

Armour To Suit Anyone

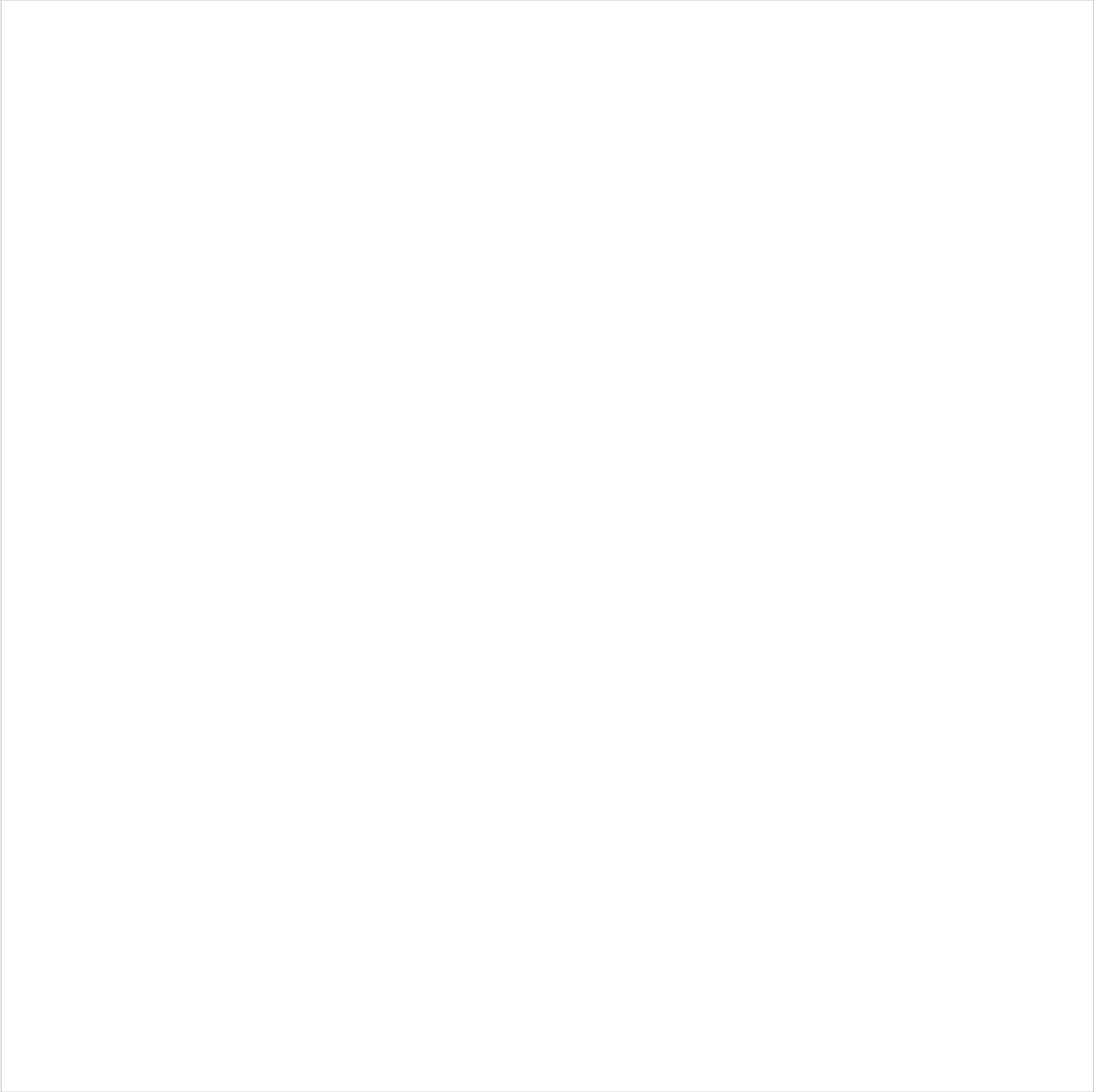
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Do you need a full set of medieval armour in your life? Perhaps a replica for the re-enactment circuit will do?

By Charles Hartley

Charles Harley is the Director of Hartleys Auctions and specialises in arms, militaria and taxidermy.

As an auctioneer I have a wonderfully varied life, not just in the items, but the situations I find myself in. Harking back to the earliest part of my career, I visited a semi-derelict property via a particularly sheepish solicitor. The front door remained fixed as the warped wood had fused shut, giving it ‘the shoulder’ it burst open sending me unbalanced and heavy into the hallway where the wormed floorboards started giving way underfoot. As if in a scene from Indiana Jones, I scrambled to safety into a room veiled in the dull darkness of cigarette-stained net curtains. Once my eyes adjusted, I was met with the most amazing scene, as if this suburban bungalow was transformed to a castle armoury, lay before me was a myriad of weapons; from drums to spears, from sabres to muskets. Although within this surplus there had been some real treasures, the piece that held my attention the most was a Cuirassier breast-plate excitingly pierced by two musket balls; unlike any other item in the market, this damage only increased value as it left the stark imprint of its gruesome past.



Composite South German heavy field armour, partly Nuremberg, circa 1540, with a North Italian close helmet, circa 1570.
Sold for £11,000, including buyers premium, [image courtesy of Olympia Auctions.](#)

I spoke to Thomas Del Mar, founder of Olympia Auctions famed for their sales of Armour. He painted a picture of a highly diverse demographic of buyers, from your focused and dedicated collectors through to your interior designers. One thing said that really stuck with me was the fact that armour can reflect value for

money. Effective musket fire made armour relatively redundant in the 1600s, so much of the full suits you see will be 16th century or earlier, yet many sale results fall within the £8 -16-thousand-pound range and as Thomas said “You find me a sculpture from the 1500s for less!”. He is absolutely right, the artisan nature of their creation, the history that they represent and their beauty in a modern context sings to me more than carved marble. Such a piece can be seen from a German heavy field armour from 1540 with later Italian helmet, that found a new home for a mere £11,000. Of course, not all armour (suits or otherwise) are “bargains”, often being owned by the rich and used in historically defining moments, strong provenance or quality can send prices rocketing. For example, Olympia Auctions recently reached a whopping £96,000 for an important German etched, gilt and embossed burgonet helmet – boasting strong provenance and stunning quality.

Keith Downen, curator at the Royal Armouries in Leeds, suggested that now was not the best time for armour. He felt the UK market had contracted since Brexit and few major collections had been under the hammer since. He also felt that armour remained largely unaffordable to younger enthusiasts and although careful scouring of the European market can turn up the odd bargain, there are few “sleepers” these days. But I suppose it depends what you mean by a “bargain”, though I am not in a position to throw £15k at a suit of armour and I know my wife would not forgive me if I did, as a value relative to anything else it does seem affordable. Even with less to spend you can pick up a genuine antique but not a period piece, in the form of Victorian armour produced for the purpose of decorating grand houses for between £800 - £2,000.

An important South German etched, gilt and embossed closed burgonet, Ausburg, circa 1555-1560. The etching attributed to Jörg Sorg the Younger. Sold for £96,000, including buyers premium, [image courtesy of Olympia Auctions](#).

There even sits a colourful market for modern armour, from cosplay and its armour-plated brassieres, reenactors fighting an eternal battle with historic accuracy, to the extremely serious world of full-contact armoured combat; where you can quite literally knock seven shades of steel out of each other. I think with all three modern forms, beyond the fun, socialising and in the latter case great exercise, there is an element of escapism. I must stress that I do not see this negatively, a lot can be gained from stepping back to a simpler rawer time where the dogmas of modern life are abandoned and in exploring the ways in which our ancestors lived and died, we can ground ourselves. Speaking to Jake Coles of Armoured Combat Gloucester, he sees it as a niche but growing market where everyone from ex-soldiers to accountants, sharing a love of history, contact sports and in many cases computer games, can really “let loose”. The modern suits are mostly made in Russia and Ukraine (currently tricky), often costing £3,000 or more – interesting when you reflect on the value of the antiques.

So, whether you are a student of history, fancy an interior show piece or identify as Sir Lancelot at the weekend, there is a suit for you. Armour is quite literally a tangible representation of history, whether it be armour worn by those who ruled, or worn by those who with a single axe blow changed the world forever, it cannot fail to strike awe and inspiration.