



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

This new exhibition invites visitors to explore the role of armour in battle, sports, society and culture, through Renaissance treasures from the Museo Stibbert in Italy, and modern examples from the Canadian War Museum and other institutions. The exhibition is divided into four zones, as described below.

Zone 1: Battle Armour

Armour has evolved in tandem with weaponry — as better weapons were developed, new and improved armour was produced in response. This section of the exhibition presents historical styles of armour, along with the weapons used against it.

Functional as well as beautiful, the Renaissance battle armour in this section includes exquisite engraved and gilded examples from the Museo Stibbert, and a pair of historical paintings depicting armoured fighters. Labelled line drawings indicate the names and functions of various pieces of armour, from cuirass to vambrace to greave. A lethal array of swords, daggers, pole-mounted weapons, a crossbow and early gunpowder demonstrates how improvements in armour inspired new weaponry — until the development of effective firearms made metal armour obsolete.

Armies experimented with plate armour during the First and Second World Wars, but it proved largely ineffective against modern machine guns and artillery. New materials and techniques would eventually lead to the development of lightweight, shatterproof gear. A Canadian combat uniform from the War Museum's own collection shows what body armour looks like today. In addition, a Kevlar vest that saved a police constable's life demonstrates why this material — with five times the tensile strength of steel — remains so widely used, more than 50 years after it was invented.

Zone 2: Sports Armour

Battle metaphors abound in sports, so it comes as no surprise that sports gear shares so many similarities with combat armour. Mock battles, with knights duelling on foot or jousting on horseback, were among the earliest European sports to involve armour. Competitors often wore the same armour as on the battlefield, with added protection for tournaments.

Horses also wore armour, or “bard.” The exhibition includes historical examples of specialized equipment for both rider and mount, including an ornate saddle trimmed with silk, a round tournament shield, and two life-sized armoured knights on horseback.

Modern protective sports equipment is on display as well, made with materials such as Kevlar, plastic, carbon and titanium. Goalie equipment worn by three-time Olympic medalist Shannon Szabados is featured, as is a selection of football, hockey and cycling helmets — from flimsy leather caps to the latest in cutting-edge headgear. Highlights include one of the first NHL helmets worn by Eddie Shore in the 1930s; Paul Kariya’s hockey helmet from the 2002 Olympics (his career ended after multiple concussions); and a football helmet designed in response to an NFL concussion study during the 1990s.

Zone 3: A Status Symbol

The most elaborate and expensive pieces of armour and weaponry were often symbols of status, prestige and power. After firearms and artillery had made body armour and many weapons obsolete in battle, they lived on in court ceremonies, parades and tournaments. Gorgets, which protected the throat, came to indicate an officer’s rank or, as with the 200-year-old First Nations gorget on display, to denote high status while also symbolizing the Indigenous–British alliance. Maces were transformed from bludgeons into beautiful ceremonial staffs. Swords became smaller, serving simply as fashionable accessories for gentlemen, sometimes with gilded blades and delicate porcelain handles.

Highlights from the Museo Stibbert in this section include a boy’s suit of armour, and beautifully embellished corselets reflecting the social status and taste of their owners. One of these belonged to an officer of the Medici guards in Florence; another to a member of the papal Swiss Guard. Paintings of noblemen in their finery underscore the importance of such accoutrements.

Also in this section is King George VI’s service dress jacket, and a suit of samurai armour from Japan’s Edo Period (1603–1868), when this privileged warrior class was at the height of its power.

Zone 4: From Battlefield to Popular Culture

Knights in shining armour disappeared from military campaigns long ago, but not from popular imagination. Authentic medieval and Renaissance armour is much sought-after today, and is often recreated and reimagined in popular culture, from 16th century paintings to recent films.

The Museo Stibbert’s replicas of armour and weapons owned by kings and princes — shields belonging to Henri II of France and Erik XIV of Sweden, and a helmet belonging to Giuliano de’ Medici — reflect renewed interest in medieval and Renaissance history and culture during the 19th century. Iron Man’s suit of high-tech armour provides the

fictional superhero with life-support systems, a holographic disguise, and the ability to soar into outer space or zip through water. The Academy Award-winning costume worn by the Bullet Farmer, a villain in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, includes a bullet-belt helmet and groin armour made of bullets.

Knights represent strength, prowess, duty and devotion in 20th century propaganda and posters from the War Museum's own collection. One particularly interesting example is a Second World War poster depicting members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, marching alongside the ghostly image of French medieval heroine Joan of Arc in battle armour.

About Frederick Stibbert and the Museo Stibbert

Frederick Stibbert was an Anglo-Italian collector born in Florence, Italy in 1838. An inheritance from his grandfather, who was Commander-in-Chief of the British East India Company's private army, allowed him to pursue his passion for art, armour, weaponry, the restoration of artifacts, and the organization of medieval and Renaissance re-enactments.

Stibbert ultimately transformed his hillside villa and park into the Museo Stibbert. Its collection of nearly 50,000 items — with special emphasis on European, Islamic and Japanese arms and armour from the 15th to 19th centuries — also includes paintings, ceramics, costumes, tapestries, furniture and other decorative arts, as well as archaeological items, musical instruments and liturgical objects. When he died in 1906, Stibbert left the museum to the Municipality of Florence, to improve public knowledge of history for the benefit of future generations.

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warmuseum.ca/armour

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with the Museo Stibbert (Florence, Italy) and the Canadian War Museum.

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