BERLIN IS, of course, famous for its museums; indeed, a whole island (Museumsinsel) in the river Spree is given over to them. Here visitors to the city may spend days admiring the Egyptian and other treasures of the Neues Museum; the Pergamonmuseum (antiquities and Islamic art); the Bode-Museum (coins and sculpture) and the lovely Neo-Classical Altes Museum (classical antiquities). This is to mention only a few of the city’s many cultural attractions.

In October 2017 a remarkable newcomer, the Samurai Art Museum, opened its doors on Clayallee in the Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf. All successful museums are in some degree the product of a team effort and require the input of several enthusiasts. Nevertheless, the Samurai Art Museum, which houses one of the world’s finest collections of samurai art, is essentially the creation of one remarkable individual, Peter Janssen. In March 2019 I had the privilege of interviewing him at his museum. In addition, I was given an informative tour of the collection by its Curator, Martyna Lesniewska. Thomas Schulze, who played an important part in the creation of the museum, kindly provided valuable background details.

BARBARA HARDING—How did your interest in the art of Japan begin? What was your inspiration, especially in relation to the samurai?

PETER JANSSEN—I was born in 1948 in a small village in north Germany. Already as a boy I was fascinated by the idea of travelling the world and I read many books of adventure and exploration. I began to collect stamps, coins
Armour with two long horns. Momoyama period (1573–1615)
and curiosities of all kinds and I spent a lot of time imagining the countries they came from. World travel was not an easy matter in those days, especially for a young boy, so after leaving school I began an apprenticeship as a chef, with the idea that this would provide travel opportunities. I found my way to Switzerland and there I met two Japanese gentlemen. One of them, Takashi Kanazashi, was a karate expert and a well-known collector of art in Japan. He helped me to understand Japanese culture and especially bushido, the way of the warrior. Takashi and I remained friends ever since those early days and he was the catalyst, the inspiration, for my involvement with Japanese art.

In 1968 I came to Berlin and began to study Economics at university; more importantly, I was able to learn karate and to become familiar with the world of the samurai. After graduating, I started my own business and opened a nursing home (the first of many) in Berlin. Today I am still involved with nursing homes but I leave their day-to-day management to my two daughters and long-term business partner.

In 1977 I made my first long trip, through Venezuela and Colombia to the Amazon region. On the return journey I had the good fortune to meet my wife, Susanne, and in the years which followed we made many adventurous journeys, to Australia, New Guinea, the Tuamotus, Vanuatu and Mongolia, to name just a few places. In 1991 I obtained my pilot’s licence and we acquired our own plane, a Beechcraft B-TC-36.

Around 1985 I bought my first samurai sword at a Berlin flea market; predictably, it turned out to be a complete mistake. Then I discovered a small gallery in Motzstrasse, Berlin, owned by Thomas Schulze. There I bought my first real samurai armour (I still have it) and Thomas went on
Armour of embossed iron, attributed to Ryo’ei and signed by Kunitaka. Early Edo period (17th century)
War fan (tessen), signed "Rakuju" (1817–1884)

Riveted helmet with gold-lacquer crest in the shape of holly leaves. Nanbokuchō period (1336–1392)
to make a major contribution to the collection. It was never my plan to build up a large collection of samurai art; the aim was simply to have a few choice items for my office. But I became fascinated by the artistic quality of these objects, their individuality and the extraordinary skill of the craftsmen who made them. Inevitably the collection grew to the size it is today.

BH—It has been said that the samurai dominated Japanese society for 1000 years, yet many non-Japanese know very little about them. What were their beliefs and their attitude to life?

PJ—Yes, the samurai were the dominant group in Japan for more than 1000 years and this was especially so after 1185, when they became all-powerful and the Emperor was little more than a puppet. Apart from being military leaders, and generally ruling the country, they influenced Japanese society in so many ways. Sometimes this influence was direct and obvious: the tea ceremony and Nō theatre were samurai creations. In other ways samurai influence was more indirect and subtle, for example in forging the national character of the Japanese.

The samurai attitude to life was dominated by bushido, the way of the warrior. It is not easy to find English words exactly equivalent to this philosophy, but we can say that sincerity, loyalty, duty, self-sacrifice, mastery of the martial arts, and honour even unto death are inherent in it. This moral code of the samurai had its origins in Confucianism, Daoism and especially in Zen Buddhism. Significantly, one of the first English language books on Zen (by Prof. Kaiten Nukariya, 1913) is entitled The Religion of the Samurai. From Shinto came the idea of a sacred essence or “soul” inherent in all things, animate and inanimate.

All these qualities associated with bushido find their expression in samurai art. Consider one example from the collection: the 14th century riveted helmet with holly-leaf crest illustrated here. When we see or handle this wonderful helmet, we are in some degree conscious of its spirit or “soul” and feel ourselves in the presence of its maker and the samurai who wore it.

BH—You have many samurai objects of the highest quality. Can you mention some of your exceptional pieces?

PJ—Over the years I made contact with dealers and collectors all over the world, but especially in Japan. There I met Mr Okawado, a connoisseur of samurai art who had studied under the well-known expert in Japanese armour, Sasama Yoshihiko (1916–2005). We have a fine Momoyama (1573–1615) armour of the Uesugi clan which was formerly in Sasama’s collection.

Mr Takimoto and Mr Morioka of Takuya Art in Kamakura helped me to acquire some exceptional pieces, such as the daimyo (feudal lord) armours of the Kato and Hachisuka clans. The Hachisuka armour was worn by the sixth generation Munekazu and was formerly in the Hayashibara Museum in Okayama. The two Kato armours came from Atami Castle in Shizuoka prefecture. Another remarkable piece is the armour made by the master smith, Ryo’ei, and his lord and student, Kunitaka, during the 17th century; this was formerly displayed in Kyoto’s Ii Museum.

Japanese blades (nishonto) of fine quality are not easy to find nowadays; many have been lost or destroyed over the centuries. However, we are fortunate to have some exceptional swords in the collection. One tanto (dagger) I must mention since it was made by the master, Go Yoshihiro, who is one of the most famous sword-smiths of all time. He was active in the late Kamakura period (14th century) and is one of the Sansaku, the three greatest sword-smiths of Japan.
BH—When you are considering a purchase for the museum what are the qualities you look for? Do you still actively collect?

PJ—Yes, I do still acquire objects for the museum—provided they are of sufficient quality and complement what we already have.

I first try to categorise the piece, in terms of age, school, smith, completeness and originality. The provenance (the various hands through which it has passed) is also important, as is its cultural and historical importance. Is the ob-
ject really the work of a master craftsman? In the case of blades there are certain technical features to consider, such as the *hada* (surface grain, generated in the forging process), the quality of the steel, the presence of *kizu* (flaws or defects), the shape of the blade, and the *haomon* (temper line).

There is another factor, in addition to these technical criteria, and it will surely be familiar to all collectors. After many years of study and after handling thousands of items, one develops an instinctive feeling for the “rightness” or quality of an object. That is a very important faculty.

Ribbed helmet with gilded crest in the form of a dragon. Edo period (17th–18th century)
BH—How does the museum interact with the public? For example, do you encourage visits by school or college groups? How do you see the future of your museum?

PJ—Our aim at the Samurai Art Museum is to be accessible to a wide audience and we actively encourage group visits and events. For example, in August 2018 we participated in Berlin’s famous “Long Night of Museums”; this all-night event was a great success and we welcomed more than 800 visitors. A highly significant project has been our collaboration with Sylwia Makris, the Polish artist. Sylwia trained as a sculptor but her main visual medium is fine art photography which she uses to create unique works of art; in our case these are samurai artefacts “inhabited” by living models.

Of course, the museum also welcomes samurai art experts and I will mention just one of the many special events which we have hosted: in February 2018 we welcomed members of the Japanese Armour Society who included our museum in their first “Grand Tour”.

My hope is that the Samurai Art Museum will stay accessible to the public for generations to come.

BH—What advice would you give to a new collector?

PJ—I hesitate to lecture other collectors but, speaking for myself, I would rather have one exceptional sword than ten average ones. “Buy the best; forget the rest” is a good maxim. If you are a beginner don’t be disheartened by a mistake or a bad experience. We all make mistakes and I certainly did at the Berlin flea market. The question is rather: can we learn from our mistakes and move on to better things?

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Semi, a work by Sylwia Makris from the series Samurai—Armour and Art. Model: Martyna Lesiewska