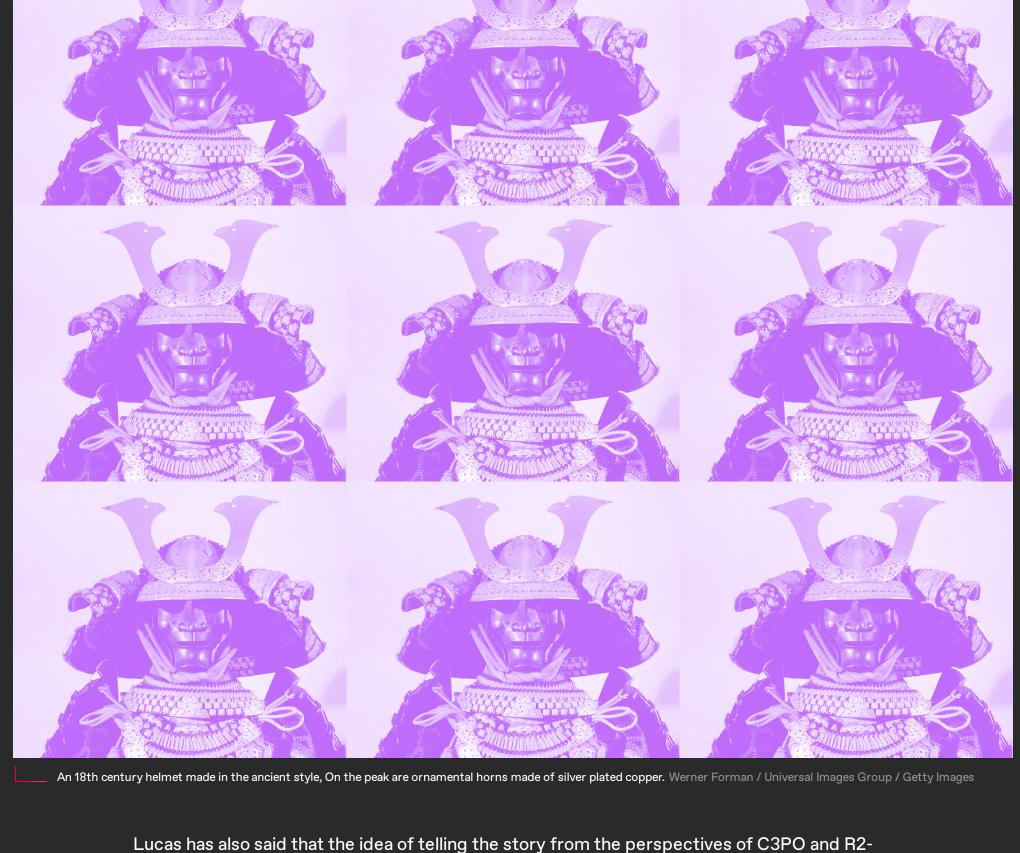
TAR WARS AND THE SAMURAI TRADITION SHARE A FASCINATION WITH THE MASKS WE SHOW TO THE WORLD, AND HOW LIVING BEHIND ONE CAN FUNDAMENTALLY RESHAPE THE SOUL OF THE WEARER. IT'S A CONNECTION THAT DATES BACK TO THE RELEASE OF STAR WARS IN 1977, AND ONE THAT'S ONLY INCREASED WITH THE RELEASE OF EACH NEW MOVIE.

Lucas was famously inspired by director Akira Kurosawa, whose films often followed the

exploits of samurai or ronin (masterless samurai or freelance swordsmen, because the gig economy was a thing in medieval Japan, too.) 1958's *The Hidden Fortress* was an obvious foundation for Lucas's space opera, and in *A New Hope* alone, there's fodder enough for a semester-long course exploring all the nods toward the legendary Japanese filmmaker's influence. Even the seeds of Star Wars now-iconic transitional wipes can be linked back to Kurosawa.

comes across in Lucas's approach to character development and narrative, too. *The Hidden Fortress* follows two medieval peasants as they escort a woman across enemy lines without realizing she's a princess entrusted with the hope of a nation. (Sound familiar?)

It's not just about framing a shot or other technical aspects of filmmaking. This influence



D2 was sparked by *Hidden Fortress*. "I decided that would be a nice way to tell the Star Wars story, which was to take the two lowest characters, as Kurosawa did, and tell the story from their point of view, which in the Star Wars case is the two droids," he explained in a 2001 interview.

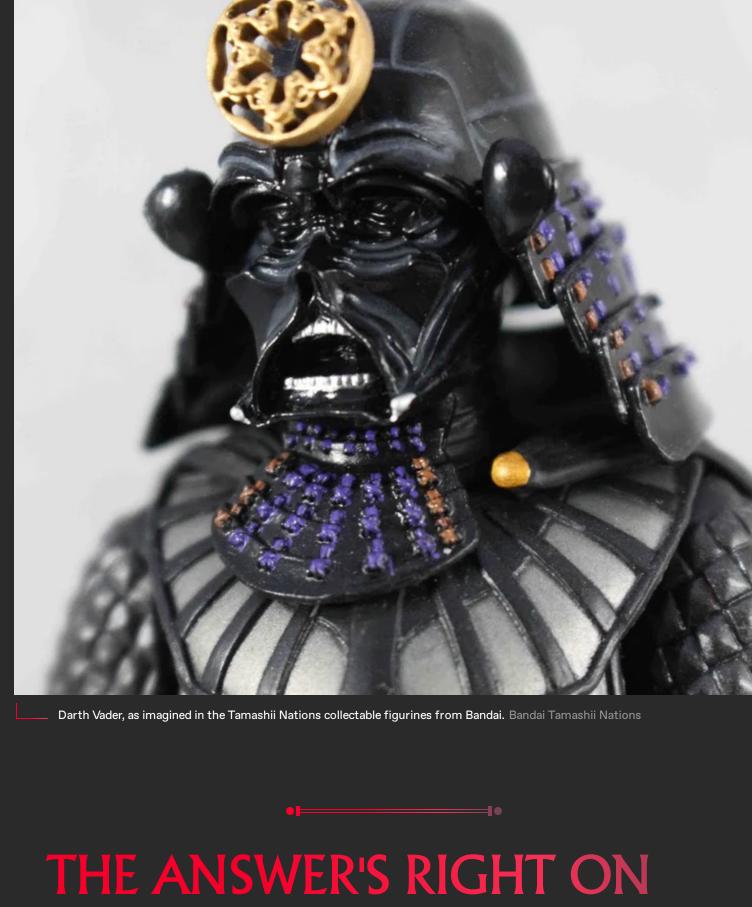
their point of view, which in the Star Wars case is the two droids," he explained in a 2001 interview.

The comparisons between Star Wars, samurai stories, and other aspects of Japanese culture haven't gone away since Lucas sold the franchise rights to Disney in 2012. If anything, the points of overlap have only become more obvious.

Rian Johnson paid homage to Kurosawa's influence in *The Last Jedi* by showing Luke drawing his saber on Ben Solo from three different perspectives, just as *Rashomon* gives several conflicting accounts of a murder. Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni's wildly popular Disney+ series *The Mandalorian* has drawn numerous comparisons to the samurai manga *Lone Wolf and* 

Cub, and Filoni's work on Clone Wars and Rebels also bears the influence of the genre that's Japan's answer to the Western.

So what's behind this persistent fascination with samurai? Inverse spoke with a Japanese arms and armor expert, the team behind a samurai-inspired line of Star Wars figurines, and the owner of the world's largest collection of Star Wars memorabilia to find out.



## similar reasons. Both take us to distant worlds of long ago. They show us cultures with customs and values that are foreign enough to spark wonder, yet familiar enough to invite our curiosity. ADVERTISEMENT

In the broadest possible sense, the world of Star Wars and medieval Japan fascinate fans for

TOP OF YOUR HEAD

awesome helmets. Perhaps the single most recognizable image of the Star Wars saga is Darth Vader's mask, which covers his face in a lacquered scowl. Like an Edo-period helmet, a long, conical plate extends around the back of the head and neck, providing more protection than a simple bowl helmet, making the wearer seem larger and more imposing than they truly are.

Markus Sesko, Visiting Researcher for Japanese Arms and Armor at New York's Metropolitan

Museum, tells *Inverse* that certain elements of Star Wars' ongoing homage to the samurai

tradition are more accurate than others. Samurai did indeed wear long, vest-like coats (called

In the most specific possible sense, that shared appeal is also very much about really

jidori) and elaborate helmets that emphasized neck protection to a greater extent than their counterparts in feudal Europe.

Like many Star Wars icons, "sixteenth-century samurai also wore full-face masks," Sesko elaborated, "though mostly it was half-masks that cover everything below the nose."



Beneath Vader's helmet is a disfigured, heartbroken young man who just wanted to save the people he loved most, losing his soul in the attempt.

"I had to make Darth Vader scary without the audience ever seeing his face. Basically, it's just a black mask. I said, "How do I make that evil and scary?" I mean, he's big and black and he's got a cape and a samurai helmet, but that doesn't necessarily make people afraid of him,"

Lucas told *Rolling Stone* in 2005. "His character's got to go beyond that. Ultimately, he's just a pathetic guy who's had a very sad life."

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production.

David Edmundson (Digital Marketing Director at Bluefin, which distributes Tamashii Nations products worldwide) tells *Inverse* the helmets are a key part of the figurines' appeal to collectors.

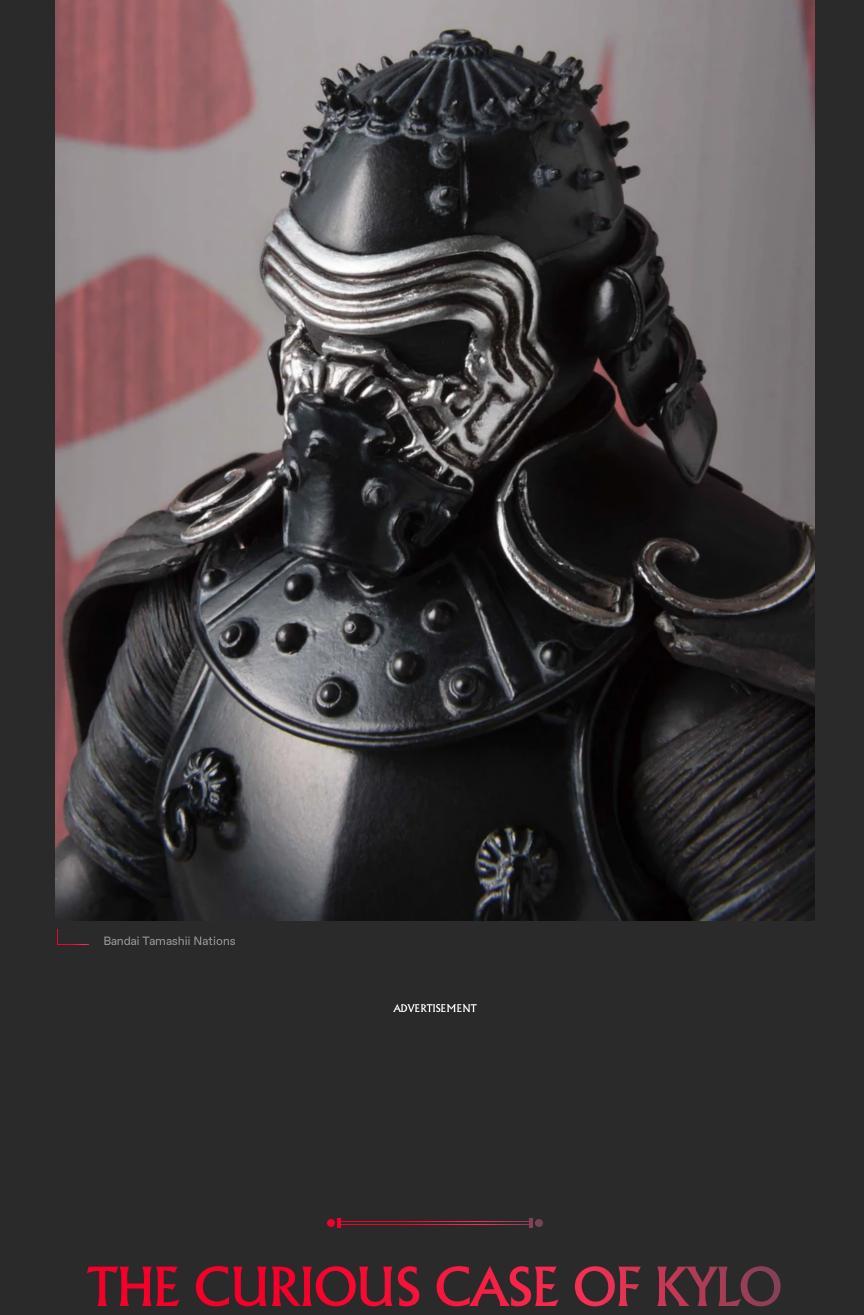
"The helmets in Star Wars allow you to quickly identify and understand who the characters are at a base level. Darth Vader's helmet is imposing, unspoiled and shiny, so you know he is evil and unrivaled in fighting skill," Edmundson says. "Boba Fett's helmet is dinged and dirty, so you know he's seen some things and is not afraid to get his hands dirty. The clean and plentiful Stormtrooper helmets let you know that they are a readily replaceable resource that are the epitome of a foot soldier."

The aesthetic similarities between Star Wars and samurai have even inspired a line of

remarkably intricate – and amazingly badass – figurines from Bandai Tamashii Nations, which

reimagines the franchise's characters as full-fledged samurai. The figures are designed in

Japan by Takayuki Takeya, but Lucasfilm must approve the final design before it goes into



## and dismissing him as a "child in a mask" in *The Last Jedi*. Even the Tamashii Nations version of Kylo Ren can't quite manage to live up to Vader's lofty status – he doesn't make the cut to be a samurai, winding up as a warlord instead.

Kylo Ren's mask reveals quite a lot about the conflicted, broken young man who used to be

Ben Solo. In the opening moments of *The Force Awakens:* he torches a village, stops a blaster

bolt with a wave of his hand, and takes off in a super-deluxe TIE Silencer. He's intimidating and

Yet we soon learn Kylo's a just a broody Vader fanboy who hates his parents, and his mask is

Even when Rey is briefly his prisoner in *TFA*, she hones in on his fear of never being as strong

as Vader. Snoke continually berates him for wearing the helmet, calling it a "ridiculous thing"

just a facade for a fearsomeness he desperately wants to project but never quite attains.

REN

hearts of his opponents."

fearsome black mask.

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point of view.

and he becomes Ben Solo again.

cruel, seemingly the new Big Bad in the galaxy.

\*\*Bandai Tamashii Nations\*\*

"It would have been easy to convert Kylo Ren into a samurai, but by adding additional elements to his helmet, cape, and armor, it adds an additional layer of design that tells a story," Edmundson tells *Inverse*. "The added embellishments to his helmet give it a more

menacing shape that is similar to what a conquering warlord would wear to strike fear into the

symbol of weakness than power, and everyone around him seems to realize it before he does.

circumstances. Vader was a disfigured monster beneath his helmet, where Kylo looks like a

glum – but handsome – Disney prince. It's our first big hint that there's still good beneath that

Over the course of the sequel trilogy, we learn Kylo's mask is a hollow affectation, more a

He dithers with taking it off in a way Vader never could, except in strictly controlled

Sith. He probably would have made a pretty terrible samural too, if his mended helmet is any indication.

Episode IX director J.J. Abrams confirmed the visible red cracks on the repaired helmet were intended to evoke the Japanese practice of kintsugi, or mending broken objects with visible seams of gold or silver, thereby transforming damage into a unique design element. While

brandishing his brokenness for all to see makes sense given the Supreme Leader's moody

Our armor expert points out a real-deal samurai would never attempt to re-use a busted

helmet in this manner. "It was used on ceramics and other things, but helmets were never

This is pretty much exactly what happens to Kylo Ren in *Rise of Skywalker*. From a certain

He has a vision of his father, Han Solo, in a scene that's meant to evoke their climactic

Starkiller Base standoff in Force Awakens. Han strikes his son in the place where he's

"cracked" in the past. Ben's weak point is his family, in spite of all the bad blood between

them. When Han strikes Kylo there again, his Vader fanboy facade finally shatters for good,

repaired with kintsugi. It would render it too fragile to be used," Sesko explains. "If something

temperamental personality, it would be utterly pointless in battle.

hit the helmet, it would crack open at the same areas again."

In*The Rise of Skywalker* , we finally learn for certain that Kylo Ren would have made a lousy

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## DONT EXPECT THE CULTURAL CROSSOVERS TO STOP ANYTIME SOON The Japanese inspirations behind Star Wars keep these outlandish stories about spaceship.

The Japanese inspirations behind Star Wars keep these outlandish stories about spaceships and laser swords grounded in recognizable, real-world history. In a small way, it lets us feel like we're not dumb for liking this stuff, at least until someone shows you a clip of Jar Jar stepping in poop at the podrace.

that Western observers already found fascinating well before 1977. So it's not particularly

surprising that a substantial portion of the treasure trove on display at Rancho Obi-Wan, the

largest private collection of Star Wars memorabilia in the world, comes from Japan. Japan's

At the same time, Star Wars constructs a layer of fantasy atop elements of a samurai tradition

unique aesthetic tradition makes it just as appealing to people who collect Star Wars as it is to those who create it.

"Whereas most Star Wars items worldwide look alike, from the beginning of licensed Star Wars products in Japan in 1978, manufacturers have been allowed to cater their products to the tastes of the Japanese market," Steve Sansweet, President and CEO of Rancho Obi-Wan

Among the most beautiful items in his collection is a miniature suit of samurai armor modeled after Darth Vader made by the three-hundred-year-old doll manufacturer Yoshitoku. That limited-edition piece sold for about \$3,500 when Sansweet acquired it for his collection more than a decade ago. Yoshitoku now sells foot-tall dolls of Vader and a Stormtrooper rendered

and author of 17 books about Star Wars, tells Inverse. "Items are made in a relatively limited

quantity. That and the design make Japanese Star Wars collectibles very appealing to

in the style of its impeccably detailed samurai dolls.

collectors looking for the unusual," Sansweet elaborated.

far away.

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Artist's rendering of Yoshitoku's Darth Vader figurine, with a variety of embellishments for the helmet. Yoshitoku								
"Because so many Japanese collectibles are different than anything else in the world and								
limited in production – most are not licensed for sale anywhere but Japan – they attract								

That appetite among Star Wars collectors is unlikely to abate anytime soon. Even though the franchise's next box office outing is a long way off, Filoni's leadership on the Disney+ side of things all but assures we'll still be seeing plenty of winks and nods to Japanese culture on *The Mandalorian* Season 2, *Clone Wars* Season 7, *Kenobi*, and whatever else Lucasfilm has up its sleeve. Viz Media even released a new manga focused on Luke Skywalker's post-*Return of the Jedi* exploits to kick off 2020.

Even though we don't know what the future holds for the next spate of films set in a galaxy

drama behind it – to be right smack in the middle of whatever's happening in that galaxy far,

far, far away, one thing seems all but certain: expect someone in a badass mask – and the

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