

歴史と文化への好奇心をひらく

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特集

選択の一つ一つが
歴史を次代へつなぐ

遺跡に残る洪水と対峙した人びと

恵みの雨 災いの雨



The Samurai You Never Knew

"Samurai" Exhibition at The British Museum (3 February–4 May 2026):
The Passage and the Path Ahead

Rosina Buckland

Exhibition concept

Japan is distant from Europe and the USA, the sources of globally dominant popular culture, and for most people there is a language barrier, which makes true familiarity with Japanese history and culture difficult. Yet, there are some words from Japan that are known around the world: *geisha*, *matcha* and *samurai*. For most people, this last conjures an image of a formidable warrior dressed in distinctive armour including a visor with a menacing expression, holding a curved sword of incredible sharpness. There are also assumptions about honour, self-sacrifice and loyalty. In the post-war period, this has become a globally recognisable icon, used in movies, television, anime and video-games. But this is an extremely limited view of the samurai and, furthermore, much of the popular understanding of the samurai is based on myth or misunderstanding. One of the approved aims of the exhibition is "to communicate how the concept of the 'samurai' has been fabricated, idealised, adapted and appropriated for a diverse range of purposes over a period of several centuries, both within Japan and outside, a process which continues today." An examination of the centuries-long trajectory of this icon matches the Museum's mission to consider themes of identity, material culture and global interchange.

The British Museum is free to enter, meaning that revenue from special exhibitions is



Gallery View



Fig. 1 Portrait of Ashikaga Yoshiteru (National Museum of Japanese History)*



Fig. 2 Domenico Tintoretto, Portrait of Itō Mancio, 1585. Italy. Oil on canvas. H. 54 cm, W. 43 cm. Fondazione Trivulzio.

extremely important, demanding big, attention-grabbing themes that will persuade people to pay for their visit. The theme of 'samurai' thus seemed a perfect way to attract visitors with a trope that they knew and found entertaining, and use this as an opportunity to explore the history and richness of samurai culture.

The exhibition at the British Museum, which opened in February 2026, explored the varying roles that samurai have played across the centuries, and presented many forms of representation of the samurai, made both by themselves and within popular culture, stretching from the medieval period right up to the present day. It showed how the samurai figure has even come to stand for Japan as a nation, but that this image has been manipulated with both positive and negative meanings. About 70% of the exhibits were from the British Museum collection, and the rest from lenders in various countries.

One irony is that the very term 'samurai' is not typically used in Japan, the customary words being 武者 or 武士, and this in itself suggests how 'samurai' has come to designate a international phenomenon, now re-imported to Japan (as サムライ) for the consumption of tourists from overseas. Some may question the rather elastic manner in which we are using this term (sometimes warrior, sometimes relating to social status, sometimes as myth), but its very adaptability suits it to the broad consideration of a large-scale exhibition.

As the figure of the samurai is so popular, there have been many previous exhibitions, including two at the British Museum. However, these tended to be unquestioning celebrations of the armour or weapons, sometimes including cultural activities, but tending to lack a critical perspective. This exhibition sought to get visitors to consider why the samurai image has been so popular, and what this says about the varying places and times in which it was made and consumed.

Exhibition structure and messages

The exhibition had three broad sections, according to three broad characterisations of the samurai: as warrior (Middle Ages), bureaucrat (Edo period) and myth (Meiji era and after). It aimed to surprise visitors with hitherto unknown aspects of samurai history. As part of the development of the exhibition, a 'narrative scope' document was drafted, which had seven messages:

1. Our modern idea of samurai has its origins in reality. A distinct warrior class emerged and gained political dominance during the medieval period (c. 1100s–1500s);
2. The development of the samurai was influenced by a long interaction between Japan and the wider world;
3. In a period of prolonged peace from 1615 to the 1860s, samurai did not fight (and rarely wore armour). They were a hereditary social class, half of which were women;
4. From 1615 onwards samurai men served as government bureaucrats who also engaged extensively in cultural activities, as consumers, patrons, writers, scholars, poets and painters;
5. In the 1890s, after the status of 'samurai' had been abolished, the myth of *bushidō* developed, reinforcing external perceptions of Japan as a martial country;
6. This 'bushidō' was co-opted during Japan's period of colonial expansion and military aggression culminating in defeat in WWII;
7. In post-war Japan, the ideal of the samurai has been repurposed to promote new values and has been popularized worldwide as an icon of Japan.

We expected particularly that many aspects would surprise people:

- the fact that during medieval warfare mounted archery and *naginata* played a much more important part than sword combat;
- the aspiration of the medieval warriors to the status of courtiers, as seen in the delicate portrait of Ashikaga Yoshiteru being lent by Rekihaku (Fig. 1);
- the emphasis on cultivating both cultural and military arts (*bunbu*), such as painting, formal tea preparation, *nō* theatre, poetry and intellectual pursuits, throughout samurai history;
- the many international aspects, such as samurai diplomats (the wonderful portrait of Itō Marcio was lent from Milan; Fig. 2);
- the fact that there was no fighting for 250 years under the Tokugawa shogunate and



Fig. 3 Woman's dressing set, 1750–1800. Japan. Wood, lacquer, gold and bronze. H. 62 cm, W. 27 cm, D. 11.8 cm. British Museum, London, 1896,0328.1. Donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

- samurai men were government administrators, often with not enough work to do;
- the fact that half the 'samurai class' was comprised of women (woman's dressing set; Fig. 3);
- the popular consumption of the samurai image began early, already in the late 1600s, in woodblock-printed books and then sheet prints;
- the fabricated nature of *bushidō*, in the context of nation-building in the late 1800s and its cooptation during Japan's wars;
- the ubiquitous influence of samurai imagery in postwar culture (Fig. 4).

Working with Rekihaku

I had been working on the exhibition concept and reading about samurai history for about eight years. I knew about the two excellent exhibitions at Rekihaku, 「武士とはなにか」and「行列にみる近世—武士と異国と祭礼と」. I was also aware of the innovative ways that Rekihaku presents Japanese history, and that my predecessor at the British Museum, Timothy Clark, had been inspired by the approach when planning the new semi-permanent displays in the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries, especially the modern era leading up to the Pacific War.

I was therefore very fortunate to be able to spend two months at Rekihaku in summer 2024 - it was a wonderful time, where I felt like I was a graduate student again! I benefitted from the library, where I could research specific aspects of Edo-period *busbi* history, and discussing the exhibition with the curators there. As well as viewing clothing, paintings and military equipment in the Rekihaku collection, I visited several museums in the Tokyo area, to consider works to borrow for the exhibition. I travelled to Kyoto to talk with curators at the International Manga Museum in Kyoto and scholars at Nichibun. I was also able to visit a dealer in armour in Kyoto, and purchased a suit of armour, formerly belonging to the Mōri 毛利 clan of Chōshū, which opened the exhibition (Fig. 5). I travelled to Kyushu also, to visit Kumamoto and Kagoshima for the first time, exploring samurai-related sites there, and gaining an understanding of how the powerful Hosokawa and Shimazu clans contributed to historical events.

International research project

Major exhibitions at the British Museum are often based on a large research project. In our case, we did not receive external funding, but nevertheless we were able to carry out an international project entitled 'Global Samurai' involving 22 researchers, thanks to the tremendous support and energy of Prof. Oleg Benesch at the University of York. Prof. Benesch has published his doctoral research on the history of *bushidō* - how it developed within a search for identity during Japan's modernization in the late nineteenth century and was strongly influenced by



Fig. 4 Noguchi Tetsuya, Human on the Duck. Mixed media. British Museum, London. 2026.3001.1 Purchase made possible by the JTI Japanese Acquisition Fund.



Fig. 5 Suit of armour, 1519 (helmet), 1696 (armour). Japan. Iron, silk, wool, leather, gold and lacquer. H. 208 cm, W. 100 cm (box), D. 42 cm (box). British Museum, London, 2025_3004.1. Purchase made possible by the JTI Japanese Acquisition Fund.

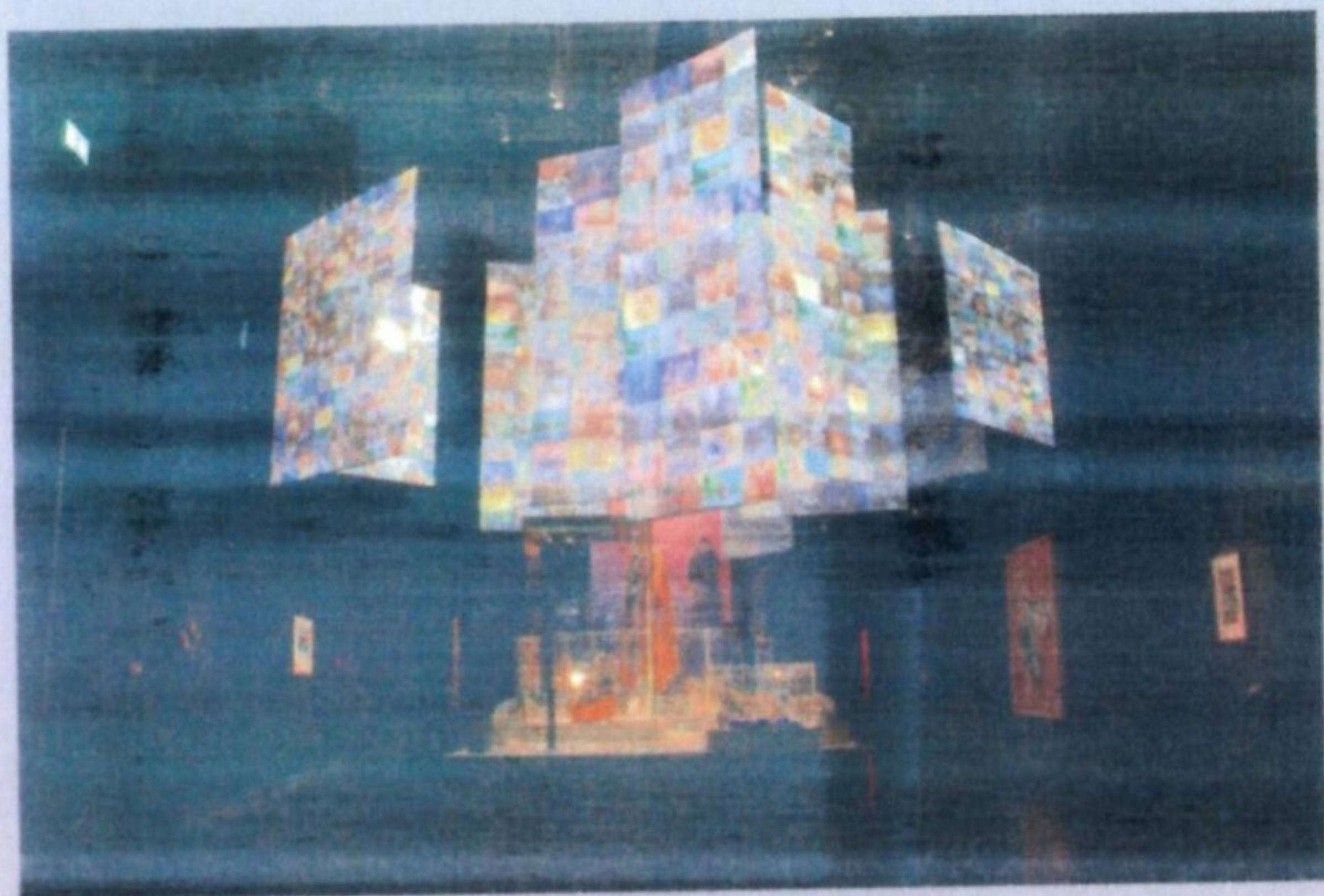
contemporary European ideals of chivalry.

The emphases were on perceptions and representations of the samurai, and on the global aspects of the icon's history. Participants covered a range of regions and themes, including the perceptions of the samurai during Hideyoshi's attempted Korean invasion, Christian samurai in South-East Asia, a comparison of Stoicism and bushidō, representations of samurai vs. modern soldiers during the Satsuma Rebellion, perceptions of samurai in early 20th-century Britain and in the Soviet Union, the use of samurai imagery by the Italian far-right, in Indonesia and in South Asia, samurai as a literary concept in South America, and how bushidō was perceived and appropriated in China and Nazi-era Germany, and samurai in post-war American TV and video-games.

The results will appear as two special issues of *Japan Review*, the peer-reviewed English-language journal of Nichibunken, during 2026. We held a symposium during the exhibition, in April 2026, to make these results more broadly known, which we hope will lead to a research volume to be published by British Museum Press. We also plan for an event to be held at Nichibunken in November 2026, to solicit contributions from more researchers in Japan.

There is a book accompanying the exhibition (not a catalogue, as it has continuous prose), which Prof. Benesch has co-written. Having his expertise on this complicated aspect of samurai history was of incalculable value. The participants of the research project have contributed summary pieces to the book as columns.

Our hope was that through the exhibition visitors would enjoy exploring the many facets



Gallery View

of samurai history and representation, but would also develop an awareness of how an ostensibly historical phenomenon could be repackaged and manipulated.

In closing, I would like to express my thanks to Nishitani-kanchō and all the curators at Rekihaku who helped me during my stay and have since answered many questions.



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