

## Today's News

Community  
Community Events  
Local  
National  
Japan  
World  
Sports

## Arts & Entertainment

Arts  
Cultural Exhibits  
Galleries & Museums  
Books  
Readings  
Reviews  
Music  
Movies  
TV & Radio

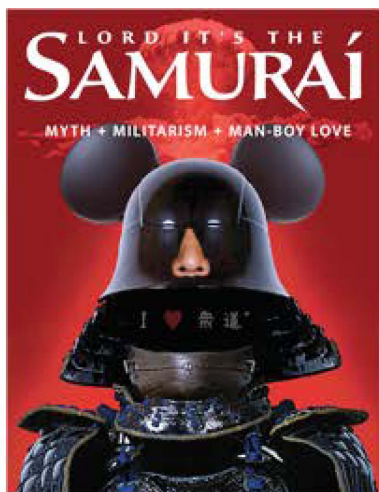
## Obituaries

Obituary Notice Form  
Obituary Search

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## 'Samurai' Parody Raises Questions About Exhibition

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The parody flyer can be mistaken for the original at first glance.

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At first glance, the flyer looks like the genuine article — an advertisement for "Lords of the Samurai," an exhibition that just concluded its run at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco.

But upon closer inspection, the samurai helmet has Mickey Mouse ears and a nose with whiskers. There's a mushroom cloud in the background. The heading reads, "Lord, It's the Samurai," and the sponsor is "Asians Art Museum — Where Asian Still Means Oriental."

More than just a parody, the flyer and its accompanying website, [www.asiansart.org](http://www.asiansart.org) — not to be confused with the Asian Art Museum's site, [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org) — raises questions about the exhibition that are still being hotly

debated online.

In announcing the well-attended exhibition, the museum said, "The culture of the samurai and their code of conduct have long captivated the imaginations of both young and old in the Western world. ... Trained to be fierce fighters, daimyo (provincial lords of the warrior class) also strove to master artistic, cultural, and spiritual pursuits."

In addition to armor, weaponry, paintings, lacquer ware, ceramics, costumes other artifacts, the museum presented live demonstrations of iaido (the way of the sword).

The parody site has a different take on the traditional image of samurai: "Enter the world of the samurai, where more than seven centuries of martial rule are reduced to a single Disney-like trope of gentleman-warrior myth. Military prowess meets cultural connoisseurship in an ideal of masculine perfection — selling militarism as beauty in a time of war.

"Neither harmless nor innocent, it masks a real history of violence and domination that extends well into the 20th century."

The flyer and website provide examples of "context hidden behind the gentility of fine weaponry, paintings and ceramics":

- A time when samurai used their blades "to slice noses off of an estimated 38,000 victims, pickled and buried in (a) mound in Kyoto."

- 16th-century invasions of Korea in which "samurai are estimated to have slaughtered

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- A time when samurai used their blades "to slice noses off of an estimated 38,000 victims, pickled and buried in (a) mound in Kyoto."
- 16th-century invasions of Korea in which "samurai are estimated to have slaughtered more than a million people, women and children included," and a ceramics industry "revolutionized by captive Korean artisans forced by samurai to work in Japan."
- Shudō (the way of loving boys), which "formed the basis of the samurai aesthetic" as the "flower of the samurai spirit," as depicted in Nagisa Oshima's 1999 film "Gohatto" (Taboo).
- The samurai code of bushidō (the way of the warrior), which "was refashioned in a context of Japanese nationalism and went on to become instrumental in the totalitarian militarism of the 1930s and '40s."
- The stereotype of "virtuous Oriental warrior," which, according to the website, is part of an effort to soften Japan's image as some U.S. and Japanese leaders push for remilitarization of Japan.

The flyers were placed in venues where actual flyers for the exhibition were typically placed — Japantown, San Francisco State University, UC Berkeley, other art institutions, cafes, yoga studios and so on. They were even handed out at the Asian Art Museum's own "Matcha" event. The guerrilla artists reported a sort of culture war in Japantown, where someone was removing the parody flyers and replacing them with museum flyers.

The main artist behind this effort goes by the name of Majime Sugiru, which means "too serious." He explained, "As artists who intervene from the margins in the mainstream, we employ anonymity in order to keep the focus on the issues at hand, by eliminating the potential diversion of character assassination. A common way to dismiss interventional work is to discredit the agent rather than the critical argument that is presented."

### Going Viral

The project went viral as bloggers commented on whether the criticism was warranted.

Video artist Valerie Soe called the website "a brilliant goof on this year's summer blockbuster which replicates the show's official website with a twist — it offers a detailed, pointed, and well-researched deconstruction of the problematic exhibition. The faux site points out the less-than-savory aspects of samurai culture that the AAM conveniently glosses over..."

Morgan Pitelka, chair of Asian studies at Occidental College, acknowledged, "Many in the museum world will feel that the parody is entirely unfair. The museum is a non-profit organization dedicated to education, and museum staff include many of Asian heritage as well as many respected scholars who have advanced degrees in Asian art history."

But, calling the website "worth exploring," he added, "Curators know that visitors might feel that having visited a show on the samurai, they have in effect visited Japan itself. This is the wonderful power and also the great danger of the museum; it reduces social and cultural complexity, not to mention historical variation and diversity, to a few beautiful objects."

Author/translator Frederik Schodt, who mentioned the parody on Twitter, remarked, "I rather enjoyed what they did, but I am very curious about the group. Somehow, I assumed that it must mainly be someone Asian American, probably Chinese or Korean, who is a graduate at the Art Institute."

Responses from Japanese Americans varied. Wesley Ueunten, who teaches Asian American studies at SFSU, wrote, "As a Japanese American, I was infatuated by the myth of the samurai warrior until I started to learn that my ancestors and relatives from Okinawa have been victims of Japanese militarism." He cited the invasion of the Ryukyus by samurai 400 years ago and the subsequent oppression of the Okinawan people.

But a Sansei from Berkeley who was interned as a child wrote, "While ostensibly combating Western hegemony over Asian art, you are pumping up new stereotypes, or rather reviving the old ones, the ones that sent me and my family to those U.S. prison camps ... the World War II stereotype of the lethal Jap."

### **Museum Staff's Response**

While the museum didn't issue an official statement, its staffers did share their thoughts. In his blog, Thomas Christensen, director of publications, wrote that while some of the critique may be valid, he disagreed with the way it was delivered:

"The reason (we can't endorse the parody site) is not the critique of the museum that it offers — we are more than willing to make that an issue for discussion — but the confusion that it is causing. We have received complaints, especially from people of Japanese descent, about the use of the image of the atom bomb on the fake website and its related printed materials. Some of these people may not have realized that those materials were not created by the museum. It is this confusion that is most problematic for us."

Forrest McGill, chief curator, said in an interview that while the website may not have been the best vehicle, "the kinds of issues that it raises are ones that we think about all the time at the museum, part of our daily work ... We try to be open to criticism and we pay attention."

In the museum's defense, he said the exhibition did "a good job" and pointed out, "We haven't gotten any complaints — I look at all visitor comments." The majority were "positive and enthusiastic," he said.

McGill added that the museum's own blog is "an invitation to comment, so if people did have concerns, questions, arguments or debates, they can address us directly ... Any time people leave their name and contact info, we get back to them."

He also invited visitors to check out another of the museum's exhibitions, "Photographic Memories," which consists of 19th and early 20th century photos of China, Japan, Korea and India. "It was put together by a young curator of South Asian art, trying to deconstruct how photography was used to create and manipulate images of Asian people and Asian culture in the 19th century. It highlights how aware we are of these issues ... how seriously we take them."

Hollis Goodall, curator of Japanese art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, wrote that the points raised by the debate "are worth discussing at the (Smithsonian Institution's) Freer/Sackler's proposed meeting of Asian art curators next spring."

Majime Sugiru responded, "We have succeeded in putting the museum on watch, among the Asian American community, among Asian studies scholars, and now their own professional community of Asian art curators."

"Lord, It's the Samurai" will be included in "Ancient to the Present: A Tribute to World Cultures" on Friday, Nov. 20, from 5:45 to 8:45 p.m. at the deYoung Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. This College Night event is free, and exhibits (except for King Tut) are free for college students and instructors with valid ID. Info:

[www.nexusartreach.org/](http://www.nexusartreach.org/)