

The Pleasure of Edo: Life in the Yoshiwara, March 24, 2000-June 18, 2000

After the Tokugawa shogun Ieyasu (1543 – 1616) established his political control of Japan in the early 17th century, a relatively long period of isolation, continuous peace, and economic development followed. The Tokugawa shoguns designated Edo (modern Tokyo) as their capital, and by the early 18th century the city was inhabited by over a million people. Its flourishing economy was fueled by the feudal lords (*daimyō*), who were required by the shogun to house their families in Edo and maintain permanent residences there. As the economy grew, the merchant class (*chōnin*) prospered and developed its own distinctive subculture, identified with the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure in the theaters, teahouses, and brothels of the city.

Established in 1657, Edo's newly licensed pleasure district (Shin Yoshiwara) was located in a walled compound in a suburb reachable by boat via the Sumida River, which ran through the center of the city. The famed beauties of the district set the fashion standard and were celebrated in woodblock prints hawked on the streets of the city. Exorbitant fees for the services of top-ranked courtesans could, over time, bankrupt even wealthy visitors. The woodblock prints depicting the great beauties occasionally were used as vehicles for social commentary on high culture. By parodying classical Chinese and Japanese literary and artistic sources, these pictures of the so-called "floating world" (*ukiyo-e*) of the Yoshiwara appropriated the cultural legitimacy of their elevated models and played at assuming a similar respectability.

The group of prints assembled here depict aspects of life in the Yoshiwara in the late 18th and 19th centuries: the formal public processions of elaborately dressed courtesans, the teahouse entertainments attended by courtesans (prostitutes) and geisha (entertainers), and the preparatory rituals of assuming elegant dress, so necessary for women whose appearance ensured their livelihood.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865
Izumiya Ichibei, Japanese
Outing to a flower garden (Oniwa hana no asobi), 1840s
Polychrome woodblock triptych
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2339



The central figure is a geisha carrying a stringed musical instrument known as a *samisen*. The woman on the left bears a container, perhaps full of *sake* (Japanese rice wine), and the woman on the right appears to be holding a lacquered tray filled with food.

RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Toyokuni II, Japanese, 1777-1835

Kawaguchiya Shozo, Japanese

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

The courtesan Shirokawa and her two kamuro Nagisa and Yumeno of the Tamaya (Tamaya nai shirokawa nagisa yumeno), Eight views of the Yoshiwara, 1830s

Polychrome woodblock print

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1403

As in *Tsukasa of the Ogiya*, Kunisada has borrowed the 11th-century Chinese landscape theme of the "Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers" for the structure of his series "Eight Views of the Yoshiwara." The inset scene depicts sailing boats, a play upon the Xiao-Xiang scene of "Returning Sails Off the Distant Shore." Instead of the mist-filled landscape of the Chinese original, the boats sail toward the Yoshiwara, in a humorous comment on the lofty character of the original Chinese subject matter and the final destination of the boats in this print.



Utagawa Toyokuni II, Japanese, 1777-1835

Kawaguchiya Shozo, Japanese

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

The courtesan Tsukasa and her two kamuro Agena and Kocho of the Ogiya (Ogiyanaitsukasa agena kocho: Daimonguchi no rakugan), Eight views of the Yoshiwara, 1830s

Polychrome woodblock print

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1414

In this print, Kunisada has borrowed the 11th-century Chinese landscape theme of the "Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers" as the basis for his series of "Eight Views of the Yoshiwara." The inset scene depicts geese descending over the Taimon, the great gate of the Yoshiwara pleasure district in Edo (modern Tokyo). The reference is to the Xiao-Xiang scene of "Wild Geese Descending to the Sandbar," but instead of the mist-filled river landscape of the Chinese original, the geese fly toward the Yoshiwara, in a humorous comment on the lofty character of the original Chinese subject matter and the final destination of the geese in this print.



Sadaoka Gakutei, Japanese, 1786?-1868
View of the Yoshiwara, 1820s
 Polychrome woodblock print with embossing and metallic
 embellishment
 Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.31

A courtesan in formal procession with her attendants is depicted in a medallion behind which the gate of the Yoshiwara (pleasure district) is visible. The poetry alludes to the Nakanochō, the main street in the Yoshiwara.



Kitao Masanobu, Japanese, 1761-1816
 Tsutaya Jūzaburō, Japanese, 1750 - 1797
*Takigawa of the Ogiya (Ogiyanai takigawa), A mirror of a comparing
 the calligraphy of new beauties of the Yoshiwara*, Spring 1784
 Polychrome woodblock print
 Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1117

Masanobu, who was actually the novelist Santō Kyōden, designed an album of prints of the most famous courtesans of the day for the New Year of 1784. Each woman is paired with courtly poetry (*waka*) written in her own calligraphy, establishing a relationship between these courtesans and the courtly female poets and writers of the Heian period (794-1185), the classical period of Japanese literature. This print is the right half of a two-panel work (*diptych*) in which each of the two courtesans is represented walking in formal procession outdoors with her attendants.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Toyokuni, Japanese, 1769-1825

Tsuruya Kinsuke, Japanese

The twelfth month: Falling snow, Mukojima [Geisha and attendants in snow] (Juni gatsu: Mukojima yuki furi no zu), Thirty-six Moons, Actors in the Twelve Months, 1810s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1304

The orange pigment in the performers' garments has discolored to gray, the result of slow chemical reaction over the years.



Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Contemporary brocades of fashions at the imperial palace (Gosho moyo tosei nishiki), 1843-47

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2334

The elaborate ritual of dressing is alluded to through the presentation of a kimono by the servant at the left and the offerings of a selection of sashes (*obi*) by the older woman to the right. These samples are from the Daimaru firm, whose emblem appears on the box to the right.



Hosoda Eishi, Japanese, 1756-1829

Nishimuraya Yohachi, Japanese

Mitsuhamama of the Hyogoya (Hyogoya Mitsuhama), Gorgeous clothes fresh as young leaves, 1790's

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1137



RISD MUSEUM

Hosoda Eishi, Japanese, 1756-1829

Nishimuraya Yohachi, Japanese

The daughter of Taira no Kiyomori using a mirror to draw her self-portrait to send to her mother (Kiyomori sokujo no ga jizo o utsushi haha ni kore o okuru zu), 1790s

Polychrome woodblock print with embossing

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1135

This very beautiful but faded print depicts an upper-class woman dressed in elegant costume completing a painting. As in many courtesan prints, the purpose of the setting and costume are to elevate the person's status through comparison with historical figures from Japan's past.



Keisai Eisen, Japanese, 1790-1848

Sanoya Kihei, Japanese

Ono no Komachi at Sekidera, Today's seven Komachica. 1825

Polychrome woodblock print

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1386

Ono no Komachi, a 9th-century court poet, was one of the Six Poetic Sages (Rokkasen). The painting of the woman at the top of the print is labeled "Sekidera Komachi," that is, "Komachi entering the Sekidera Temple." In Eisen's series the seven characteristic depictions of the famed writer are instead used to portray geisha or ordinary women.



RISD MUSEUM

Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806

Omiya Gonkuro, Japanese, 18th century

A parody (mitate) of Act 5 of Chūshingura (Treasury of the Loyal Retainers) with a courtesan of the Naniwaya (go-danme (Act 5) Naniwaya [inscribed to l. of figure]), Chushingura parodied by famous beauties: a set of 12 prints, ca. 1794-1795

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1145

The *Treasury of Loyalty (Chūshingura)* told the tale of the forty-seven masterless samurai (*rōnin*) who avenged their lord's death and then committed suicide. The teahouse mistress and servant depicted here are deliberately matched with an episode from this tale of martial devotion and loyalty to parody the social values espoused by the Tokugawa regime.



Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806

Totsuka, Beauties of the first rank and the Fifty-three stations [of the Tokaido], mid 1700s-early 1800s

Polychrome woodblock print with embossing

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1143

By choosing to illustrate the courtesans of his day paired with the various stations of the Tōkaidō road linking Edo (modern Tokyo) and Kyoto, Utamaro lends a degree of respectability to his subject matter.



RISD MUSEUM

Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806

Yamadaya Sanshiro, Japanese, 18th century

Left panel of the triptych Washing and Stretching Cloth (Arai-bari), ca. 1796-1797

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1140

Although so casually portrayed, these two women, probably a mother and daughter, are identified as ordinary townspeople on the basis of their simple costumes and hairstyles.



Kikukawa Eizan, Japanese, 1787-1867

Wakasaya Yoichi, Japanese

Beauty (Bijin), Beauties as the Six Immortal Poets, 1820s

Polychrome woodblock print

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1394

This print appears to be the right panel of a triptych (a work in three parts); the two women depicted are clearly waiting upon guests at a party.



Kikukawa Eizan, Japanese, 1787-1867

Yamada Shojiro, Japanese

Three elegant beauties enjoying the evening cool (Fūryū yusuzumi san bijin), ca. 1810

Polychrome woodblock print

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1399

In this striking image, three slightly disheveled geisha escape from a party visible through the sliding doors.

