

Beyond the Armour: Samurai Heritage as a Bridge of Cultural Diplomacy Between Japan and Poland

by Adam Jurgilewicz

Introduction

Why Samurai Armour Still Matters in the Twenty-First Century

Every year millions of people around the world encounter the image of the samurai. Few, however, realise that behind the iconic armour lies a sophisticated cultural language that continues to inspire audiences far beyond Japan.

For many people, the samurai remains a symbol of courage, honour and discipline. Films, literature and popular culture have shaped this image for decades, introducing generations of Europeans to a warrior tradition unlike any found in the West. Yet the armour itself is often perceived merely as military equipment or a museum curiosity. In reality, it represents something far more profound.

A Japanese suit of armour is a remarkable synthesis of craftsmanship, aesthetics, spirituality and identity. It reflects not only the practical requirements of warfare but also the social status of its owner, the artistic sensibilities of its maker and the philosophical values of the society in which it was created. Every component - from the elegant curvature of a helmet to the carefully chosen colour of the silk lacing - was designed with intention. Even decorative motifs carried symbolic meaning, expressing aspirations, beliefs and connections with nature.

One lesson has become increasingly clear to me over the years. People rarely fall in love with samurai armour because of warfare. They are captivated by the astonishing level of craftsmanship, the harmony between strength and beauty, and the feeling that every object carries the presence of the person who once wore it. Armour is one of the few historical artefacts that still feels profoundly human. It bears the marks of individual lives, family traditions and personal choices made centuries ago.

This becomes particularly evident when viewed through the lens of Japanese culture, where beauty has long been inseparable from function and where the natural world has served as a constant source of artistic inspiration. Samurai armour embodies this uniquely Japanese way of thinking. It is both an object of protection and a work of art, equally at home on the battlefield and in the cultural imagination.

Today, centuries after the end of the samurai era, these objects continue to speak to audiences across continents. Visitors to museums in Europe rarely see them as relics of war. Instead, they discover stories of craftsmanship, philosophy, symbolism and human creativity. Armour has

acquired a new role: rather than protecting the warrior, it now preserves memory, cultural identity and opportunities for dialogue between nations.

This transformation reveals an important truth. Cultural heritage is not confined to the country of its origin. When presented with respect, knowledge and appropriate context, it becomes a universal language capable of building mutual understanding between people from different traditions. In an era marked by geopolitical tensions, social fragmentation and rapid technological change, such forms of cultural dialogue may be more valuable than ever.

My own journey has convinced me that samurai armour possesses an extraordinary ability to bring people together. Conversations that begin with curiosity about a helmet or a cuirass often evolve into discussions about Japanese history, aesthetics, philosophy and contemporary society. Objects created hundreds of years ago continue to inspire new relationships, new collaborations and new perspectives.

This article explores how samurai armour can serve as a form of cultural diplomacy between Japan and Poland. Drawing on historical context, personal experience and two recent exhibitions in Poland, I argue that private collections, museums and scholarly cooperation can play a meaningful role in strengthening international understanding. The story presented here is therefore not simply about collecting historical artefacts. It is about discovering how material heritage can become a living bridge between cultures.

Why Europeans Continue to Be Fascinated by the Samurai

European fascination with the samurai did not begin with contemporary cinema or television. It has evolved over more than a century, shaped by changing encounters between Europe and Japan. While today's audiences may first encounter samurai through films, novels, video games or streaming series, their curiosity often develops into a much deeper appreciation of Japanese history and artistic achievement.

The opening of Japan during the Meiji period introduced Europe to a visual culture unlike anything previously known. Japanese prints, ceramics, lacquerware and armour found their way into museums, royal collections and private homes, profoundly influencing artists, designers and collectors. The movement later known as *Japonisme* transformed European perceptions of Japanese aesthetics, encouraging admiration for qualities such as simplicity, harmony, precision and respect for craftsmanship.

In more recent decades, directors such as Akira Kurosawa brought the ethical and human dimensions of the samurai to international audiences. His films portrayed warriors not as invincible heroes but as individuals confronted with loyalty, sacrifice, responsibility and moral choice. These themes resonated strongly with European viewers because they addressed universal questions rather than exclusively Japanese history.

My own fascination with Japan also began in front of a cinema screen. As a young boy I watched Kurosawa's films with a sense of wonder. At that time I could never have imagined that this fascination would eventually lead me to study Japanese armour, build a collection, publish books on the subject and, years later, co-curate an exhibition at one of Europe's leading museums dedicated to Japanese culture. Looking back, I realise that the journey began not with collecting, but with curiosity.

I often believe that Europeans are not fascinated by the samurai because they admire war. They are fascinated because they recognise values that transcend cultures: honour, discipline, perseverance, loyalty and respect for craftsmanship. Samurai armour becomes the visible expression of these universal ideas. Long before visitors understand its historical context, they instinctively respond to its beauty and humanity.

The popularity of Japanese martial arts has further strengthened this fascination. For many Europeans, disciplines such as judo, kendo or aikido became their first encounter with Japanese concepts of self-discipline, respect and continuous self-improvement. Although these practices differ from the historical reality of the samurai, they introduced generations to aspects of Japanese philosophy that continue to shape perceptions of Japan today.

Yet among all surviving symbols of samurai culture, armour occupies a unique place. Unlike weapons, which primarily represent conflict, armour embodies a remarkable combination of technology, artistic vision and cultural symbolism. It appeals simultaneously to historians, artists, engineers, designers and those who simply appreciate beauty. Few historical objects demonstrate so convincingly that functionality and aesthetics need not be separated.

Perhaps the enduring fascination with samurai armour also reflects something more universal. In an increasingly digital world, handcrafted objects possess a growing emotional value. Every rivet, every silk cord, every layer of lacquer and every forged iron plate reminds us of the extraordinary skills of generations of artisans. These objects invite us to slow down, observe carefully and appreciate the patience, precision and creativity invested in their creation.

This may explain why visitors often spend unexpectedly long periods standing before a single suit of armour. They are not simply looking at an artefact from distant history. They are encountering a human story expressed through iron, leather, silk and lacquer.

And perhaps this is precisely why samurai armour continues to resonate so strongly in Europe today. It offers not only a window into Japan's past, but also an invitation to reflect upon values that remain relevant in the present: dedication, beauty, responsibility, resilience and respect for tradition.

Collecting Samurai Armour in Europe: Preserving Heritage Beyond Japan

European interest in Japanese samurai armour dates back to the late nineteenth century. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan underwent profound political and social transformation. The abolition of the samurai class and the modernisation of the country meant that many objects which had once symbolised hereditary status and military service gradually entered museums, private collections and art markets across Europe and North America.

Initially, these remarkable objects were admired largely for their exotic appearance. Their dramatic helmets, richly lacquered surfaces and vibrant silk lacing fascinated Western audiences, yet relatively little was understood about the cultural language they embodied. During the twentieth century, however, scholarly research expanded considerably. Armour increasingly came to be recognised not simply as military equipment, but as one of the highest expressions of Japanese craftsmanship and artistic achievement.

Today, important collections of Japanese armour can be found in museums throughout Europe, while numerous private collectors continue to study, preserve and document these extraordinary artefacts. Although their collections vary greatly in size and scope, they share a common purpose: safeguarding an important part of Japan's cultural heritage and ensuring that it remains accessible to future generations.

Private collectors occupy a distinctive place within this landscape. Unlike museums, they often spend years researching individual objects, tracing their provenance, studying historical sources and building relationships with Japanese historians, dealers, restorers and fellow collectors. Collecting therefore becomes far more than acquisition. It becomes stewardship.

Perhaps the greatest privilege of collecting lies not in ownership itself but in becoming a temporary guardian of objects that have survived wars, political upheavals and centuries of

changing history. Every collector eventually realises that these artefacts are not possessions in the ordinary sense. They are fragments of another civilisation entrusted to our care for only a short chapter of their much longer existence.

This perspective fundamentally changes the purpose of collecting. Instead of asking “*What can this object add to my collection?*” one gradually begins to ask “*What responsibility do I have towards this object and the culture from which it originates?*”

For me, that has become the true philosophy of collecting Japanese armour.

My Journey: From Curiosity to Responsibility

Like many Europeans of my generation, my first encounter with the world of the samurai came through cinema. As a young boy, I was captivated by Akira Kurosawa's films. Their visual beauty left a lasting impression, but what fascinated me even more were the values they portrayed: honour, loyalty, courage and the quiet dignity of people facing impossible choices. My fascination did not begin with collecting. It began with wonder.

Years later, curiosity gradually transformed into study. Study became research. Research became collecting. Eventually, collecting evolved into something I had never anticipated: a responsibility to preserve, interpret and share a small part of Japan's cultural heritage with others. When I acquired my first pieces, I believed I was collecting historical objects. Only much later did I realise that I was collecting stories. Every authentic suit of armour tells an individual story.

Its construction reflects the military realities of a particular period. Its form reveals changing technologies and artistic preferences. The lacquer, silk lacing and forged iron demonstrate the extraordinary achievements of Japanese craftsmen. Most importantly, however, every armour carries traces of the person for whom it was created.

Unlike many museum visitors, collectors have the privilege of spending hundreds of hours with a single object. They examine every rivet, every silk cord, every layer of lacquer and every repair carried out over centuries. Gradually, the armour ceases to be an anonymous historical artefact and begins to resemble a biography written in iron, leather and silk.

One of the discoveries that fascinated me most was how deeply personal these objects really are. Many helmets display a **kamon** - the family crest identifying the samurai clan to which the owner belonged. These emblems were never merely decorative. They represented ancestry, loyalty, honour and family identity. Whenever I identify a kamon on a helmet, I instinctively pause for a moment and imagine the person who once stood beneath it.

Every crest tells us that this armour was never anonymous. It belonged to a particular individual who served a particular family, lived during a particular period and faced challenges that history can only partly reconstruct. A museum label may tell us the date, school or province, but the family crest reminds us of something much more important: every suit of armour was once worn by a living human being. Perhaps this is why I have always found armour more compelling than weapons. A sword can survive independently. Armour preserves the physical presence of its owner.

The Dragonfly: Discovering the Narrative

As my collection gradually expanded, another question began to emerge. Why did one particular motif appear so frequently on samurai equipment? Dragonflies decorated helmets, stirrups, sword mountings, horse equipment, jinbaori, arrow quivers and countless other objects associated with the warrior class. At first, I regarded this as an attractive decorative theme. Gradually, however, I realised that it represented something far more profound.

Known in Japanese as *tombo* or *akitsu*, the dragonfly became associated with courage, determination and victory. In samurai symbolism, the dragonfly was perceived as an insect that flew only forward and never retreated, earning it the name *kachimushi* – the “victory insect”. Yet its significance extends beyond martial symbolism.

The dragonfly also reflects one of the most distinctive characteristics of Japanese culture: the ability to perceive strength and beauty not as opposites but as complementary qualities. A warrior could admire nature without diminishing his courage. On the contrary, attentiveness to the changing seasons, plants and insects formed an essential part of the cultural world in which many samurai lived. The dragonfly eventually became much more than a recurring decorative motif in my collection. It became its guiding idea.

The more I studied Japanese armour, the more I realised that the dragonfly represented exactly what fascinated me most about Japanese culture: the remarkable ability to unite martial tradition with an admiration for nature. That discovery ultimately inspired the name **Akitsushima**. One of the oldest poetic names for Japan, *Akitsushima* may be translated as *The Island of Dragonflies*. It evokes an image of a country in which landscape, mythology, history and identity are deeply interconnected.

From that moment onwards, my aim was no longer simply to assemble important examples of samurai armour. Instead, I began consciously building a collection capable of telling a coherent story. Every object was selected not only for its historical quality or artistic merit, but also for its ability to contribute to that narrative.

Looking back today, I no longer think of **Akitsushima** primarily as a collection. I think of it as a conversation. A conversation between war and peace. Between craftsmanship and philosophy. Between nature and human creativity. And, perhaps most importantly, between Japan and Europe.

From Private Collection to Public Dialogue

At the beginning, I regarded the collection as a deeply personal journey. Every newly acquired helmet, cuirass or face mask represented another opportunity to better understand Japan's history, craftsmanship and aesthetic philosophy. I never imagined that these objects would one day leave the privacy of my study and begin a completely different life - as ambassadors of Japanese culture. That changed when part of the collection was presented at the Embassy of Japan in Warsaw. The exhibition marked an important turning point.

For the first time, I was able to observe how visitors with little or no previous knowledge of samurai armour responded to these remarkable objects. Surprisingly, their questions rarely focused on warfare. Instead, they asked about craftsmanship, symbolism, family traditions, religion, aesthetics and the lives of the people who had once worn the armour.

It became clear that the armour itself was only the beginning of the conversation. People were not simply looking at historical artefacts. They were trying to understand Japan. The positive reception of the exhibition encouraged us to develop the idea further. This ultimately led to the exhibition **“Akitsushima: The Island of Dragonflies - Japanese Armour from the Collection of Wiktoria and Adam Jurgilewicz”**, organised at the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków, Poland - one of Europe's leading museums dedicated exclusively to Japanese art and culture.

Rather than presenting a chronological survey of samurai armour, we chose a different narrative. The exhibition was built around a single symbol. The dragonfly. Through this recurring motif, visitors gradually discovered how nature, warfare, craftsmanship, spirituality and aesthetics intertwine within Japanese culture. The dragonfly appeared not only on helmets but also on horse

equipment, sword mountings and stands, jingasa, jinbaori and many other objects associated with the samurai. Instead of seeing individual artefacts, visitors began to recognise a coherent cultural language.

One curatorial decision proved particularly important. Whenever conservation requirements allowed, the armour was displayed **without glass cases**. This fundamentally transformed the visitor's experience. Instead of looking through reflections and barriers, people could appreciate the true depth of the black lacquer, the texture of forged iron, the vibrant colours of silk lacing and the remarkable three-dimensional presence of each suit of armour.

More importantly, they experienced something difficult to describe but immediately perceptible: the emotional distance between the visitor and the object became noticeably smaller. The response confirmed that this decision had been worthwhile.

One visitor wrote: *"Lovely to see armour exhibited outside of glass so it can be truly appreciated. My favourite thing about samurai armour is that it rewards you for close inspection."* I found those words particularly meaningful. They express something I have long believed but had never articulated so clearly.

Samurai armour rewards patience. Like many aspects of Japanese culture, it does not reveal itself immediately. The longer one observes it, the more details emerge, and with them a deeper understanding of the people who created and used it.

Equally moving was a comment from a Japanese enthusiast, who wrote: "The display method is very stylish and innovative. Japan should adopt this approach as well." Receiving such a remark from someone in Japan was both humbling and encouraging. It suggested that meaningful dialogue does not always flow in one direction.

Just as Europe continues to learn from Japan, carefully considered European interpretations of Japanese heritage may also offer perspectives worthy of discussion. Perhaps the greatest satisfaction, however, came from observing visitors as they left the exhibition. Many entered expecting to see weapons. They left talking about philosophy. Others discussed craftsmanship, aesthetics, symbolism or the remarkable harmony between martial culture and the natural world. As a collector and co-curator, I could hardly hope for a more meaningful outcome.

Culture as a Form of Diplomacy

My experience with these exhibitions has strengthened one conviction above all others. Culture remains one of the most effective and enduring forms of diplomacy. Unlike political dialogue, cultural dialogue rarely begins with disagreement. It begins with curiosity.

Standing before a four-hundred-year-old helmet, visitors do not ask which country is stronger. Instead, they ask: "Who made this?" "Who wore it?" "What does this family crest mean?" "Why is there a dragonfly on a warrior's helmet?" These questions create something that politics alone rarely can. They encourage respect before judgement. Understanding before opinion. Listening before speaking. This may appear a modest achievement, yet it represents one of the foundations upon which lasting international relationships are built.

My experience has also changed the way I think about museums. Their role is not simply to preserve collections. It is to create meaningful encounters. When visitors leave an exhibition remembering not only what they have seen but also how they have felt, museums become places where cultural diplomacy happens naturally - without speeches, negotiations or official programmes. Private collectors can contribute to this process in meaningful ways. Museums possess professional expertise, conservation facilities and public trust. Collectors often contribute years of specialised research, long-term relationships with experts and access to objects that

might otherwise remain unseen. When these worlds cooperate rather than compete, both scholarship and the public benefit.

Throughout my own journey I have been fortunate to receive generous support from my friends in Poland and Japan, Japanese dealers, restorers, collectors and museum professionals. Their willingness to share knowledge has continually reminded me that preserving cultural heritage is never an individual achievement. It is always a shared responsibility.

Recommendations

The experience of developing the **Akitsushima** project has led me to several conclusions that may be relevant for future Poland-Japan cultural cooperation.

First, cultural diplomacy should continue to strengthen partnerships between museums, private collectors, universities and cultural institutions. Together they can reach audiences that none could engage alone.

Second, private collections should increasingly be recognised as valuable educational resources. When responsibly researched, conserved and presented, they complement museum collections and help preserve important aspects of Japanese heritage.

Third, travelling exhibitions deserve greater institutional support. They enable carefully developed narratives to reach new audiences, creating lasting cultural relationships rather than one-time events.

Fourth, exhibitions should focus not only on presenting historical objects but on interpreting their meaning. Visitors rarely remember how many artefacts they have seen. They remember the stories those objects tell.

Finally, cultural diplomacy should recognise that meaningful relationships are built by people as much as by institutions. Every scholar, conservator, curator, collector and visitor become part of a wider dialogue that strengthens understanding between our countries.

Conclusion

Looking back, I sometimes think that the young boy fascinated by Akira Kurosawa's films could never have imagined that one day he would help present Japanese samurai armour in one of Europe's leading museums dedicated to Japanese culture.

Life occasionally follows unexpected paths. Mine began with curiosity. It continues through gratitude. Gratitude to the Japanese scholars, collectors, museums, dealers and friends who generously shared their knowledge, trusted me and helped me understand that collecting is not about ownership, but about responsibility.

That gratitude also extends to my wife, Wiktoria. Throughout this journey she has shared not only the work involved in building the collection, but also the curiosity, reflection and sense of responsibility that it has inspired.

Like the collection itself, Akitsushima has become something we have built together. Samurai armour was originally created to protect a warrior on the battlefield. Centuries later, its purpose has fundamentally changed. Today it protects something equally precious: memory, craftsmanship, cultural identity and the stories that connect generations.

Perhaps this is the greatest journey a suit of samurai armour can make. No longer travelling to the battlefield, it now travels between cultures - carrying with it the craftsmanship, memory and humanity of the people who created and wore it centuries ago.

If a single helmet can inspire someone in Poland to discover Japan, if one exhibition can encourage new friendships, academic cooperation or institutional partnerships, then these remarkable objects continue to fulfil an important purpose. Not the one for which they were originally made. But perhaps one that is even more important today.

Because samurai armour no longer serves to protect a warrior. It protects memory, preserves craftsmanship and quietly reminds us that the strongest bridges between nations are often built not by politics, but by culture.

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