

Guns as Status Symbols

Matchlock muskets, like swords, are weapons that came to be seen as signs of wealth and power, or even as art.

After the internal conflicts of the sixteenth century led to the relative peace and stability of the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), the demand for weapons of war decreased. The shogunate still needed guns for its own arsenals, but it imposed harsh restrictions on the unauthorized manufacture and possession of firearms.

As a result, muskets became symbols of status for their rarity. Like the set of long and short swords worn only by samurai, or the swords worn by European gentry, an elegant musket could serve as a statement of power and class. Important officials displayed guns in their residences, and shogunal gunsmiths began producing elaborately ornamented pieces to cater to this demand.

Some of the aesthetic flourishes that could be added to a musket include engraved barrels and lock plates, and stocks inlaid with gold, silver, or brass. Floral designs were popular, and many guns were etched with the names of their owners or manufacturers.