theme.

#### Using The Samurai armour as your context....

Write Haiku poems inspired by the Samurai.

Try out Japanese crafts and skills the Samurai would have had to learn including calligraphy and the tea ceremony.

Research how and when the Samurai lived. Find out as much as you can about the role of women in Samurai families.

Research the Bushido Code and discuss which characteristics you consider most important and why.

Find out how Samurai swords and armour were made. Create your own armour and helmets.

Create dance, drama and role plays inspired by Samurai legends. If possible film your outcomes.

Investigate how Samurai legends have influence Western culture and entertainment.

Learn some Japanese words and phrases.



Samurai Life



Inspired by the National Gallery's  
Take One Picture programme

## Tips for introducing objects to a class

- Display an image of an object in the classroom for a number of days with a tape recorder or 'graffiti wall' for children to add comments or questions about the object. Once the pupils' comments and questions have been gathered a class discussion can follow on.
- Cover an object and allow the children to feel it. Can they work out what it is without seeing it?
- Show an object to the class for a minute or two. Remove the object and see what they can remember.
- Introduce an object to the whole class in a question and answer session designed to develop the pupils' speaking and listening skills as outlined on page one.
- Work in pairs sitting back to back. One child describes an object and the other draws.
- Collect as many pictures or examples of similar objects from different time periods and explore the similarities and differences. Then try to sort the objects according to age.

"Thank you for a wonderful and stimulating day at the Ashmolean. I came away buzzing full of ideas."

Feedback after a recent  
Take One...INSET

## Take One...Inspires

Take One... encourages teachers to use an object, painting or other resource imaginatively in the classroom, both as a stimulus for artwork, and for work in more unexpected curriculum areas. Work in many curriculum areas can be inspired by using a single object as a starting point.

The challenge is for teachers to use objects to develop culturally enriching, relevant and practical learning opportunities across the curriculum.



After a visit to the Ashmolean pupils created their own Samurai armour using a variety of skills and materials. Here pupils are using garden netting as a base for weaving with strips of fabric.

Please contact us or visit our website for more information about our programmes including training opportunities

Education Department  
Ashmolean Museum  
Beaumont Street  
Oxford OX1 2PH  
T. 01865 278015

E. [education.service@ashmus.ox.ac.uk](mailto:education.service@ashmus.ox.ac.uk)  
[www.ashmolean.org/learn](http://www.ashmolean.org/learn)