

# 'Lethal Beauty: Samurai Weapons and Armor'

By Heather Halsey

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Visit the latest exhibit at the Clark Center for Japanese Art and Culture and you'll be greeted by what appear to be five intimidating samurai soldiers in full armor.

Complete with fierce face masks and giant horns, the suits of armor are perched on boxes in the center's latest exhibit, "Lethal Beauty: Samurai Weapons and Armor."

The exhibit opens Saturday and shows the beauty of the weaponry and armaments that have been used since the 12th century when the samurai warrior class served the nobility through periods of intense warfare and during peaceful times from 1603 to 1868.

"The concept is to show the beauty in deadly weapons and items that are used to fight in a context that is not related to beauty," said the center's director and chief curator Andreas Marks.

Samurai soldiers were officially disbanded and ordered to give up carrying swords in 1876 but their elaborate accessories and weapons live on as artistic reminders of the bygone era.

Marks began preparing for the exhibit last year by finding collectors who had weapons and suits of armor that were of exhibition quality.

He was successful in finding 60 objects from the 13th century through 20th century, most of which came from outside the center's expansive collection of Japanese art.

The Clark Center is one of four California museums that have focused exhibits on the samurai this year.

"It is a very strange coincidence," Marks said of the other exhibitions in Santa Ana, Pasadena and San Francisco.

Four of the five intricately designed samurai suits are fully intact right down to their elaborate shin guards and paper batons that would have been used as signaling devices.

"That's like going into a top-level clothing shop and purchasing a complete suit," Marks said. Comparing the impressive suits to modern-day fashions is fitting, since many samurai elements have made their way onto the runways of today's designers.

The metal cuirass or breast plate that is seen on each of the suits is one of the most literal examples that has been translated into modern-day corsets.

Also displayed are the samurai's swords, which were decorated with elaborate mountings that were created to suit the taste of each individual owner. The blades of the swords are equally distinct, yet reflect the taste of the individual craftsmen who made it.

"I like to urge visitors when coming to really take time and look at the details," Marks said. "The oldest blade is from the 13th century, 700 years old; that's quite an age, but it looks like brand new."

Many of the swords are certified by the Japanese government as being "important" or historically significant and are clearly marked as such in the exhibit.

Samurai soldiers would carry two swords with them — the larger would be left when entering someone's home as a sign of peace and the smaller would be carried with them at all times, Marks said.

Also displayed individually are the decorative elements or "sword furniture" that are made from iron, copper or a copper and gold alloy unique to Japan called shakudo.

Marks also selected pieces that show how weapons were recycled in Japan after the disbandment of the samurai in 1876.

These include pieces of sword furniture that have been made into a pill box or water dropper and a flower basin that was made from lizard skin and lacquered sword handles.

The exhibit will last until Jan. 30. On Feb. 6 the center will unveil an exhibit entirely made up of intricate Japanese folding screens.

This reporter can be reached at 583-2427.

"Lethal Beauty: Samurai Weapons and Armor" runs from Sept. 5 through Jan. 30

The Clark Center at 15770 10th Ave., Hanford

Gallery open Tuesday through Saturday from 12:30 to 5 p.m.

Admission is \$6 for adults, \$4 for students and military with valid ID

Admission for children 12 and under is free

For more information, call 582-4915  
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