

【Ii Family Weaponry & Heraldry】

Japanese Bows and Arrows

Contrary to popular portrayals of samurai, for many centuries of Japanese history, the quintessential image of the warrior was of a mounted archer, not a swordsman. As recorded in accounts of the Genpei War (1180–1185), large-scale engagements between two armies would begin with volleys of “turnip-arrows” (*kaburaya*) which emit a whistling sound as they fly through the air. Once the battle began, mounted warriors would seek out an opponent of appropriately corresponding rank and engage him in single combat, beginning with an additional exchange of arrows.

The traditional Japanese longbow is approximately 220 centimeters long, and the grip is positioned about a third of the way up the curve of the bow. Until the twelfth century, bows were made entirely from Japanese cherry or mulberry. Over a period of several centuries, many more layers of lacquered bamboo were added as reinforcement, and by the Warring States period (1467–1568) the cores of some bows were also constructed from several layered slats of bamboo.

Although archery is rarely a part of modern combat, the tradition lives on as several classical Japanese martial arts, including *kyūdō* (standing or seated archery) and two forms of mounted archery, *yabusame* and *kasagake*, which have been practiced continuously since as early as the twelfth century.

Japanese Swords

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the spear, bow, and *hinawajū* (a type of matchlock firearm) played the largest roles on the battlefield. During times of peace, however, swords were important symbols of power and social position. The extensive time and labor required to produce a Japanese sword, as well as their often-elaborate fittings and ornaments, all served to highlight the elevated positions of their owners. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Japan was unified under a single government, and for two and a half centuries there were far fewer large-scale armed conflicts. During this time, the right to wear a sword was limited to the samurai classes. Swords were often awarded to samurai when bestowing titles, land, or commendations, and particularly during the Edo period (1603–1867), a samurai’s sword represented his very honor and livelihood.

Ii Family Collection

The Ii family participated in the Battle of Sekigahara (1600) and the Siege of Osaka (1614–1615), and the museum’s collection of arms includes weapons that saw use

during these conflicts. The Hikone Castle Museum collection contains bows, several varieties of quivers (*ebira*, *yazutsu*, *utsubo*), and Japanese-style bracers (*yugote*) from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The collection also contains a bow and arrows that are thought to have been owned by Ii Naomasa (1561–1602), the first daimyo of Hikone and the commander of the famed Red Battalion (*Akazonae*). The Ii family possessed more than 600 swords by the time the Edo period ended, but the collection was decimated by fire during the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and today only some 60 swords remain.