

【Ii Family Heirloom Armor and Helmets】

Ii Family Armor

The Ii family's position as lords of Hikone was founded on their family's impressive performance at various battles during the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568–1603) and in other capacities in subsequent decades. Beginning in 1582, Ii Naomasa (1561–1602) led the “Red Battalion” (*Akazonae*), a group of soldiers in red-lacquered armor who functioned as elite shock troops for Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616). Outside of a few notable exceptions, the Edo period (1603–1867) was free from major military conflict, and Hikone Castle itself was never the scene of any combat. Nonetheless, red armor emblazoned with the gold Ii crest was kept ready at Hikone Castle.

Hikone Castle Museum contains a collection of 25 sets of armor made for various Ii lords and other members in the Ii family. In keeping with Ii heraldry, each item is finished with red lacquer. Whereas lesser family members and retainers had only small fittings called *maedate* on the fronts of their helmets, the helmets of the daimyo were also bedecked with towering gilded ornaments called *tentsuki wakidate* (“sky-piercer side crests”). With time, these fittings became more ornamental and more flamboyant.

As methods of warfare evolved, so did samurai armor. Beginning with the introduction of matchlock firearms in 1543, armor made of iron plates (*tōsei gusoku*) began to replace armor made with interlocking scales of iron or leather. A full suit of iron armor of this type might weigh 27 kilograms or more. Even in peacetime, armor was a symbol of the warrior class, and armor for the lord and his sons was created with the utmost skill and artistry.

Battlefield Heraldry

In the chaos of battle, where fighting often dissolved into a fracas of individual two- and three-person engagements, soldiers had to be able to quickly identify friend from foe. Although commanders were clearly distinguishable by the large banners that accompanied them, identifying individual samurai at a distance was much more difficult. This presented a problem, especially considering that, for a samurai, being recognized for one's performance in battle was more than a matter of pride—accolades were given in the forms of property, gold, or even lordship over a domain. For this reason, each samurai in the Ii army wore a banner with their name and the Ii crest emblazoned in gold against a red background.