

## Japanese treasures from the Royal Collection to go on display in the first major UK exhibition exploring the relationship between the British and Japanese royal and imperial families

### Japan: Courts and Culture

The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace  
8 April 2022 – 12 March 2023

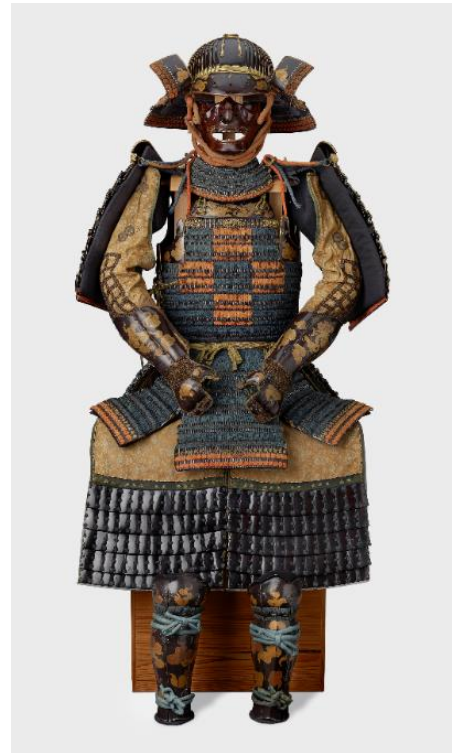
The Royal Collection contains one of the finest holdings of Japanese works of art in the western world, significant for both the unique provenance and exceptional quality of the objects. Now, for the first time, highlights from the collection will be brought together in the major new exhibition **Japan: Courts and Culture**, opening at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace in April 2022.

The exhibition explores the diplomatic, artistic and cultural exchanges between Britain and Japan over more than 350 years, from first encounters and early trade under James I to the diplomatic engagement and modern partnership of Her Majesty The Queen's reign. This royal story, never before told in a dedicated exhibition, will be explored through rare surviving examples of unparalleled Japanese craftsmanship, including armour, weaponry, porcelain, lacquer, woodcut prints, delicate fans and embroidered screens.

The earliest direct contact between England and Japan was made when the first English ship reached Japanese shores in 1613. The captain, John Saris, brought letters and gifts from James I for Shōgun Tokugawa Ieyasu, the military leader who governed Japan on behalf of the imperial family. Saris returned with a letter granting the English permission to live and trade in Japan, and with gifts for the King. These included a magnificent samurai armour, the earliest to arrive in Britain and the first surviving non-European work of art to enter the Royal Collection.

This first contact was short-lived; from the 1630s, for some 220 years, Japan closed to the West in an attempt to regulate foreign influence. During this time, the Dutch were the only Europeans permitted to trade directly with Japan. Demand for exotic East Asian wares soared in Europe, where the secrets of porcelain and lacquer manufacture were yet to be discovered.

The British royal family led the way in collecting highly prized examples of Japanese lacquer, porcelain and textiles, much of which was produced specifically for the export market. In the 17th century, Mary II displayed vast quantities of Japanese porcelain in her apartments at Kensington Palace and Hampton Court, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Queen Caroline, consort of George II, formed a significant collection of Japanese lacquer. A century later, George IV



incorporated Japanese porcelain into the opulent decorative schemes at Carlton House in London and the Royal Pavilion, Brighton. Many of the pieces acquired by the King were given new functions through the addition of elaborate European gilt-bronze mounts, turning a simple jar into a *pot-pourri* vase and animal figures into incense burners.

When Japan reopened to the West in the 1850s, goods began to flow freely, and diplomatic and political links were re-established. Queen Victoria's son, Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, was the first member of a European royal family to visit Japan when he travelled there in 1869. The Prince met the Emperor Meiji at the Imperial Palace and was presented with an impressive samurai armour, including a helmet dating from 1537. In a letter to his mother, Alfred wrote: 'To give you any account of this country, I feel quite at a loss. Every thing is so new & so quaint that I am quite bewildered.'

The next members of the British royal family to visit Japan were Queen Victoria's grandsons Prince George of Wales (the future King George V) and his brother, Prince Albert Victor. In 1881, the teenage Princes were serving as midshipmen aboard *HMS Bacchante* and were granted shore leave to meet the Emperor Meiji and Empress Shōken. They returned with presents for their family, including a teapot and cups for their father, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, and with diplomatic gifts from the Emperor. According to the official diary of the tour, the Princes had their arms tattooed during their visit to Japan – Albert Victor with 'a couple of storks' and George with a dragon and a tiger, a combination said to signify East and West.

In the early 20th century, a defensive Anglo-Japanese Alliance was formed to secure both nations' interests in the Pacific. This was also a period of growing artistic exchange. The most significant cultural event was the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition in London, which included demonstrations of Japanese crafts, music, sports and entertainments. More than eight million people visited the exhibition, including Queen Mary, consort of King George V, who was an enthusiastic collector of East Asian art.

The relationship between the Japanese and British imperial and royal families continued to flourish through reciprocal royal visits, attendance at coronations and the exchange of gifts. In 1902, Prince Komatsu Akihito attended the coronation of King Edward VII and presented the King with an embroidered folding screen of the four seasons. In 1911, Queen Mary received a coronation gift of a miniature cabinet bearing the imperial chrysanthemum crest, created by Akatsuka Jitoku, one of the most accomplished lacquerers of his generation.

While the Second World War dramatically impacted the bonds formed during the early 20th century, a new era of Japanese-British co-operation has been forged since The Queen's accession in 1952. On the occasion of Her Majesty's coronation, the Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) sent The Queen the first post-war diplomatic gift between the two nations: a cosmetic box decorated with a heron by the great lacquer artist Shirayama Shōsai. Seventy years later, as the nation celebrates Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee in 2022, visitors to The Queen's Gallery will have the opportunity to see this exquisitely crafted coronation gift up close and to discover more about the unique and lasting relationship between Britain and Japan.

Rachel Peat, curator of *Japan: Courts and Culture*, said, 'We are delighted to give visitors a rare chance to see these stunning works from Japan, which have been marvelled at, displayed and cherished by members of the British royal family for centuries. It's a real opportunity to see first-hand the precious materials and intricate techniques which have so profoundly shaped British taste and which helped forge a lasting relationship between the two nations. We hope visitors will enjoy discovering the worlds of ritual, honour and artistry that link the courts and cultures of Britain and Japan to this day.'

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The accompanying publication, *Japan: Courts and Culture*, is published by Royal Collection Trust, available at £35.00 from Royal Collection Trust shops and [www.rct.uk/shop](http://www.rct.uk/shop), and at £49.95 from all good bookshops.

Visitor information and tickets for The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace: [www.rct.uk](http://www.rct.uk), T. +44 (0)30 3123 7301. The Queen's Gallery is open Thursday to Monday, remaining closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

A selection of images is available from [mediaselect.pa.media](http://mediaselect.pa.media) and via [WeTransfer](#). For further information and images, please contact the Royal Collection Trust Press Office, +44 (0)20 7839 1377, [press@rct.uk](mailto:press@rct.uk)

### **Notes to Editors**

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**The Royal Collection** is among the largest and most important art collections in the world, and one of the last great European royal collections to remain intact. It comprises almost all aspects of the fine and decorative arts, and is spread among some 15 royal residences and former residences across the UK, most of which are regularly open to the public. The Royal Collection is held in trust by the Sovereign for her successors and the nation, and is not owned by The Queen as a private individual.

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