

Feature



Japanese War Fans *Philip Gust**

A little-known weapon of the Japanese Samurai provides many opportunities for historical, as well as, anime costumers.

Samurai were skilled in the use of a range of weapons, including bows and arrows, knives, spears and guns. Their most famous weapon, and the symbol that represented the honor of the Samurai, was the sword. The word “Samurai” finds its root in “samorau” (or “saburau”), a verb in Japanese that means "to serve".

These traditional weapons have become so associated with the Samurai, thanks to countless romantic representations in movies and literature, that most people would be surprised to learn of another weapon that was equally indispensable to them: the war fan.

I first learned about this surprising accessory while attending an event put on by the Fan Association of North America (FANA) at the Hand Fan Museum in Healdsburg California last year (see [VC volume 8 issue 4 \(2010\)](#), pp 46-48). I already knew that the fan was an indispensable accessory in Japanese culture,

but I had not appreciated just how pervasive it was.

For those who are planning on creating costumes based on the Samurai warrior, or even for those involved in Anime costuming, a war fan not only adds a note of authenticity, but also provides an opportunity to incorporate one in interesting ways into



Samurai general in armor with Dansen uchiwa (war fan).

your presentation.

The purpose of this article is to provide an introduction to the types and uses of Japanese war fans that can serve as a launching point for your own costume research.

The Fans of War

The fan was customarily carried in the hand or tucked in the obi (belt), especially in ceremonial dress. The folding fan also

played a significant role in Japanese etiquette, especially on formal occasions, and was rarely ever out of a samurai's possession.

Given the prevalence of fans in Japanese society and their use for ceremonial communications, it's not surprising to learn that fans were also used as signaling devices on the battle field. The use of sound to signal in battle has always been unreliable. Horns and drums carry a certain distance, but their sound can be blocked or misdirected by physical obstacles. Colorfully painted fans, on the other hand, can be seen at great distances wherever there is a direct line of site, and their messages can be relayed from one signaler to another to cover greater distances. Three primary types of war fans were employed for different purposes.

Gunbei-uchiwa. The earliest type of war fan adapted the ceremonial fan for use on the battlefield as both as a signaling device and as a defensive weapon. The Gunbei-uchiwa was a large, open fan made of solid iron, metal with a wooden core, or solid wood. They were usually carried by high-ranking officers to signal their troops on the battlefield. The gunbei can also be used defensively. Because they were made of hard materials, the solid construction could deflect, or ward off, arrows or sword blows.



Solid iron signal fan "gunbai or gumpai". Photo by [Samurai Antique World](#).

Gunbei were difficult to carry because they were rigid and often made of heavier materials, so there were fewer choices about where they could be hung without interfering with the use of other weapons.

Gunsen. Another type of war fan was an improvement over the gunbei in terms of portability and utility. The gunsen, or folding war fan, was made of wood, bronze, brass or a similar metal for the inner spokes, and often used thin iron or other metals for the outer spokes or cover, making them lightweight but strong.

Gunsen were frequently carried by Bushi in armor and used as a weapon of both attack and defense. They were hung from a variety of places, including the belt or breastplate, though such placement often made it more difficult to use a sword or a bow.

As a signaling device, the gunsen served the same role as the gunbei. They were often highly decorated to make them more visible, and because they were not solid and could fold, they could also be made in larger sizes to make them more visible.

As a defensive weapon, the gunsen could also be used to deflect arrows or sword blows using the the metal outer spokes in a folded configuration. The construction made the fan solid without incurring the weight of the solid gunbei.



Edo period "gunsen" fan with wood ribs and an iron outer cover. Photo by [Samurai Antique World](#).

The gunsen could also be used offensively as a striking weapon. Due to the more solid construction of the spokes, a folded Gunsen could be used at close quarters, when other weapons were not available, to inflict serious injury to unprotected areas of an opponent.

Tessen. A third type of fan succeeded both the gunbei and the gunsen on the battle field. The tessen, literally "iron fan," was a



Bronze folding tessen war fan, Edo period, 18th century. Photo by [The Mandala](#), Fukuoka Japan.

folding fan with metal ribs. They were designed to look like normal, harmless folding fans, which Samurai could take to places where swords or other overt weapons were not allowed. Another type of tessen was a non-folding solid club shaped to look like a closed fan.

Like its predecessors, the tessen could be used for signaling on the battlefield. It could also be used both defensively and offensively. The versatile tessen could fend off arrows and darts, be used as a throwing or impact weapon, and aid in swimming. Some swordsmanship schools included training in the use of the tessen as a weapon.



Non-folding, club tessen were used as defensive and offensive weapons. Photo by [Samurai Antique World](#).

War Fans At Home and in Battle

When performing domestic chores, at leisure, or meeting with superiors the samurai was often disarmed. A warrior was also generally required to leave one or both swords with an attendant if visiting another's home. Armed with a tessen in his obi, though, the samurai was never completely unarmed. He could easily defend himself in an emergency with what appeared to be a common, everyday object.

It was considered unseemly to use a sword against a lower ranking rival. On the other hand, tessen-jutsu was considered sophisticated, especially among the higher ranking samurai, and many actually preferred to defend themselves with a tessen.

There are many legends regarding combat about the use of an iron fan. The hero of many Japanese sagas, Yoshitsune allegedly learned swordsmanship and tessen-jutsu secrets from the Tengu, mythical beings who were supposed to be expert martial artists.

As kendo instructors to the Tokugawa shoguns, the Yagyu ryu were also famous for their iron fan defensive techniques. Many examples of duels were said to be won using iron fans against naked swords, and even deaths caused by blows from a tessen. A famous 16th century swordsman, Ganryu, armed only with his tessen, defeated several armed opponents in one incident.

The versatility of these fans is illustrated by a famous story from various sources. Araki Murashige was an important figure of the late Warring States period. Summoned to appear before Oda Nobunaga, the first of the three great unifiers of Japan, Murashige knew that his life hung in the balance and that only his tessen stood between him and an unpleasant demise. A method of Nobunaga's retainers for disposing of enemies was to snap their neck between the heavy wooden door panels that separated the antechamber from the reception hall when the visitor performed the ritual bow greeting across the threshold.

When he bowed, Murashige placed his tessen in the groove in which the door panels slid, and there was a loud bang as the doors suddenly bounced against the steel rods of the fan, but no blood flowed. Murashige acted as if nothing had happened, and his composure was acknowledged by Nobunaga with reconciliation and favors.

The legend may or may not be true, but it demonstrates the respect that war fans had among the feudal samurai of Japan.

Uses of War Fans in CosPlay



War fans provide new scope for historical costumers, but they are also ideal as accessories for action-packed skits by anime cosplayers. There are many examples. Takeda Shingen in the video game series

Samurai Warriors wields a dansen uchiwa in the first game, and in *SW2*, *Ishida Mitsunari* also wields a tessen. Female ninja video game character *Mai Shiranui* also uses war fans, and a pair of sharp metal fans are used in the *Mortal Kombat* series and films.

War fans could be incorporated into the choreography of a combat skit, with combatants using war fans to vary the pace, or adding a surprise ending by having a disarmed warrior defeat an opponent using a war fan hidden in his or her costume.

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Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.