

The Stibbert Museum Florence

During a recent short visit to Florence I had the opportunity to visit the Stibbert Museum together with fellow member Ian Phillips. Ian had visited the museum before with Ian Bottomley some years ago and had maintained contact with Riccardo Franci, the curator of the Armoury. Riccardo kindly agreed to meet us and show us some of the pieces within the collection.

The Japanese section of the Museum is currently undergoing refurbishment so the rooms were not at their best. In addition some of the best swords from the collection are currently on loan to an exhibition in Nashville USA, so our timing wasn't perfect but it did allow us to look at some of the pieces in hand that might not have otherwise been available.

The Stibbert collection is extremely comprehensive. It includes examples of arms and armour from around the world. There is a magnificent display of European armour with a dozen or more mounted knights standing in line through the length of the hall. The walls are generously laden with all manner of edged weapons and firearms of all ages. Alongside this there are many paintings (including a recently restored Botticelli) and furnishings you might expect to see in the home of a wealthy 19th century industrialist.

The Japanese collection comprises of 280 swords over 100 suits of armour and helmets, tsuba and other associated art. I think it has been written previously by those who know far more about the subject than I do, that the armours and helmets do not represent the finest examples of Japanese armour. They are for the most part later work from the mid to the end of the Edo period. However the display of so many and such diverse pieces together is absolutely breathtaking. What it is not in doubt is the incredible skill and artistry exhibited in these pieces. Alongside the armours there were a number of masks and sculpted heads produced to go on manikins wearing armour. These were truly beautiful.

What I think is unique about the Stibbert collection is that it was formed very soon after the opening of Japan. Examples of Japanese art first started to appear in Europe after the great exhibition in Paris in the late 1860's. Stibbert purchased his first katana in 1872. This had two consequences:

Firstly the armours he was buying, while late, had not been made for export as so many later examples were. So while some may have been assembled all had components made for purpose not as export pieces for an uneducated foreign clientele.

Secondly at the time Stibbert was buying, top quality swords were not being sold. As a result the swords within the collection may not be considered outstanding but they do represent good competent workmanship with a considerable range of styles and fittings on display. As often happened with European collections, some of the swords were "improved" by local armourers. As a result some of the leather tsuka mountings owe more to the skill of Florentine armourers than those of Edo. This resulted in some curious combinations of style and material.

The above should not be regarded as negative. The Stibbert collection offers a unique opportunity to see a large range of pieces as they first appeared outside Japan following the opening of the country. The overall effect is breathtaking and one can only imagine the effect of seeing such a display for the first time in the late 19th century.

The Stibbert is located about 10 minute by taxi from the central station in Florence. The refurbishment is due to be completed in the spring of 2017. For anyone visiting Florence, the Stibbert should certainly be included on the “Must see” list for its Japanese collection, it’s European Arms and Armour and all the other beautiful works that adorn this 19th century gentleman’s home.





