

Frist Art Museum showcases stunning 'Knights in Armor' in Renaissance relics

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Head to the [Frist Art Museum](#)'s upper-level galleries, and you'll come face-to-face with a 500-year-old knight in shining armor.

OK, so it's not an actual knight. The armor, however, is the real deal. It was made between 1500 and 1510 A.D. and belonged to a German knight. And true to his long-ago life, it still shines.

Made of steel, leather and fabric, the suit is a stunning introduction to the [Frist's "Knights in Armor,"](#) on view through Oct. 10. Featuring over 100 exquisitely crafted and preserved objects such as full suits of armor plus an array of helmets, mounted equestrian figures, paintings and weaponry, the

exhibition brings to life the functional and artistic aspects of European knighthood during the Renaissance when the art of arms and armor was at its height of sophistication.

“These are showpieces,” said Frist Art Museum senior curator Trinita Kennedy. “They are some of the most expensive and most artistic kinds of armor ever made.”



“Knights in Armor” begins at 1500 A.D., when plate armor had all but displaced the chain-mail armor worn by knights throughout the Middle Ages. The development of plate armor offered not only better protection but also more opportunities for aesthetic innovation and customization.

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“These pieces were for wealthy, elite knights,” Kennedy said. “They could afford to commission custom armor fitted to their bodies and decorated with figures, motifs or inscriptions they liked.”

Kennedy worked closely with the exhibition designer to make sure there was something exciting for visitors to see at every turn. Highlights include life-sized replicas of knights riding armored horses. There’s a gallery dedicated to jousts and tournaments — the mock battles performed by knights for spectators — and another gallery focuses on iconic weaponry, such as polearms, maces, crossbows and, of course, swords. There are even examples of ceremonial armor made for children.

Combined with silk and other luxury fabrics, a Renaissance knight’s armor was as much about defensive protection as it was about “men’s style and fashion,” Kennedy said.

“Fashion in armor often followed the textile designs and civilian dress at the time. The styles changed often and were different in various parts of Europe.”

Unlike the camouflage fatigues worn by soldiers today, a knight’s armor was emblematic of his status and power. It was meant to command your attention.

“In a lot of ways, armor was the Renaissance version of a Ferrari or a Lamborghini,” Kennedy added. “It was very high-tech and made to sparkle in sunlight and candlelight. Peasants would have been wearing clothes made from drab, undyed wool, so when a knight rode through town on a horse, it would have been a very impressive sight.”

The wow effect of an armor’s design was further magnified by what it represented. Knights were the legendary “superheroes” of their time, and that reputation was strengthened if not stretched by popular romance literature in the Medieval and Renaissance ages.

“Knighthood and its code of chivalry was definitely romanticized. That’s how they sold the job,” Kennedy said. “It was a very dangerous occupation made to look very exciting, with an emphasis on adventure and chivalry.”

Even after the development of firearms and other weaponry had rendered armor obsolete, the romanticization of knights and chivalric culture persisted.

All of the pieces in the exhibition, for instance, come from the stunning Museo Stibbert in Florence, Italy, which houses an extraordinary collection of arms and armor amassed by Frederick Stibbert (1838-1906) in the 19th century. Stibbert was a passionate, eclectic art collector who was particularly interested in Renaissance armor from all over the world, Kennedy said.

“In the 1850s, he collected about 50,000 works of art and had an eye for artistic armor. The museum still has receipts from his purchases, and they say that he bought art almost every day of his life.”

Kennedy said Stibbert would even commission armor for himself and wear it at parties. His costume choice reflected his passion as well as the larger context of the Gothic Revival, a period of renewed interest in the art and culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance that emerged in the 19th century.

To this day, knights in some form or another continue to show up in books, film and video games – "Star Wars" and superhero movies come to mind especially.

“Knights are old but feel new at the same time,” Kennedy said. “They have continued to resonate with people of all ages throughout time.”

“Knights in Armor” offers plenty for adults and kids to enjoy, including bonus programming aimed at making the exhibition a fun, dynamic experience for everyone. From films and musical performances to special tours, multisensory exploration stations and knight-themed activities at Martin ArtQuest, there is much to see and do before this show closes.

If you go

“Knights in Armor”

When: Through Oct. 10

Where: Frist Art Museum, 919 Broadway in Nashville

Hours: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Monday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday; 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 1-5:30 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: <https://fristartmuseum.org/tickets/>