

Samurai Dandy

By Nobuo Tsuji

Japanese folding screens elaborately painted with battle scenes are a staple of Oriental exhibitions in Europe's art museums. I assume that these screens, many of them acquired in the late 19th century, appeal to European taste because of their colorful depictions of warriors in exotic dress so different from their Western equivalents. Armor, helmets, horse trappings, flags, swords: everything is alien, everything wonderful.

That is not to say the European knights of the Middle Ages were any less ostentatious on the battlefield. But one suspects that for the Japanese warrior, military campaigns were like some grand festival. In the 14th century, the Japanese imperial court was divided into two camps, northern and southern, and there was fierce conflict as each tried to subdue the other. Despite, or perhaps because of, the constant warfare, the warlords of the day vied with each other to see who could dress most exquisitely, who was most original.

According to one account in the *Taiheiki*, when the Kanto northern army moved into Kyoto, the then capital, rumors of the glorious parade of warriors flew swiftly through the city, and nobles and commoners alike swarmed to see the exquisite sight. Such was the press of onlookers that special stands were built to accommodate them. One captain headed a procession of 30 horses, each led by a foot soldier, with their manes and tails dyed in a rich array of purple, pink, green, turquoise and dappled patterns. In addition, there was row upon row of samurai, each with two 130-centimeter swords in sheaths covered with tiger skins tucked into his sash.

The *daimyo* of the late 15th through 17th centuries inherited the finely honed taste for fashion of their 14th-century predecessors. The ornateness of their clothing and weapons suggests they paid as much attention to the finer points of dress as to the strategies of warfare. The *jinbaori*, a jacket that commanders

wore over their armor, is a good example.

The dark purple *jinbaori* shown here belonged to Date Masamune (1567–1636), *daimyo* of the Sendai region. It is made of wool material imported from Europe, chosen both for its water-repellent quality and also for its rich, deep purple color, which made a perfect background for the appliqued motifs of large and small red, yellow, blue, green and white circles. The overall effect reminds one of the abstract paintings of Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) in his later period. Designed to be seen from afar, the *jinbaori* was meant to make its wearer stand out no matter where he might be on the battlefield. Date Masamune was a dandy through and through, well-known for his ostentatious dress. Indeed, he and his men made such an impression on Kyoto residents when they marched into the city in 1619 that the word “date” (pronounced da-tay) has been used



Kon-rashaji omodaka-mon'yo jinbaori, Momoyama period, private collection

ever since as a synonym for dandyism.

It is not known who wore the dark blue *jinbaori*, but it is another masterpiece of abstract design. Arrowhead leaves cut out of white wool are applique onto the dark blue ground in a powerful pattern that brings to mind the cut-out designs of Henri Matisse (1869–1954). The tension of the *jinbaori* design, however, is unlike anything found in Matisse's work.

The lining of the *jinbaori* was almost as important as its exterior. In these two examples the linings are made of imported cloth decorated with detailed embroidery. It is a safe bet that these linings were probably more expensive than the outside appliques—one more example of the subtleties of traditional Japanese fashion.

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Muraşaki-rashaji mizutama-mon'yo jinbaori, Momoyama period (ca. 1573 – ca. 1615), Sendai City Museum