Creativity Forged Anew in Japan

Celebrating the metalworking mastery achieved in the Edo period and the creative resilience that followed in the Meiji Restoration.

By Lee Lawrence

Fourteen objects fill a wall in the Asian galleries of the Worcester Art Museum in a display titled "Last Defense: The Gorgets of Japanese Meiji Samurai." It is a simple installation in these clusters that bears some useful witness to the mastery achieved in the Edo period (1663-1868) and the creative resilience that followed in the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912).

A handful of Edo pieces exemplify the range of techniques and designs workshops perfected as they filled commissions from samurai and supplied objects for Buddhist temples and homes. Three works in particular illustrate the range. As bold as it is elegant, a helmet made in 1686 by the Nagaoino school emulates the swirling shape of a coiled shell with spire-like protrusions. An 1855 helmet by the equally famous Myochin family sports on its brim an epigraphic relief of crying waves. And in an incense burner made around 1856, another Myochin shaped the lid in the form of a miniatureized helmet topped by the sculpted figure of a dragon flying through flames. The censer reminds us that, as peace wore on and the economy thrived, metalworking studios also created accessories for samurai with sophisticated tastes as well as a growing merchant class with deep pockets.

When the ground shifted beneath them all after the military shogunate fell in 1868 and the Meiji Restoration began, within a few years, samurai lost their class privileges as well as the right to carry swords; the new imperial ruler declared Shinto the state religion, marginalized Buddhism, and a path to modernize the country and compete with European and American markets took hold. Metalworkers were among the hardest hit. Buddhist temples stopped commissioning works. Samurai had no need for arms or armor. And, unlike potters, whose vessels Dutch merchants had been importing to Europe, metalworkers like the Myochin had to learn to cater to foreign tastes while cultivating and expanding their local clientele. The closest this display comes to the strange-willed tours de force, sometimes up to six feet tall, that dizzied visitors at international expositions are the eye-popping reliefs on a pair of silver vases. Made by Hironao Kamei between 1900 and 1918, they depict hibiscus flowers, every feather, talon and ridge of their combs rendered in detail with different alloys and gold.

Mostly, however, this display showcases the astute reuse of popular forms. The decorations, on a three-tiered box by Takasho Inoue, for example, are recycled sword guards, while his articulated figure of a lobster (made around 1900) carries forward a prized specialty of the Myochin family—witnesses the impressively detailed dragon figure next to it. It is easy to imagine how such works appealed not only to Japanese buyers eager to connect to the past, but to Western audiences excited by the exotic and admiring of skilfully handcrafted works in an age of increasingly industrial manufacture.

Lost Defense: The Gorgets of Japanese Meiji Samurai

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Mr. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.