



Japan

Helmet, 17th century

Iron, lacquer, wood, leather, gilt, pigments, silk, papier-mâché

Collection: Minneapolis Institute of Arts; The James Ford Bell Foundation Endowment for Art Acquisition and gift of funds from Siri and Bob Marshall

Key Idea

What is a huge insect doing atop a helmet? And why, specifically, a dragonfly? In Japan, dragonflies symbolize focus, determination, and vigilance. Able to change directions nimbly, dragonflies reflect the ideal virtues of a capable warrior. This helmet is called an “exotic helmet” (*kawari kabuto*, [kah-war-ee kah-boo-toe]) because of its imaginative design. It likely belonged to a high-ranking warrior who wanted to stand out from his peers. Exotic helmets were a sort of military haute couture in 16th- and 17th-century Japan, and they were important expressions of personality, status, and wealth.

Who Were the Samurai?

In Japan, samurai were a class of elite warriors renowned for their loyalty and military skill. Land-owning aristocratic families employed samurai as early as the 10th century. Frequently at war over land and vying for political influence, these families relied on samurai to protect their lives and interests. The samurai formed close bonds with the families they served, gaining a reputation for their devotion (the term samurai comes from a Japanese word meaning “to serve”). The ideal samurai was expected to be selfless, brave, and fiercely loyal. Because of their elevated connections, social status, and military skills, samurai developed influence in politics, eventually becoming Japan’s ruling class.

By the 12th century, powerful military families established a feudal government. At its head was a military leader, the *shogun* [show-gun], who replaced the emperor as Japan’s ruler. But the government was very unstable. Ruling families faced competition from other families, and sometimes even from within their own. Samurai and their lords were caught amid complicated relationships. Between the 15th and 16th centuries, feuds between aristocratic families spread over most of Japan. This period is known as the *Sengoku Jidai*, [sehn-go-coo gee-die] or Warring States Period. Low-ranking foot soldiers, peasants, and even some Buddhist clergy joined samurai armies in battles.

From Practical Headgear to Sumptuous Style

Frequent wars and large armies created high demand for effective yet inexpensive armor. To keep up with demand, armor makers developed practical, simply designed helmets that appealed to lower-ranking warriors. In contrast, leaders and officers sought elaborate helmets. By the late 16th century, they began commissioning armorers to create extravagant helmets that reflected their wealth, rank, and personality. The base was the same plain helmet made for common

warriors, on top of which artisans constructed a skeletal form out of wood, covered with papier-mâché and lacquer for a seamless design. On the MIA's helmet, the dragonfly also features removable golden wings, golden eyes, and a silk cord to tie at the chin. Whether the MIA's helmet was worn in battle is unknown. One thing is clear: In spite of its exotic appearance, this helmet was designed to offer superior head protection during combat. And like most others, this dragonfly helmet features a sweeping apron at the rear to protect the back of the neck.

The Importance of Getting Noticed

For better or for worse, it was important for samurai to be recognizable in battle—especially to distinguish friend from foe. Leaders in particular needed to be easily visible by their armies in the chaos of battle. During the 14th century, armies began adorning their armor with symbols that represented their allegiance, while others adopted shared color schemes for the same purpose. Soldiers showed their support by decorating their armor with their lord's crest, or **mon** [*moan*]. Still others showed their intent to fight by attaching fans or small branches from fruit trees to their helmets.

While this ornate helmet is a far cry from a plum branch, it shows the continued importance of individual expression, identity, and the evolving artistry of armor making. By the late 16th century, flamboyant helmets were all the rage among top samurai. They distinguished officers from the ranks, and exhibited their personality, wealth, and status. Officers often chose symbols that held special meanings, or reflected an aspect of their personality. Sometimes, the design on a leader's helmet even reflected the collective spirit of his army.

A Time of Peace

In 1603, a new *shogun* named **Tokugawa Ieyasu** [*Toe-coo-gah-wah ee-yay-yah-sue*] took control of Japan. He established a strong central government controlled by his family until 1868. This period is called the **Edo** [*Eh-doh*], or Tokugawa, period, a relatively peaceful time in Japan. During the Edo period, Japan's population grew, and cities became important cultural centers. Urban residents enjoyed plenty of outlets for entertainment at restaurants, shops, and spectacular street shows. Arts like painting, calligraphy, woodblock printing, kabuki theater, and the tea ceremony flourished, all with major support from the samurai class.

Lacking wars to fight, samurai invested their time—and justified their status—by patronizing the arts. Still, they maintained a connection to their military heritage. They continued practicing martial arts and remained ready for battle. As a result, even during peacetime, artisans continued making samurai armor and helmets with flair. Armor and helmets were worn during ceremonies or in public processions that showed off the ruling class's grandeur. Ultimately, samurai applied their military discipline to their intellectual and artistic interests. Prominent samurai thinkers declared samurai to be Japan's cultural role models, setting the standard for good taste and class. The dragonfly helmet at the MIA shows the continuing interest among the samurai of combining

both visual and military arts. This helmet illustrates their taste for beauty and humor, even when the subject was war.

The End of an Era

Despite its high social status, the samurai class faced many uncertainties in the late Tokugawa period. Between their expensive lifestyle and few outlets for gainful employment (samurai were not typically allowed to farm or own shops), samurai families increasingly fell into poverty. Some even grew skeptical about the feudal system. In 1867, a civil war broke out between those wishing to destroy the feudal government (and restore the emperor's power) and those who supported it. A year later, in 1868, forces backing the emperor won, and the feudal system collapsed. In 1873, the new government created a national army, thereby eliminating the need for the samurai class. Three years later, the government dissolved it altogether. Many former samurai were given money to open their own businesses, while others joined the army or engaged in politics. Though their status dissolved, former samurai played important roles in shaping Japanese history and society in the early 20th century.

Look Closely

How would you describe the decoration on this samurai helmet? What does it look like to you? What do you see that makes you say that?

Some leaders chose symbols for their helmets that had important personal meanings or designs that reflected the spirit of their troops. Think about the dragonfly design on this helmet. Do you think it was chosen to reflect the owner's personal goals, or that of his troops? Both? What reasons can you come up with to explain your answer?

What kind of warrior do you think would have worn a helmet like this? What do you think it says about the person wearing it?

In Japan, dragonflies symbolize focus, determination, and the ability to change directions without losing course. Why might a warrior choose to put a dragonfly decoration on his helmet? In what ways might these qualities appeal to a warrior?

Think Broadly

What qualities do you associate with dragonflies? If you were to design your own samurai helmet, what creatures or symbols would you add? Why? What meaning does this creature or symbol have to you? Would you choose a personal meaning, or one to rally the spirit of your troops?

How does this helmet compare to the other samurai helmet in the MIA's collection? How does it compare to helmets from other parts of the world?

This helmet belonged to a high-ranking warrior. How might this helmet show off his status? How might it distinguish him from his army? How do high-ranking people in society today show off their status?