Truth and myth in samurai culture

By Mike Street
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Few icons that represent Japan are as enduring and important as the feudal samurai warriors. Renowned for swordsmanship, loyalty, and bravery, samurai have impacted artists worldwide, and myths about them are accepted as fact.

Last month, Maribeth Graybill, Ph.D., presented a lecture, "Samurai in Myth, History, and Art," at the Portland Art Museum (PAM) in conjunction with the "Samurai! Armor from the Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Collection" exhibit. Graybill, PAM's curator of Asian art, highlighted her entertaining and educational lecture with images from PAM exhibits, exposing — and occasionally debunking — the roots of our samurai perceptions.

Our earliest impressions of Japanese samurai come from the Heian Era, dominated by the Fujiwara clan at the end. Minamoto Raiko and his father, members of the Minamoto warrior clan, attached themselves to the Fujiwaras and rose in prominence through a series of shrewd political moves.

Although Raiko was granted both a powerful governorship and the rare honor of an imperial audience, he is better known for the story of how he rid Mount Oe of a group of bandits. In the popular retelling, an ogre leads the bandits, who bring him local youths to feast upon. Raiko, on orders from the emperor, goes to destroy the ogre, first praying at a Shinto shrine, where he receives a magic helmet and poisoned saké.

After infiltrating the bandit group, Raiko poisons and beheads the ogre, but the head survives and attacks Raiko, who is saved by his magic helmet. Graybill pointed out that this is the first example of a samurai using a divine helmet; it is also an illustration of a samurai's supernatural strength, cunning, and bravery in the service of his master.

The next samurai representation comes from a painted screen in PAM's collection, depicting the Death of Atsunori from *The Tale of the Heike*. The plot of *Heike* surrounds a civil war between the Taira and Minamoto clans; it became an often-used source for Japanese drama, dance, and paintings.

The screen shows Atsunori, a young Taira captain fleeing Minamoto troops into the ocean, hoping to reach his family's ships. When the head of the pursuing troops demands that Atsunori stop and fight like a man, the young captain returns for one-on-one combat. During the fight, Atsunori's helmet comes off, and his opponent sees that he is fighting someone as young as his own son.

Although he wants to spare Atsunori, the warrior sees more Minamoto troops approaching. Apologizing, he decapitates Atsunori to save him from a long and painful death at their hands. This episode shows the familiar samurai conflict between personal honor and loyalty to clan, a conflict that results in suicide in popular films like *Harakiri*. It also shows the samurai's grim acceptance of death when Atsunori returns to face his pursuer.

As Graybill pointed out, these qualities are undoubtedly exaggerated in samurai fiction. The pursuing Minamoto warrior, consumed by regret, later became a Buddhist monk, but never committed suicide. Similarly, Atsunori might have understood that his death was inevitable, or he might have hoped for a quick death — not necessarily an honorable one. Extreme emotions produce good art, but not good history.

One of Japan's most famous historical figures, Oda Nobunaga began the process of unifying Japan into the shogunate that lasted until the Meiji Restoration. To show how he represented several political, military, and social aspects of samurai life, Graybill analyzed another PAM piece, a brightly painted screen that shows a young and rebellious Nobunaga meeting his father-in-law.

Followed by his famous spear troops and aware of the importance of appearances, a young and rebellious Nobunaga is garishly dressed — a "young punk," as Graybill described. Nobunaga changed to more conservative clothes before formally meeting his father-in-law, and this mixture of rebellion and conformity would be typical of him throughout his career.

After flouting convention to aggressively unify Japan, Nobunaga became its formal leader, and looked and acted the part. Similarly, samurai can be presented as rebels or military lords: Akira Kurosawa provides examples of both, from the reckless ronin in *Yojimbo* to the regal (if treacherous) leaders in *Ran*.

SAMURAI HISTORY. *"Samurai! Armor from the Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Collection," an exhibit of full suits of armor, helmets and face guards, weapons, horse trappings, and more, is on display at the Portland Art Museum (PAM) through January 12. Talks have been held in conjunction with the exhibit, including an event last month featuring Maribeth Graybill, PAM's curator of Asian art. She spoke about images of the samurai, drawing from works in PAM's Japanese galleries and on view in the "Samurai!" exhibit, including the Tosei Gusoku armor (pictured) with features of a tengu, a part-bird, part-human creature with a distinctive beak, golden eyes, and striking eyebrows. (AR Photo/ Jan Landis)*

A further aspect of Nobunaga's life shows the less-martial side of samurai. Samurai often cultivated civilized pursuits, and Nobunaga became an aficionado of formal tea wares. Matsunaga Hisahide, a contemporary of Nobunaga, was similarly obsessed with the crockery, which the men used — oddly — as political weapons.

Hisahide rebelled twice against Nobunaga, but he was forgiven for the first after the gift of a prized tea set. The second time, Nobunaga would spare his life in exchange for a simple tea ladle. Instead, Hisahide destroyed the ladle and all of his tea wares, to prevent them from joining his rival's collection. While samurai usually battled with blades, these two fought with their tea sets.

In the late eighteenth century, Uragami Gyokudo exemplified this lesser-known artistic aspect of samurai culture. When the shogunate brought peace, samurai turned their abilities even further to poetry, music, painting, and calligraphy; Gyokudo occupied his time with philosophy and zither playing.

When the branch of Confucianism that Gyokudo studied was officially banned, he abandoned his imperial duties (risking a death penalty) to pursue painting. Known for quick brushstrokes reminiscent of zither strumming, Gyokudo typified the new, peaceful samurai. One of the beautiful paintings he produced, "Mysterious Forces: Sages at Play," is on display at PAM.

In a lecture that transported its listeners across nearly a millennium of Japanese history, Graybill exposed the roots of popular samurai representations. Bringing to light lesser-known aspects of samurai culture while showing the fallacies of other assumptions, Graybill also showed the breadth of PAM's collection. Be sure to visit the "Samurai!" exhibit before it closes on January 12, and hear her entire, enlightening lecture on PAM's YouTube site.

The final lecture in this series, "What Became of the Samurai in Modern Japan?," will be presented on Sunday, January 12 at 2:00pm in PAM's Whitsell Auditorium. Tickets are free for museum members and College Pass holders, $20 for nonmembers, and $17 for students and seniors. The price includes admission to the museum and the "Samurai!" exhibit. The Portland Art Museum is located at 1219 S.W. Park Avenue in Portland. To learn more, call (503) 226-2811 or visit <www.portlandartmuseum.org>.