Two Important – and visually striking – works of Japanese armor acquired by the Minneapolis Institute of Art

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MINNEAPOLIS— The Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) announced today that it continues to build its significant collection of Japanese artworks with the acquisition of two works of Japanese armor. The first piece is an unusual full-length face mask made in 1737 by Myōchin Muneakira, one of the greatest armor makers in Japan’s history. Since the fifteenth century, armor masks were made in varying sizes, from simple half-length chin covers, leaving the eyes and forehead uncovered, to masks that covered the full face; this work covers the full face and is unusual for its style, as well as for carrying the date inscribed by its maker. The second piece, a helmet dating to the late-17th century, is a sculptural work hammered from a single piece of steel into the shape of a turban snail—an auspicious symbol of protection for the wearer. Made by Ryōei, a legendary Japanese metalsmith, the work is one of few extant pieces to have been included in a famous 18th century illustrated reference book of Japanese arms and armor.

“Japanese armor provides remarkable insights into aspects of Japanese culture, aesthetics, and artistry, and these two objects are outstanding examples of this combination,” said Andreas Marks, Mia’s Mary Griggs Burke Curator of Japanese and Korean Art and Director of the Clark Center for Japanese Art. “Both the mask and helmet are masterpieces of their respective makers and demonstrate the exceptional quality and care taken with the metalwork, to ensure smooth lines and balanced forms. At the same time, they are also visually striking, showing creativity and ingenuity in their ability to convey a point of view through an object that might otherwise be seen as merely functional.”

About these new acquisitions:

Myōchin Muneakira’s Hammered Iron Full-Face Armor Mask

Myōchin Muneakira (1683–1751) is considered one of the best skilled armor makers in Japan’s history. At age 13, Muneakira began an apprenticeship under his uncle in Edo (modern Tokyo), where he learned the art of repousse hammering (uchidashi) in which three-dimensional shapes are hammered into a single sheet of iron. He eventually established his own workshop in Hiroshima Prefecture, employed by the feudal lord (daimyō) Asano, and then returned to Edo to create pieces for other lords and their families.

By 1730, Muneakira had perfected the art of making smooth, curved surfaces as demonstrated by this mask—a skill that had not been mastered by other metalsmiths before him. Made of hammered iron, the mask is constructed of two sections, connected by
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pins on the interior side; the upper section, comprising the forehead and eyes, can be removed, and the entire interior is lacquered in red.

Ryōei’s Helmet hammered as a turban snail
Ryōei, whose real name was Ohara Katsunari, was active in the late 17th century and lived and worked near Edo, today’s Tokyo. He was especially famous for his single sheet forges of helmets, breastplates, and masks, demonstrating a capability for manipulating iron that evoked the simplicity and straightforward aesthetics of the period, as is also evident in the ceramics of that time. Ryōei achieved such recognition and acclaim for his work that Matsumiya Kanzan (1686–1780), author of the Illustrated Reference Book to Famous Armor (Meiko zukan), created a monograph just about him, titled Illustrated Reference Book to Ryōei (Ryōei zukan).

Helmets were an important part of a samurai’s equipment, and they were sometimes decorated or shaped after animals that evoked strength, protection, and resilience, like dragons, bears, or lobsters. The level of workmanship and detailing varied, with high-ranking samurai often able to better afford the cost of a high-skill metalsmith to create a more complex form. This helmet, shaped like a turban snail (sazaenari), is hammered from a single sheet of patinated steel (uchidashi), demonstrating again Ryōei’s talent for bending the metal to meet his creative expectations, while remaining a functional helmet for its owner.

This helmet—one of 31 works by Ryōei that were illustrated by Kanzan, of which only eight have been identified—is a prime example for the extraordinary skill and style of its maker. While it is not known who owned this helmet in the two hundred years after it was made, the work surfaces again in Europe in the late-19th century. From there it changed hands several times, and it was included in various publications of Japanese arms and armor, noting its evident quality, rarity, and history.

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About the Minneapolis Institute of Art
Home to more than 100,000 works of art representing 5,000 years of world history, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) inspires wonder, spurs creativity, and nourishes the imagination. With extraordinary exhibitions and one of the finest art collections in the country—from all
corners of the globe, and from ancient to contemporary—Mia links the past to the present, enables global conversations, and offers an exceptional setting for inspiration.

General admission to Mia is always free. Some special exhibitions have a nominal admission fee.

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