

# *Three-Quarter Field Armor from a Garniture*

1570–80



THE  
ART INSTITUTE  
OF  
CHICAGO

## Poster Packet

Department of Museum Education

Division of Student and Teacher Programs

The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

# Three-Quarter Field Armor from a Garniture 1570–80

Milan, Italy, Etched and gilded steel, iron, brass, leather, velvet with gold lace, 5 ft. 10 in.

George F. Harding Collection, 1982.2102 a-t

## Background

The Art Institute's George F. Harding collection of armor is one of the largest in America. The items date from the Middle Ages (c. 500-1400) to the Renaissance (c. 1400-1600) and range from arms and armor for combat, ceremonies, and **tournaments** to armor and equipment for the horse.

Medieval armor varied in materials and style. Armor from the early Middle Ages consisted of leather, padded textiles or mail. Mail was made of interlocking iron rings either as knee-length shirts (called **hauberks**) or as breeches. Mail was very flexible, but this meant it was effective only against stabbing and cutting weapons such as swords and spears. It could be easily rolled up for storage. When the knight was fully armored, complete with helmet, it was hard to tell who he was. A **coat of arms** worn over his armor became his identification. It was often embroidered on a cloth tunic, or surcoat, or painted on his wooden shield. The coat of arms indicated pictorially what family he came from, and therefore what side he was on.

As weapons changed, armor changed as well. When warriors began to use crushing weapons such as the war hammer and axes, better armor was needed. A blow with an ax could cut right through the mail. **Plate armor** was devised to cover virtually the entire body. A knight in armor would use a number of weapons. To crush the armor of the enemy, he could use a mace, battle ax or flail. His most important weapon when fighting from horseback was a long, heavy spear called a **lance**. A lance was used to pierce an opponent's armor, or dislodge him from his horse. Special lances were also used in **jousting** tournaments. He also had a **broadsword** and dagger worn on a waistbelt. From the 1500s on, armored horsemen began to carry pistols, weapons whose development helped make battlefield armor impractical.

The study of European armor from the fourteenth through the sixteenth century is, essentially, a study of history of medieval and early Renaissance Europe. The evolution of this functional art form parallels the emergence of Europe from an era of social disorder into the structured order of

fiefdoms, city-states, and eventually nations. The strongest warriors became feudal lords. The strongest lords became kings. The people whom a medieval lord or king protected, the loyal followers, were called vassals. They served in his army, paid him taxes, and helped build his domain, which was centered around a castle with walls.

The king's core army was a highly trained and disciplined group of men called knights. To earn the right to knighthood was not easy. To become a knight, a boy had to be of noble birth (born to a family of lords and ladies). At approximately 6 years of age, boys would be selected to help the ladies or lords of the castle as **pages**. Between ages 14 and 20, a page became a **squire** in service to a knight, where he would learn skills for competition and battle and the code of chivalry (see below). Only after proving his loyalty and good service to the court could a squire become a knight.

# The Code of Chivalry

A medieval knight was expected to be both gentleman and warrior. His status was dependent upon allegiance to a superior who granted privileges and limited power in return for special payments and most importantly, military service. Medieval knighthood was shaped by a highly ritualized system of ideals and practices known as chivalry. This included standards for religious, military, and societal facets of life, such as defending one's religion, protecting those in need, and fighting well and fairly. Symbolic attributes were often applied to elements of the knightly arsenal. Armor protected the wearer's physical being just as he was expected to defend his faith.

His war horse sought his equestrian guidance yet supported him as did the common people. At its best, knighthood and chivalry provided a basic system of order and government; at the base extreme it imposed on lesser society a clique of powerful, armed individuals who often gave little thought to anyone other than themselves. By the fifteenth century the increasing use of professional foot soldiers and handguns meant that the mounted knight was no longer the all-powerful force on the battlefield. Warfare took on an even more brutal nature, and knighthood acquired a largely ceremonial, nostalgic quality.

## Armor for a Prince

Armor is a symbol of the knight's diverse functions and significance in medieval and early Renaissance society. It represents, on one hand, the violence and harsh social conditions that existed; on the other, it is evidence of the effort to stabilize society and develop strong moral values around the Church. In the case of the *Three-Quarter Field Armor from a Garniture*, it also represents the manual skill of Renaissance artisans and their ability to interpret the highly developed tastes of the nobility.

This suit of armor is from part of a group of intricately etched and **gilded** pieces made in the northern Italian city of Milan, 1570-80. During the Middle Ages, Milan became one of Europe's major centers of armor-making. It played a leading role in the development of steel armor because of its good access to rich resources of iron, charcoal, water power, and highly skilled craftsmen. The city's intensive production of wapons and armor was without rival in Europe during the fifteenth century. In the sixteenth century, in response to competition from other European cities,

Milan encouraged its industrious artisans to design and perfect new, complicated constructions for body defense.

The Art Institute owns nineteen matching pieces (although there were probably more) to this suit of armor, probably made for a prince of the Spanish court. (See below for a diagram of the armor and a separate list of terms.) A collection of matching pieces that make up an "armor wardrobe" is known as a **garniture**. This suit is set up for use in battle. By mixing the various pieces that came with the garniture, the owner could use the suit for war, tournaments, or ceremonial parades. All pieces would have been decorated with similar etched bands filled with gold. (Etching, the art of cutting a design into metal with acid, evolved later into a major medium of fine printing. On this suit, a paste of gold and mercury was applied to the etched steel and then heat-fused into place.) The organization of the decoration into vertical bands and ornamental patterns resembles men's costume in late sixteenth-century Europe, where jackets were adorned with gold-and-silver embroidered stripes. Allegorical figures appear on the shoulder defenses, or pauldrons, representing the knightly virtues of faith, prudence, fortitude, and justice.

The pieces of armor assembled here weigh nearly forty-three pounds. Imagine how it would feel to wear this combination. How is the tasset (hip and upper thigh protection) attached to the breastplate that protects the chest? Look at the helmet. Notice the three-layered visor covering the face. Find the metal buttons on the right side that could be pressed to lower the layers one at a time.

What do you see on the front of the visor to help the knight breathe when it is closed? Find a large hook on the breastplate. This is a lance rest, which acts as a shock-absorber for the long, pointed lance used in battle or in a tournament.

What colors do you see on this suit of armor? Bands of decoration on the surface have been etched into the silvery steel and then have been filled with gold. Look closely at the gold decoration. Find tiny pictures of parts of a suit of armor, portraits of people, shields, and helmets. Find the roped borders around the edges of the armor. This helped to strengthen the edge and to turn away blows from a sword or lance aimed at the wearer of the armor.

# Common Questions About Armor

## **Q. How much does armor weigh?**

A. The weight is dependent upon the armor's function. Ceremonial armor is the lightest because it is primarily for show. Tournament armor is the heaviest because the knight needs maximum protection and minimum mobility. (The knight is on horseback and charges toward a set target or an opponent with the goal of unseating him.) Armor for battle is moderate in weight; it offers protection and mobility. The average weight for such armor is forty to fifty pounds, equivalent to what a fully-equipped soldier carries today. Remember, though, that the weight of the armor is distributed over the body. This suit of Renaissance armor weighs nearly forty-three pounds.

## **Q. What is the hook on the front of the breastplate?**

A. It is a **lance rest**. After tucking the lance under his arm, a knight rested the weight of the lance on top of this hook with a ring mounted on the lance pressing against the front. This served as a shock absorber and gave better balance and support.

## **Q. How did a knight get dressed?**

A. With assistance! One of the duties of the squire was to help his knight with the dressing process. The first layer was an undergarment whose style varied with costume fashion. It was often a durable shirt and pants with padded areas. With this arming doublet in place, the knight and squire attached the armor piece by piece, starting with the feet and working up the body. Helmet and gauntlets (armored gloves) were not worn until the moment they were needed.

## **Q. Could knights move well in armor?**

A. Yes! Keep in mind that they needed mobility to perform most of their tasks. The most uncomfortable thing about wearing a suit of armor was the heat generated by the sun. Knights often wore tunics over mail, and sometimes over plate armor, but they offered little relief.

## **Q. Did any women wear armor?**

A. At least one—Joan of Arc. In 1429-1431, she dressed herself as a knight to help France defeat England in the Hundred Years' War.



# Diagram Key

**A Helmet:** a defense for the head

**B Gorget:** a component that protected the throat and upper torso, covering the gap between the top of the torso armor and the base of the helmet.

**C Breastplate:** plate armor for the torso, reaching to just below the waist.

**D Lance rest:** a shock-absorbing bracket used in conjunction with the wooden spear called a lance, and fastened to the right side of the breastplate, below the arm.

**E Pauldrons:** defenses for the shoulder and uppermost part of the arms.

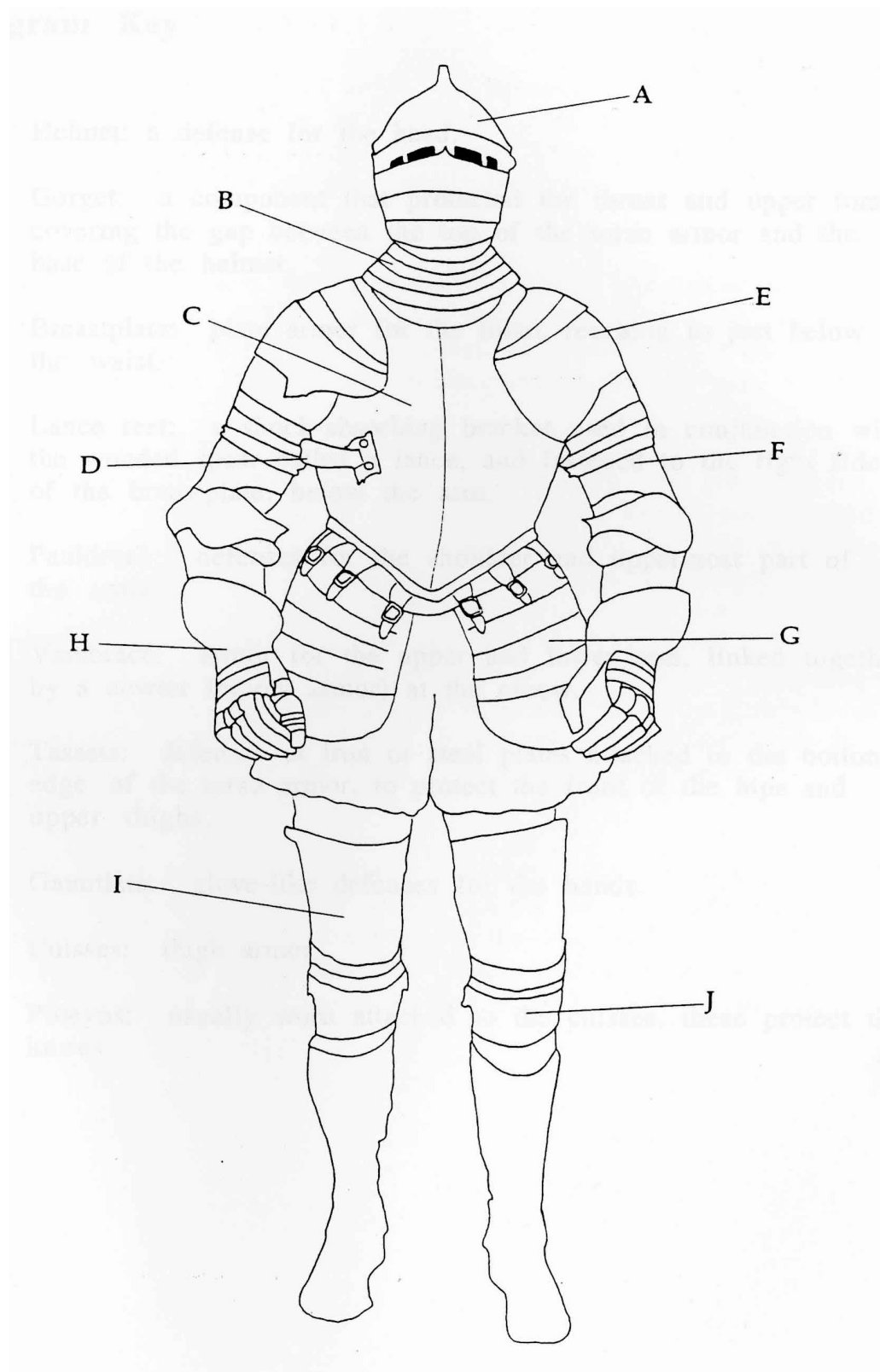
**F Vambrace:** armor for the upper and lower arm, linked together by a cowter (elbow armor) at the elbow.

**G Tassets:** defenses of iron or steel plates attached to the bottom edge of the torso armor, to protect the front of the hips and upper thighs.

**H Gauntlets:** glove-like defenses for the hands.

**I Cuisses:** thigh armor.

**J Poleyns:** usually worn attached to the cuisses, these protect the knees.



# Questions for Discussion

1. This suit or garniture of armor was created in sections. How many can you find? What are the reasons for the sections? How does their design relate to their function? (The sections must fit the wearer's body exactly and they must correspond to how the body moves.)

2. Some animals have natural armor as a means of protection. How many can you think of? The skirt on this suit of armor may be a hint! (The flexible skirt is similar to the shell of a lobster or armadillo; other animals with "armor" are turtles, snails, porcupines.)

3. As a sign of status and wealth, armor was elaborately decorated. Often, symbols of virtues such as faith, prudence, and justice were etched in the metal to signify the virtues of the knight wearing the armor. If you were designing a suit of armor for yourself, which virtues would represent you and how would you symbolize them?

4. What sports require protective gear today? What jobs? Which part of the body is most often protected? While most of us no longer have coats-of-arms, logos are prevalent in our society, especially in the arena of commercial products. What are some of the symbols you can think of? Why are these symbols used? What do messages on T-shirts say about the wearer?

5. This armor garniture was made in Milan, Italy. (Locate Milan on a map, and point out its central location along the **Crusade** routes, taken by the Crusaders from Europe to the Middle East.) Even today, Milan is one of the major cities for fashion design in Europe. Do you suppose anyone in Milan today designs armor? Why or why not?

## Suggested Classroom Activities

### Social Science

In the Middle Ages, a knight often wore a **heraldic** symbol on his shield or on some part of his body. Sometimes the symbol would have only one feature, such as a picture of a lion, or sometimes the picture would be divided into smaller units, each containing a different image. Have students investigate what the heraldic symbols meant. (See bibliography for reference ideas.) Have students design a shield with symbols to represent their family. Symbols can include animals, objects, words or letters.

If all knights wore armor, how could they be recognized as friends or enemies? Discuss horse coverings, plumes, tunics over armor, and banners. A knight's coat of arms became his identification. It indicated pictorially his family lineage and therefore indicated what side he was on. The coat of arms was often embroidered on a cloth tunic, or surcoat, or painted on his wooden shield.

Students can design their own symbols for a coat of arms and a shield using emblems, border designs, plumes, helmets, crossed swords, etc. Students can look at contemporary design elements such as sports equipment and compare the techniques of distinguishing oneself in a public competition. A knight was meant to be brave, honest and fair—what pictures could you use to symbolize these ideas?

### Language Arts

Certain words and phrases derive from the era of knights and chivalry. Examples include:

- A chink in one's armor = the most vulnerable area.
- anache the plume of feathers at the top of the helmet.
- Crestfallen = in a tournament one tried to knock off an other's helmet crest with a blunt sword or club.
- Freelance = A knight who did not owe allegiance to a particular lord, and was free to use his lance to fight for whomever hired him.
- Up in arms = To be attired and ready for battle.
- Handshake = The offering of the hand was a way of showing someone that you were unarmed and meant no harm.

Think about words and phrases in our lives today that originated in contemporary technology such as computers or space exploration, but which have since gained wider meanings and contexts. Some possibilities include input, crash, reboot, glitch, surf the net, takeoff, space cadet, launchpad.

Write a dialogue or draw a cartoon of a medieval knight and a contemporary astronaut or computer user trying to communicate with one another using these idioms. How do they explain themselves across a divide in time and technology?









# Glossary

## Broadsword

A large sword whose broad blade allowed for cutting.

## Coat Armor

A surcoat embroidered with armorial bearings (“coat of arms”) which enabled a knight to be identified by symbols.

## Crusades

Military expeditions made by Christians in the eleventh, twelve, and thirteenth centuries to take over the Holy Land from the Muslims.

## Garniture

An armor with a customized set of supplementary and interchangeable elements to allow for multiple field and sporting uses.

## Gilded

To decorate with a thin covering of gold.

## Hauberk

A long tunic made of mail reaching below the knees.

## Heraldry

The system which enabled a knight to be identified by symbols on his shield.

## Joust

A sporting combat on horseback between two individuals armed with lances or swords.

## Lance

A long, spearlike staff weapon of horsemen, with an iron or steel head.

## Lance Rest

A shock-absorbing bracket attached to the right side of the breastplate.

## Page

Son of a noble family assigned at a very early age to the household of a lord or to the king’s court to learn how to behave and how to ride horseback.

## Plate Armor

Metal plates worn over the body for protection.

## Squire

A male youth of about fourteen apprenticing to a knight, usually after serving as a page. He was taught how to handle weapons, to look after his master’s armor and horses; he even went into battle with the knight, helping him to put on his armor and assisting him if he was hurt or unhorsed.

## Tassets

Defenses for the front of the hips and upper thighs, attached to the lower edge of a breastplate.

## Tournament

A generic name for sporting combats between teams of participants, who could either be on horseback or on foot.

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