

## Samurai armor and the art of intimidation

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By Donald Munro / The Fresno Bee

Picture me -- a not-so-intimidating physical specimen clad in dress shirt and slacks, peering through my high-index spectacles, wielding nothing but my critics's notebook as a weapon -- trying to look menacing on the battlefield.

Not exactly the stuff of an action movie, eh?

Now imagine me decked out in an 18th century Tosei gusoku suit of samurai armor. On my head: a spectacular kabuto, or helmet, with fierce horns and a bowl entirely covered with boar fur. On my face: a flesh-colored menpó, or mask, with vicious expression, deep wrinkles, silver lacquered teeth and a moustache and chin tuft made of boar bristle. On my chest: a rib-bone cuirass, or iron chest plate, also flesh-colored, attached to shoulder guards and shino-gote, armored sleeves with splints for the forearms.

Heck. I'd certainly be scared of me dressed like that.

When you walk into "Lethal Beauty: Samurai Weapons and Armor," a new exhibition at the Madden Library at California State University, Fresno, you come face to face with four original samurai suits of armor. They're the stars of a show featuring more than 65 samurai objects from private and public collections worldwide that date from the 13th through 20th centuries.



SPECIAL TO THE BEE "Lethal Beauty: Samurai Weapons and Armor," may be seen through June 24 at the Leon S. Peters Ellipse Gallery at Fresno State.

The exhibition comes from the Valley's own Clark Center for Japanese Art & Culture in Hanford, where it was featured in the fall of 2009.

Old suits of armor are usually big hits at museums. It's easy to see why. Their instantly recognized human form seems both familiar and a little creepy. The absence of a corporeal being inside intensifies the effect. It reminds us that actual flesh-and-blood men, now long gone, walked around in these things.

Even when you learn that the four suits of armor in this exhibition come from a later period of Japanese samurai culture in which the dominant activity was

ceremony, not warfare, you can still get a bit of a chill down your spine when you ponder their intimidating stares.

The exhibition is the brainchild of Andreas Marks, the Clark Center's director and curator, who hoped the subject matter -- everyone's seen a samurai movie, it seems -- might broaden audiences.

With the opening of the new addition of the Madden Library and the inauguration of its Leon S. Peters Ellipse Gallery -- a beautiful, adaptable space that can be used for exhibitions, lectures and concerts -- the library is hoping to raise the gallery's profile on the local arts scene, which is why it arranged to bring in the samurai show. (Peter McDonald, Fresno State's dean of library services, told me he hopes in the future to provide the same kind of family-friendly exhibitions and programming that was the purview of the now-defunct Fresno Metropolitan Museum.)

The "Lethal Beauty" show certainly delivers on both aspects of its title. Take a look at one of the pieces in the exhibition, a 13th century short sword that has been designated in Japan as an "Important Cultural Property." It's an implement that has certainly drawn blood.

But besides the menace, the craftsmanship of the works is exquisite. The samurai certainly knew how to dude it up in style. Every scrap of their ensembles was handmade and gorgeous, from inlaid dragons made of gold to a parade mask for a horse modeled as a dragon head.

By the early 17th century, the brutal civil wars in Japan had come to an end, and the country was mostly at peace.

By that time, samurai used their armor for ceremonial occasions, and like any other garment, shifting fashions and styles dictated popular looks. Marks says they were the designer Italian suits of their day.

In other words, I could look warlike and stylish in a samurai get-up. That image of me decked out in the Tosei gusoku suit of armor?

Did I mention that it includes a mount in the back for a flag with my family crest? I'd be a trendy one-man intimidation machine. Ebay, here I come.

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