

This gory ode to past glories is a cut above

Exhibition Laura Freeman

Samurai
British Museum
★★★★★

The trouble with myth-busting is that some of us like the legend. Facts can get in the way of the fire, the fury, the fun. I was worried that seeking to present the samurai less as traitorous, throat-slitting warriors and more as poetry-reciting aesthetes might go too far down the tea-bowls-and-folding-screens route. No chance. This exhibition comes at you blades flashing. There is gore galore, with more dismemberments than you can shake a (freshly amputated) fist at.

Immediately we're in the thick of the fight with a painted handscroll illustrating a mounted archery battle from the Latter Three-Year War in the late 11th century. In the foreground an enemy soldier lies headless on the floor, neck cavity still spurting blood. His opponent makes off with the head, carried swinging by its topknot. It's a gruesome spectacle but also stunningly realised: the twisting of the panicking horses, the

patterns on the embroidered tunics worn by the combatants, the intricate detail of latticed armour.

There is beauty and force in equal measure in this compendious survey of the samurai warrior class that rose to power in Japan during the Middle Ages and became its ruling elite in the 250 years of peace and prosperity under shogunate rule.

Here we meet the samurai making war, making art, making love and making, exquisitely, tea.

Every case contains something surprising, amusing or strange. There are helmets in the shape of shark fins, aubergines and dragons. One is decorated with edamame bean pods. Another mannequin wears the uniform of a female firefighter; the scarlet satin-weave silk jacket and hood are embroidered with cooling waves as if the very appliqué could put out a blaze. (Edo, modern-day Tokyo, was a city built of wood and often went up in flames.)

Spears are topped with their own little bearskin hats, like busbies, each in a different shape to identify the bearer. A card game played by guards to pass the time acts as a sort of Top Trumps for samurai society. A palanquin, inlaid with gold and gilt

bronze, makes you wonder at the lady tiny enough to be carried inside.

The catalogue refers decorously to "the affective pleasures of the body" (so that's what the kids are calling it these days), which doesn't do justice to the randy knowingness of the erotic shunga prints on display. One couple, a tangle of sheets and kimono sleeves, have disturbed a cat, which spits and arches its back and complains, "Just when I was sleeping so nicely..."

The final room addresses the enduring legend of the samurai in fashion, film, manga and anime. We discover how the samurai went intergalactic, inspiring the costume for Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. The fractures in the helmet worn by Kylo Ren (Darth Vader's grandson) draw on kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken ceramics with seams of lacquer and gold.

This is a ravishing, riveting exhibition and if you come away anything less than awestruck, I shall nobly fall on my sword.

Feb 3 to May 4, britishmuseum.org





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Helmet decorations range from dragons to aubergines and edamame bean pods