

# Samurai to Manga: Japan across the centuries

## The Asahi Shimbun Display

15 December 2005 - 5 February 2006

Room 3

Admission free

'Samurai to Manga' is a small display - a dozen or so objects in total - in a high-profile location at the front of the British Museum. The main aim of this experimental exhibition is to allow visitors of all ages to consider juxtapositions of objects across time. The objects on display will show the extraordinary continuity of tradition in Japanese culture, from archaeological finds to modern and contemporary works. The display will challenge the visitor by highlighting the often unexpectedly old roots of something they might have thought was quite new.

It's a truism about life in Japan that the ultra-modern and the traditional are frequently experienced together; or at least side by side. The exhibition will show how change in Japan has almost always been quite controlled and gradual. Even at what seem to be key turning points in history, the underlying continuities are remarkable. For example, one iconic object on display is the samurai armour (strictly speaking it is an assemblage of objects, as the different parts date from the 16th - 19th centuries). It has been a major focus in many exhibitions in the Japanese Galleries. In this show it will be displayed alongside a terracotta tomb figure (*haniwa*) of a warrior which dates from about 500 AD, that is, from more than 1,000 years earlier. Samurai rule was formally established in Japan in 1192AD but for centuries before then powerful warrior elites controlled local regions.

Also on display will be a modern manga by Kono Fumiyo (b. 1968), a contemporary woman author-artist. It tells the story of Minami, a young girl who goes blind and dies of radiation sickness ten years after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Particularly affecting are the spaces at the end of the cartoon - left blank after Minami goes blind. Modern manga really took off after 1945 and were much influenced by Hollywood and Disney. Here again, however, they owe a debt to an earlier tradition, as printed text-picture stories have been very popular in Japan since at least the 17th century. And it was Hokusai who in 1814 first coined the word 'manga' to describe his printed 'drawings run riot'.

**The Japanese Galleries (Rooms 92-94) are currently undergoing a major renovation and will reopen with a new presentation of the British Museum's Japanese collections in August 2006.**

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