

Fearless warriors – and shameless fops

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CHIEF ART CRITIC



Exhibition

Samurai

British Museum, London WC1



What does “samurai” conjure up for you? A virtuous Japanese warrior in immaculate armour, who’s scarily handy with a sword? That’s certainly what I think of, having lapped up *Shōgun*, the recent television drama series about warlords in feudal Japan. As a result, the British Museum’s enthralling new exhibition, which includes a clip from *Shōgun* near the start, before detonating various myths about the samurai, blew my mind.

There are surprises at every turn: deluxe beauty sets (women could be samurai, too); explicit pornography; a vermilion hood and jacket once worn by a (female) fire warden in Edo (present-day Tokyo). The show even finds room for the black costume of Darth Vader, whose flared helmet was inspired by samurai armour.

The biggest surprise of all? This isn’t, really, an exhibition about martial prowess, but a fashion show akin to recent blockbusters about famous couturiers at the V&A. The samurai may have been fearsome fighters. But they were also dandyish as hell.

The first exhibit – a stunning 17th-century suit of armour (with an older, grimacing mask-helmet),

recently acquired by the museum – illustrates this point. With its tassels and trimmings, lavish silk braid in a fetching (and auspicious) vernal green, slinky white doeskin boots, and a glittering back decoration in the form of seven splayed, sword-shaped iris leaves (which seem to emanate from the helmet like rays from the sun), it’s

pure sartorial peacocking, designed to catch the eye, and proclaim its owner’s status, as much as protect him.

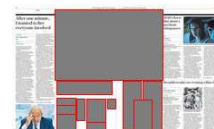
There’s a lot of weaponry and bloodshed in this show, but also an intense, unshakeable obsession with aesthetics. A hand-cannon as sleek and seemingly squidgy as a seal is decorated with silver and gold overlay; a glittering 19th-century quiver looks like it was fashioned from a disco’s floor (in fact, it’s made of lacquered wood and mother-of-pearl). For the samurai, who aspired to be sophisticated courtiers, and held the arts in high regard, brutality and beauty were always intertwined. Some were even artists themselves. With around 280 objects, the show is a behemoth, occupying the full, 12,000-sq-ft footprint of the museum’s Sainsbury exhibitions gallery. Yet, the tripartite story it tells is crisp and comprehensible, rather than overwhelming.

First, we learn about the “rise” of the samurai from the early medieval

period, as Japanese mercenary fighting men were organised into “bushidan” (“warrior bands”), according to family loyalties. Next comes the “long peace” under the Tokugawa shogunate, from around 1600 until the 1850s, when the samurai became a hereditary class, and morphed from obscenely skilful killing-machines into bureaucrats. A 19th-century print by Katsushika Hokusai depicts samurai officials surveying coastal land with rulers and theodolites.

I found the second section even more engrossing than the first. Brilliantly, it evokes the texture of life in Edo, with its licensed pleasure quarter awash with samurai retainers, some of whom wore lacquered-wood hats like surreally oversized mushrooms. Only the finale – devoted to the afterlives of the samurai in popular culture – disappoints. There’s too much ephemera (comic books, posters, a football shirt); the effect is bathetic, as if we’ve wandered into a teenager’s bedroom. Still, the first two acts of *Samurai*, which will appeal to history buffs and aesthetes, are riveting.

From Feb 3;
britishmuseum.org



The show even finds time for the black, samurai-inspired costume of Darth Vader



Art attack:
Hokusai's
*Tametomo on
the Isle of
Demons*, above;
samurai armour,
bearing the
Takasu family
crest, right