This suit of armor, along with six similar armors, were made in 1612 for a German ruler named Johann Georg I of Saxony, now Dresden, Germany. His wife, Magdalena Sibylla, presented all seven sets of armor to him as a Christmas gift. We know that they were actually used on July 4, 1613, in a tournament celebrating the baptism of the couple’s son and heir, also named Johann Georg. In this particular military sporting event, the contestants fought on foot with swords instead of on horseback with lances.

The men who made plate armor like this suit were highly skilled craftspeople. To produce suits of armor, they hammered bars of iron and steel into flat plates. Then they created patterns based on their customers’ bodies and shaped the metal pieces to fit exactly. This armor is densely covered with intricate designs—intertwining leaves, flowers, and fruits, as well as four fierce lion faces on the breastplate and the back plate, and on each cowter (elbow defense). Artists who collaborated with the armor makers created the designs by etching (cutting into) the metal with acid, blackening the surface with paint or varnish, then wiping and polishing it, leaving the ink in the etched lines only.

This suit of armor weighs sixty-three pounds and provides both protection and mobility. Although plate armor looks inflexible, parts of it like the cuisses (kweeses) (plates covering the front thighs) are made of many separate pieces, like the shell covering the tail of a lobster, to allow a full range of movement.