The development of

MEDIEVAL ARMOR

over time

The Arms & Armor Collection

Alfred Jonniaux, *John Woodman Higgins*, 1953, oil on canvas, The John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection, 2014.146

In 2014, the Worcester Art Museum acquired the John Woodman Higgins Collection of Arms and Armor, the second largest collection of its kind in the United States. John Woodman Higgins was a Worcester-born industrialist who owned Worcester Pressed Steel. He purchased objects for the collection between the 1920s and 1950s.

Introduction to Armor

German, after Albrecht Dürer, *Knight, Death and the Devil,* 1500s, engraving on cream laid paper, Gift of Robert F. Johnson, 1994.300

This German engraving on paper from the 1500s shows the classic image of a knight fully dressed in a suit of armor. Literature from the Middle Ages (or "Medieval," i.e., the 5th through 15th centuries) was full of stories featuring knights—like those of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, or the popular tale of Saint George who slayed a dragon to rescue a princess.

Introduction to Armor

However, knights of the early Middle Ages did not wear full suits of armor. Those suits, along with romantic ideas and images of knights, developed over time.

The image on the left, painted in the mid 1300s, shows Saint George the dragon slayer wearing only some pieces of armor. The carving on the right, created around 1485, shows Saint George wearing a full suit of armor.

Paolo Veneziano, *St. George,* mid-1300s, tempera on panel, Museum Purchase, 1927.19.4a

Southern German or Austrian, *St. George and the Dragon*, 1480–1490, lindenwood with traces of paint, The John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection, 2014.1

Mail Armor

European, *Mail Shirt,* 1400s-early 1500s, iron, The John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection, 2014.842.2

The first type of armor worn to protect soldiers was mail armor, commonly known as *chainmail.* Mail was made by hand, weaving interlocking rings of iron into a pattern of protective mesh. Artisans weaved the mail into a variety of attire: shirts, leggings, and hoods.

Mail Armor

https://mapsontheweb.zoom-maps.com/image/53753265954

Based on archaeological evidence, scholars believe mail was invented before 300 BCE by the Celts.
At this time, much of Europe was culturally Celtic and the Roman Republic (seen here in red) was still small.
Over time, the Romans would adopt mail for their own soldiers. By the beginning of the 1st century CE,
the Roman Empire had gained control over most of Europe, and the use of mail spread
throughout the Mediterranean world.

Mail Armor

Egyptian/Ottoman, Persian, *Mail Coat*, 1500s, with later alterations, iron and brass, The John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection, 20014.9

By the 11th century, mail outfits had developed in length to protect more of the body.
Like this one from the Sudan in Africa, the armor included extended sleeves and a knee-length skirt suitable for riding a horse. This type of suit is called a hauberk, and it weighs just over 33 pounds.

With the 13th century addition of mail leggings, a full suit would weigh around 40 pounds.
Mail armor was expensive to make and was therefore owned by wealthy soldiers.

More Protection

An early knight would have additional equipment to protect himself.
Under his mail, a knight would wear a light, padded garment, which goes by different names: a *gambeson, aketon, wambais* or *panzeri*.
The purpose was twofold: to prevent chaffing of the mail against the body, and to provide further protection.

A shield was also used. While shapes varied, the triangular type is popularly associated with knights.
(Our shield here is upside down so it can stand!) Helmets were worn to prevent head injuries.

helmets

Italian, *"Mezza testa" (skull-cap)*, about 1490–1500, steel, 2014.1056

Sudan, *Helmet*, 1800s, russeted iron with gilding, 2014.91

English, *Helm*, 1800s, iron, 2014.1126

Swedish, *"War Hat,"* mid- to late 1600s, iron, 2014.1116

The 5th through 12th centuries saw round or conical, open-faced helmets.
Sometimes a nose guard or a mail curtain was included to protect the face from slashes.
Helmets that covered the whole head developed between the late 12th and 14th centuries.
These helmets, often worn while riding horses, offered limited vision and were removed when fighting on foot to see better.
Helmets with brims were popular for foot soldiers, or *infantry*, as they added extra protection without covering the face.

helmets

German, *Basinet Helm with Aventail (mail hood) and "Dog-Faced" visor,* about 1360–1370, steel, iron and brass with modern leather, cord and restorations, 2014.842.1

Southern German, *"Sallet" Helmet,* 1480–1490, steel, 2014.1146.1

Northern Italian, Milan, *Close Helmet for Field and Tournament,* about 1550–1570, etched steel with traces of gilding, 2014.1124

• By the 14th century, the *basinet,* a helmet with a moveable visor, developed. The visor pictured here was called "Dog-faced!"

• By the 15th century, the *sallet* became the most popular helmet for combat. Note that it has a projection to protect the neck.

• In the 16th century, the *close helmet* developed. The close helmet covered the entire head and had a visor that lifted. This helmet is often associated with knights today.