

WORKS OF ART: KNIGHTS IN SHINING ARMOUR

THE EXPERT'S STORY by [The Arts Society](#) Lecturer

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The armour that clad warrior knights of old was not merely worn for protection; each one was a work of art, holding hidden messages denoting power and identity. Arts Society Lecturer Tobias Capwell leads us into this mysterious world of metal.

Tobias Capwell, BA, MA, MA, PhD, FSA is an author, lecturer and broadcaster, and curator of arms and armour at The Wallace Collection in London. He has also been a rider and martial arts practitioner since childhood, and is a founding member of the modern historical jousting community. He has written many books and articles on weapons, armour, tournaments and knighthood. His lectures include *Mars and the Muses: The Renaissance Art of Armour*; *Beautiful Monsters: Heroic and Grotesque Armour of the Italian Renaissance*; and *The Scoliotic Knight: Reconstructing the Real Richard III*. In 2015 he had the honour of serving as one of the two fully armoured horsemen who escorted the remains of King Richard III from the battlefield at Bosworth to their final resting place in Leicester Cathedral.



'I have known when he would have walked ten-mile a-foot to see a good armour...'

William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*

Act II, Scene 3, lines 829-30



John Chalon of England and Lois de Beul of France jousting, from the Royal Armoury Manuscript, 1448

1. DIVINE POWER IN HUMAN FORM

(Image: The close-helmet of the Emperor Ferdinand I, Augsburg, c.1555, from The Wallace Collection, London)

Medieval and Renaissance Europe was ruled by kings, queens and princes who claimed their right to rule directly from God. The Divine Right of Kings bestowed ultimate power on the monarch, who in turn granted aspects of this God-given supremacy to the nobility who supported them and enforced their rule. In this, the 'Age of Chivalry', the enforcers were the knights and the *chevaliers*, elite aristocratic warriors who were trained to fight on horseback (from the French *cheval* meaning horse; and *chevalerie* denoting horsemanship).



The chivalric class, the knights, had a unique role, beyond fighting for their king. They represented living proof of the extravagant claim of divine right. A knight did not simply claim to be more powerful than other human beings. He literally was more powerful, in several crucial ways.

First, as children, knights-to-be had the luxury of time and money to devote their lives to their martial training. From the age of five or six, they were learning to fight with a variety of weapons and also with their bare hands. By their teens, they were skilled martial artists, and their mastery of the lance, sword, axe and dagger gave them a genuine physical superiority over others.

Second, when they were not just training to fight, they were learning to ride horses, for hours every day. Prowess in the saddle placed all the strength, speed and sheer size and weight of the horse at the rider's command. On his warhorse or *destrier*, the knight stood, literally, above other people.

2. KNIGHTS IN SHINING ARMOUR

(Image: Saint George and the Dragon, c.1432–35, by Rogier van der Weyden)

The ability to fight and ride well in battle had been possessed by elite members of diverse world cultures for centuries – what made the European knight different or special?

The answer was that which, after his weaponry and his horse, completed his arsenal of superhuman attributes – something that was at once an advanced military technology and a powerful, expressive art form. This was the great age of armour.



For most of the medieval period, it was almost impossible to produce large enough plates of ferrous metal to make solid, one-piece helmets and breastplates. Any amount of good iron or steel was valuable, and had to be used sparingly. Even as late as the 13th century, the only plate armour a typical knight had was his head protection, while the rest of his body was covered in padded textile and mail, sometimes reinforced with plates of hardened leather, horn or bone.

Metal plate armour for other parts of the body only began to proliferate from c.1320, first as plates for the knees, shins and elbows. By the middle of the century, upper- and lower-arm plates became common, as well as complete leg armour. By the late 14th century, iron- and steel-producing technology had advanced to the point where much bigger pieces of good-quality ferrous metal could be smelted consistently, making the complete, mirror-polished plate armour of the archetypal knight at last a reality

3. BODY ART IN FORM AND DECORATION

(Image: The Emperor Maximilian on Horseback, 1518, by Hans Burgkmair)

The complete armour of plate, historically often called a 'harness' (but never a 'suit of armour') introduced a new art form into Europe.

Armour had always been impressive to look at, and since the earliest times it had been used to broadcast visual messages about the identity, character and associations of the wearer. However, the master armourer of the late Middle Ages became a true artist when he assumed the responsibility of cladding the entire body of his patron in plates of sculpted and polished steel.



At this point, his work took on a new identity as expressive sculpture in metal, possessed of a unity of concept, form and decoration. The great armourers began to self-identify as artists first and military engineers second. They became members of the wider artistic community of the Renaissance, employed in the royal courts of Europe and collaborating closely with draughtsmen, painters and designers – Botticelli painted elaborate tournament shields for the Medici in Florence, and Dürer designed complex visual schemes to decorate the personal armours of the German Emperor Maximilian I.

Armour became a process through which the artist transformed his patron into a living artwork, transforming his physical presence and augmenting his visual impact on the world around him. In

this way, armour was of profound and deeply personal significance to the people who funded the Renaissance – the warlike aristocracy and their supporters.