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MEDIA RELEASE

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The Samurai Legend: Of Mighty Warriors and Tragic Heroes

The new exhibition at the Bernisches Historisches Museum takes the visitor on a fascinating journey to the world of the legendary samurai in Japan. “The Samurai Legend. The Ann & Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Collection” traces the developments from the dawn of the Japanese warrior tradition to the eventful reign of the military nobility, which lasted around 700 years, and finally to the traces of the samurai found in modern pop culture. At the center of the exhibition is the outstanding Japanese armor on loan from the private collection of Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller (Dallas, USA). These have been augmented by a selection of magnificent weapons from the collection of the Bernisches Historisches Museum. www.bhm.ch/samurailegend

Who were the samurai? Self-sacrificing servants, fearless fighters, virtuous scholars, warriors without a war? Starting on 4 November 2021, the eventful history of the dynamic Japanese warriors will be brought impressively to life at the Bernisches Historisches Museum in a space covering around 1000m2. The armor and weapons are distinguished by their exquisite craftsmanship and are emblematic of the history of the samurai. They reflect moreover not only the changing face of warfare and the shifting role of the samurai, but also the political turbulences and social upheavals in Japanese society over the past millennium. While touring the exhibition, visitors are invited to compare the historical reality with not only their preconceptions about the samurai, but also the images evoked by popular culture.

“We are proud to be the first Swiss museum that can tell the fascinating story of the Japanese warrior elite by presenting the spectacular objects from the internationally renowned private collection of Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller,” says the delighted Director of the Bernisches Historisches Museum, Thomas Pauli-Gabi. “The loans will be complemented by outstanding weapons from our own collection. The Bernisches Historisches Museum has one of the most extensive and important Japanese collections in Switzerland – encompassing around 1,000 objects directly related to the samurai and their history,” adds Alban von Stockhausen, curator of the exhibition.

Stories Ranging from Brute Force to Tender Poetry

With over 200 exhibits, the presentation draws up a richly faceted panorama of the age of the samurai from the 12th to the 19th century, and of the history of Japan up to the present. The samurai’s arsenal included armor, helmets, masks, and horse equipment, which were diversely designed for face-to-face combat, religious purposes, or to function purely as status symbols. Their decorative elements and the stories associated with them are no less varied and imaginative. Creatures from mythological tales as well as from the country’s flora and fauna were used to represent powerful family clans, terrify the foe, or protect the warriors from mental and physical harm. Religious motifs, deities, or symbols citing famous battles are also to be found. The samurai have continued to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for present-day pop culture, entertainment and the consumer goods industry is also demonstrated by a selection of objects submitted by Swiss citizens in response to a digital call for contributions during the run-up to the exhibition.
The visitor’s experience is shaped by the visual opulence of these spectacular exhibits and is also turned into a multi-sensory adventure by the numerous interactive discovery stations and audiovisual elements. What does it feel like to put on samurai armor, to touch exotic materials such as ray skin, or to wield a battle sword in your hand? An audio-guide tour by an expert opens an additional narrative dimension: in the audio experience, figures from exhibited woodcuts are brought to life, the poetry and tragedy that underline the warrior ethos are reflected upon, and little-known aspects such as the role of women and children as warriors explored in greater depth.

A Supporting Program for Young and Old
The rich supporting program broadens and enlarges the array of topics in the exhibition. From November 2021 to February 2022, the museum will be open on Wednesdays until 9.30 p.m. as part of its regular slot for “An Evening at the Museum – the Japan Series”. In addition to viewing the exhibition, visitors can attend expert lectures, take guided tours, and participate in creative workshops on numerous aspects of Japanese art, history, and culture. For families, family ateliers will be featured on the program from January 2022.

High resolution images: www.bhm.ch/images_samurai

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About the Samurai
The Establishment of Military Rule: The origin of the term samurai, which derives from “to serve” or “to wait upon", can be found in the milieu of the Japanese imperial court during the cultural ascendancy of the Heian period (794-1185). The samurai were servants who also performed protective duties, before rising to become the ruling class of the military nobility in the late 12th century. For around 700 years, power was held not by the imperial court, but by the military commander-in-chief, the shōgun, to whom the regional samurai lords, the daimyō, were subordinated. With the rise of the shōgunate, a specific warrior culture developed, based on the values cultivated at court and bound to unconditional loyalty, honor and discipline. The warrior’s honor was to be upheld at all costs – even at the risk of his life. The image of the samurai later conveyed by modern popular culture is rooted above all in the period of the 15th and 16th centuries, in which countless bloody battles were fought.

During the Edo period (1603-1868), which was marked by peace, the warrior class legitimized itself through new statutes that laid down the ideals and ethics of the samurai. In addition to the martial arts, the statutes cite seven fundamental virtues: Courage, respect, kindness, honor, righteousness, honesty and loyalty. This code of honor later came to be known as bushidō. As warriors without a war, the samurai increasingly spent these peaceful years in municipal administration, and many lapsed into idleness and at times poverty. Known as rōnin, roving penniless warriors went as far as to pawn their armor and even their swords, their symbol of honor and sense of life.

The Demise of the Warrior Class: The first half of the 19th century was marked by social unrest. In 1853, US ships applied main force to open up Japan, which had sequestered itself from foreign countries, to international trade. The shōgunate subsequently signed trade agreements, which had far-reaching political consequences for Japan and led to civil war. With the so-called Meiji Restoration, the supremacy of the samurai met its end in 1868. The warriors were disarmed and stripped of their privileges. Imperial power was restored and a newly formed army took over the defense of the country. Soon after, the idealization of the former military nobility began to occur in Japan and the Western world.
About the “Ann & Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Collection”

The Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Museum: The Samurai Collection is one of the most complete and largest of its type in the world, selectively amassed by Ann and Gabriel and their children over the past twenty-five years. Centuries of craftsmanship are represented in the collection with objects dating from the seventh to nineteenth centuries.

The Ann & Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Museum: The Samurai Collection in Dallas, Texas was established in 2012 to permanently house their ever-expanding collection of samurai masterpieces. Located in the Harwood District and housed on the second level of a historic Dallas landmark, the St. Ann’s School building, the Museum is the only one of its kind in the United States. The Samurai Collection welcomes guests of all ages and is free to the public.

Beyond the Museum, a dynamic and beautiful compilation of suits of armor, helmets, masks, horse armor, and weaponry are on display in a touring exhibition as well as the lobbies of Harwood International developments around the world. Since 2011, The Samurai Collection’s touring exhibition has been presented in over 10 cities worldwide.

www.samuraicollection.org