



Knights

May 22 | October 19, 2025

EXHIBITION ✕ POINTE-À-CALLIÈRE

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How these iconic figures evolved throughout History

These legendary figures from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance represent an ideal of bravery built on a code of chivalric conduct and values. As their role was deeply tied to the military and social conventions of their time, their status changed over the centuries. From horseback warriors on the 9th-century battlefield to representatives of an aristocratic elite in the 13th century, knights were vessels of prestige and power.

Through 250 remarkable pieces, including 135 from the reputable collection of the Museo Stibbert in Florence (Italy), this one-of-a-kind exhibition explores the mythic qualities of knights and their status along with their role in war, society and culture.

Frederick Stibbert collection (1838-1906)

Wealthy heir Frederick Stibbert spent his life collecting artifacts related to knights, as chivalry was very much in vogue during Europe's Romantic era. A vast array of weapons, armour and period costumes turned his collection into one of the most extensive of its kind in the world. His villa in Florence—which contained over 50,000 pieces!—was transformed into a museum after his death. A connoisseur of fine paintings, Stibbert acquired contemporary and classical works, including an invaluable copy of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa produced in the early 17th century.

Mona Lisa (La Gioconda)
Unknown, after
Leonardo da Vinci
1600–1625
Museo Stibbert

This historic copy of Leonardo da Vinci's iconic painting is extremely valuable because of its faithfulness to the original.



Photograph of Frederick Stibbert
Circa 1865
Museo Stibbert

Frederick Stibbert wearing his armor and with a heater shield bearing his coat of arms.

Chivalry as an ideal

Knights appeared in the ninth century as vassals who served their lords. Over time, their status evolved. At first supported by the Church—which sought to have these violent warriors defend the faith and the vulnerable—, this military institution coalesced around a more cultural, moral and spiritual ideal in the 12th century. Knighthood became reserved for the nobility and was a title obtained after a long process that began in childhood and included many stages and ceremonies. The image of the valiant and loyal knight became a fixture in literature and the collective imagination, with its popularity culminating in the 16th century.



The accolade of Galahad,
from *Lancelot en prose*
1405
Bibliothèque nationale de France

The future knight is dubbed on the shoulder with the flat of a sword, while his sponsor gives him the sword and spurs.

Armour: From protective gear to art pieces

An essential defence for knights, armour changed over time through technical progress. Chainmail was used in the beginning, with metal plates added for increased protection. In the 15th century, suits of armour became true works of art with complex motifs and meticulous decorations that displayed the skill of the artisans who made them.



Cavalry armour
1500–1550
Germany
Museo Stibbert

This type of decoration was typical of “Maximillian armour,” referring to Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519).





Cuirass
1550–1600
Italy
Museo Stibbert

This breastplate was part of a foot soldier's half-armour, typical of Lombardy.



Knight's armour
1580–1585
Italy
Museo Stibbert

Could knights actually move in their armour? See for yourself!

Despite what many people think, knights were extremely agile in their plated armour. In fact, they could run, ride horses, and even perform acrobatic manoeuvres. Watch their incredible skill through videos and a unique experience zone: feel the weight of some armour, pick up a sword, and even try a challenge straight out of a grand tournament of old!

This is a beautiful illustration of the art of Pompeo della Cesa, Milan's leading armourer of the late 16th century. Below the upper edge of the breastplate, two trumpet players can be seen holding up a crown etched with the maker's name.

Castles: Where chivalry came to life

In the Middle Ages, the castle was the seat of the lord's power and a meeting place for the nobility. The lord lived there with his family, household, and knights. As knights often had no land of their own, they served the lord in exchange for protection and honour. Banquets, dancing, music, entertainment, and tournaments filled daily life at the court. Women also played an essential social and political role that, although discreet, was influential.



**Chess piece:
the hunter (bishop)**
1300–1325
Scandinavia
Musée de Cluny – Musée national
du Moyen Âge

Board games such as chess and checkers were very popular in the lords' courts.



Candleholder: battle scenes
1180–1190
France
Musée de Cluny – Musée national
du Moyen Âge

This candleholder shows three fights between a standing female figure armed with a sword and a male figure with bent knees who is carrying a weapon. These depictions may symbolize battles between virtue (the female figure) and vice (the male figure).

Tournaments: A stage for bravery

Tournaments evolved from medieval military practices into prestigious events. These events included melees, or hand-to-hand fights among several knights (often on horseback), and jousting, in which two knights would ride or run at each other with a lance. Initially perilous, these competitions became codified spectacles that showcased chivalric honour and skill.



Museo Stibbert

Tournament book depicting William IV, Duke of Bavaria, clashing with an opponent during a tournament in 1511





Chanfron
1525–1575
Italy
Museo Stibbert

As trusty companions, horses were also fitted with protective armour that included a chanfron to protect the head.



Tournament shields
1500–1600
Italy
Museo Stibbert

Metal shields of this type were used in military games on foot, with combatants separated by a barrier, generally made of wood.



Full jousting armour with lance
1500–1525
Italy
Museo Stibbert

This is an excellent example of armour that could be transformed into jousting armour by way of reinforcing pieces. The wooden lance lacks its tip.



Joan of Arc (1412–1431)
1584
Bibliothèque nationale de France

The French peasant girl Joan of Arc proclaimed that she had received a call from God to free France from the English occupation. After persuading Charles VII of her divine mission, she fought in decisive battles and sieges that led to the King's coronation in Reims in 1429. Wearing a sword and armour, she led the troops and fought heroically. She was captured in 1430, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake in Rouen in 1431 at just 19 years of age.

Women and chivalry

In the Middle Ages, war was mainly an affair of men. Wearing armour and wielding a sword were not considered socially acceptable for women. Yet some noblewomen took up arms to defend their lands and manage their estates when their husbands were away. In the 16th century, some women even had power as regents to maintain the continuity of the State.



Rapier
1600–1700
Spain
Museo Stibbert

Weapons: Testaments to a changing knighthood

The swords, lances and armour needed to defend buildings and train knights were kept in the castle armouries. But the nature of warfare changed as the weapons evolved. Eventually, these spaces were no longer used for military purposes but in some cases as showrooms to display decorative armour and war trophies. As places of remembrance, they bore witness to the end of an era by honouring the feats of heroes gone by and keeping alive military traditions through stories and legends.



Partisan
1575–1600
Italy
Museo Stibbert

The partisan is distinguished by its two small lateral blades, or wings, which extend from either side of the main blade. The latter is richly decorated with engravings, including four medallions depicting deities from mythology: Jupiter, Minerva, Mars, and Mercury. Its ornamentation suggests that it was designed for ceremonial guards.

What happened to the knights?

Although knights have disappeared from the battlefield, they have lived on in our collective imagination, inspiring literature, film and art. Today, knights still embody the values of merit and loyalty through honorary titles. Such is the case with the knights of the Ordre de Montréal, a distinction awarded to citizens whose remarkable achievements help shape the city. Long before them, there was Louis-Hector de Callière — a member of the Order of Saint-Louis, after whom the Museum is named. What about you? Do you know any knights?

