Cherry Blossom in the Yoshiwara by Yoshikazu

PICTURES OF THE FLOATING WORLD

An exploration of the world of the Yoshiwara, 吉原

PICTURES OF THE FLOATING WORLD

In the nightless city
Floating free from life's cares
Picture memories

Haiku Keith Oram

INTRODUCTION

Japanese woodblock prints that recorded the Ukiyo, the 'Floating World' of the Yoshiwara of Edo city were so numerous that during the nineteenth century they were used to wrap ceramics exported to Europe. This practice provided some European artists with their first proper encounter with these beautifully created images. The impact on western art of their bold colours and sensuous line was quite significant influencing many artists of the *avant gard*. The story of those prints, however, began much earlier in the seventeenth century. First a little background history.

The battle of Sekigahara in 1600 and the fall of Osaka in 1615 allowed Tokugawa Ieyasu to gain complete control of Japan. He had been made Shogun, supreme military leader, in 1603, but the fall of Osaka was the final action that gave him complete control. Almost his first act was to move the capital from Kyoto, the realm of the Emperor, to Edo, now Tokyo. This backwater town, now the new capital, grew very quickly into a large town. Tokugawa Iemitsu, Shogun 1623-51, required the daimyo of Japan, local rulers and warlords, to remain in Edo every other year, but when they returned to their fiefs he made them leave their families in the capital. This 'hostage' style management, sankin tokai, helped to maintain the peace. The other affect was that the daimyo needed to build large homes in Edo for their families. The need to service these homes and their retainers and provide an infrastructure to support the running of them and the activities of the new governing regime meant that Edo grew from a town into a large city very quickly. Tokugawa Iemitsu, the third Shogun and grandson of Ieyasu, also closed the country to foreigners allowing only very limited with foreign influences and those were relegated to the fringes of coastal Japan.

The Tokugawa Shogunate based its governance on tight control of all aspects of the Japanese society and drew its inspiration from the Confucian code of ethics. Duty and responsibility lay at the centre of everything. It is important to note that the teachings of Confucius chimed well with the existing Shinto and Buddhist ideologies and existed without any sense of religious, or social, conflict. Shinto dealt exclusively with birth, marriage and progress in life; Buddhism confronted death and organised the funerals; Confucianism covered all the spaces in between and where it intersected with the other two. All three reflected family connections, duty, loyalty and encouraged 'right thinking and action'. This did not mean Japan was free of crime, or violence, or unfairness, but it did mean that, by and large, it was very controlled and certainly more peaceful than the history preceding the Tokugawa Shogunate. Japan was a highly stratified society with little or no chance of social mobility. The top of the pyramid of power was held by the Shogun and the Daimyo, beneath them were their Samurai retainers, under them farmers, merchants and townsfolk and at the very bottom of the pyramid were the Eta, the untouchables, who dealt with all the dirtiest and demeaning tasks of the city plus handling dead bodies and slaughtering animals. The Eta

were a group that helped support a society that valued cleanliness and order. Yet despite this ultra-control social during the late seventeenth century the arts flourished in the peace created by the new regime. Novels and poetry became popular and the Kabuki theatre, originally a vehicle for songs and dance, evolved into a full theatre experience with song, dance and famous stories and history forming the central dramatic core of its work, all of which focused often on the themes of heroism, loyalty, duty and tragedy. Painting and woodblock prints, particularly images of the Ukiyo, blossomed in the peace created by Tokugawa Ieyasu and subsequent Shoguns. This re-naissance in the arts is often referred to as the Genroku Period; it even brought new and colourful designs to household decoration and clothing.

The Yoshiwara pleasure district, home to the Ukiyo , the floating world, was a product of governmental initiatives to control and regulate society. A pleasure district walled from ordinary society meant it was able to be policed and controlled. It was also a response to a need to service a society in which men dominated politically and socially. A male population that needed outlets for its energy and a safety valve to reduce conflict and violence. Visitors had the freedom to come and go freely subject to the strict rules and curfews of the Yoshiwara, whilst its courtesans, house 'aunties' and the entourages that serviced them remained largely within the quarter. The other interesting aspect of the Yoshiwara is that as time passed and it became well established it began to influence trends in clothing and speech. The woodblock print artists, who recorded the Ukiyo, first beautified the courtesans and geisha of the Yoshiwara. They celebrated the fame of actors of the Kabuki as well as well known rikishi, Sumo wrestlers. They also produced shunga prints that offered more erotic and lurid visions of the sexual encounters of the Yoshiwara. They explored the whole world of the Ukiyo and their images present us with an almost complete picture of a now forgotten world that flourished from the seventeenth century right up to the early twentieth century.

NB All Japanese names in this text are recorded as family name first and given name second e.g. Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康, Tokugawa Iemitsu 徳川 家光

THE YOSHIWARA, 吉原

The Omon, Great Gate photographed c 1903

Jinyemon Shoji had petitioned to construct a pleasure district in Edo as early as 1612; he was finally successful in 1617. He set about constructing a courtesan quarter on the swampy ground near to the Asakusa Kannon Temple area and Nihonbashi, an important bridge into the city. The name Yoshiwara means "reed plain" derived from the swampy area on which it was constructed. The enclosed quarter was subject to many laws and regulations that covered every aspect of life in the quarter. During the early times of the Yoshiwara courtesans could not wear any clothes with gold or silver embroidery. The buildings had to be discreet, without an imposing appearance. Every visitor was to be carefully observed by the owners of the brothels and any suspicious behaviour reported to the authorities. There were rules about opening and closing times and the organisation of assignations. The regulations were detailed and all encompassing. The entrance to the quarter displayed a notice at the Omon, the great gate, which remained there from its founding in 1617 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868 when the samurai class was disbanded and the carrying of swords outlawed, it read,

Persons other than doctors are forbidden to enter riding in a kago (palanquin) or norimono (sedan chair).
Long weapons are forbidden. (This meant both spears and long swords.)

"The Nightless City or the History of the Yoshiwara Yuwaku" J.E. de Becker pub. 1899 p. 24

The ban on swords was a practical necessity; samurai were often very touchy about their honour and during the Edo period, although frowned on, duels were common. Swords were carried thrust through the obi, belt, and because of their length often stuck out behind, saya ate, clashing of scabbards, could be an excuse for a fight. E.J. Harrison, a western pioneer of judo, in his book, "The Fighting Spirit of Japan" (1913) recorded an account of a duel told to him by one of judo's early great judokas, Yokoyama Sakujiro, a pupil of Kano Jigoro shihan the founder of Judo.

I can carry my memory back to the days when all samurai wore the two swords and used them as well when necessity arose. When quite a boy I accidentally witnessed an exciting duel to the death between a ronin [an unattached samurai] and three samurai. The struggle took place in the Kojimachi ward, in the neighbourhood of Kudan, where the Shokonsha now stands. Before proceeding with my narrative I ought to explain for the benefit of my foreign listeners [there were two of us present besides another Japanese gentleman] the usage that was commonly observed by the two-sworded men of the old feudal days, in order that the incident I am about to describe may be better understood. The sword of the samurai, as you know, was a possession valued higher than life itself, and if you touched a samurai's sword you touched his dignity. It was deemed an act of unpardonable rudeness in those days for one samurai to allow the tip of his scabbard to come into contact with the scabbard of another samurai as the men passed each other in the street; such an act was styled saya-ate and in the absence of a prompt apology from the offender a fight almost always ensued. The samurai carried two swords, the long and the short, which were thrust into the obi, or sash, on the left-hand side, in such a manner that the sheath of the longer weapon stuck out behind the owner's back. This being the case, it frequently happened, especially in a crowd, that two scabbards would touch each other without deliberate intent on either side, although samurai who were not looking for trouble of this kind always took the precaution to hold the swords with the point downward and as close to their sides as possible. But should a collision of this description occur, the parties could on no account allow it to pass unnoticed. One or both would at once demand satisfaction, and the challenge was rarely refused. The high sense of honour which prevailed among men of this class forbade them to shrink from the consequences of such an encounter.
So much by way of introduction. The episode I am going to describe arose in precisely this fashion. The parties to the duel were a ronin and three samurai, as I have already said. The ronin was rather shabbily dressed, and was evidently very poor. The sheath of his long sword was covered with cracks where the lacquer had been worn away through long use. He was a man of middle age. The three samurai were all stalwart men, and appeared to be under the influence of sake. They were the challengers. At first the ronin apologized, but the samurai insisted on a duel, and the ronin eventually accepted the challenge. By this time a large crowd had gathered, among which were many samurai, none of whom, however, ventured to interfere.

In accordance with custom, the combatants exchanged names and swords were unsheathed, the three samurai on one side facing their solitary opponent, with whom the sympathies of the onlookers evidently lay. The keen blades of the duellists glittered in the sun. The ronin, seemingly as calm as though engaged merely in a friendly fencing bout, advanced steadily with the point of his weapon directed against the samurai in the centre of the trio, and apparently indifferent to an attack on either flank. The samurai in the middle gave ground inch by inch and the ronin as surely stepped forward. Then the right-hand samurai, who thought he saw an opening, rushed to the attack, but the ronin, who had clearly anticipated this move, parried and with lightning rapidity cut his enemy down with a mortal blow. The left-hand samurai came on in his turn, but was treated in similar fashion, a single stroke felling him to the ground bathed in blood. All this took almost less time than it takes to tell. The samurai in the centre, seeing the fate of his comrades, thought better of his first intention and took to his heels. The victorious ronin wiped his blood-stained sword in the coolest manner imaginable and returned it to its sheath. His feat was loudly applauded by the other samurai who had witnessed it. The ronin then repaired to the neighbouring magistrate's office to report the occurrence, as the law required.

"The Fighting Spirit of Japan" E.J. Harrison pub 1913 quoted from online article source www.swordpolish.com

This account, no doubt embellished a little, is still an example of the problems that could occur all too easily from something as simple as saya ate or other imagined or real slights and offences. Duels inevitably caused death to one, or sometimes both combatants, in a tightly controlled pleasure district it was important to take every precaution to guard against any activity which could cause civil disturbances. The authorities could decide to shut down the whole district if there were too many such disturbances of the peace, after all the purpose of the district was enjoyment and pleasure not conflict.

Despite the rules forbidding imposing frontages to the buildings within the Yoshiwara the gateway to the quarter was an impressive decorative archway, on which were inscribed words by the well known playwright , Fukuchi Genichiro.

A dream of springtide when the streets are full of the cherry blossoms. Tidings of autumn when the streets are lined on either side with lighted lanterns.

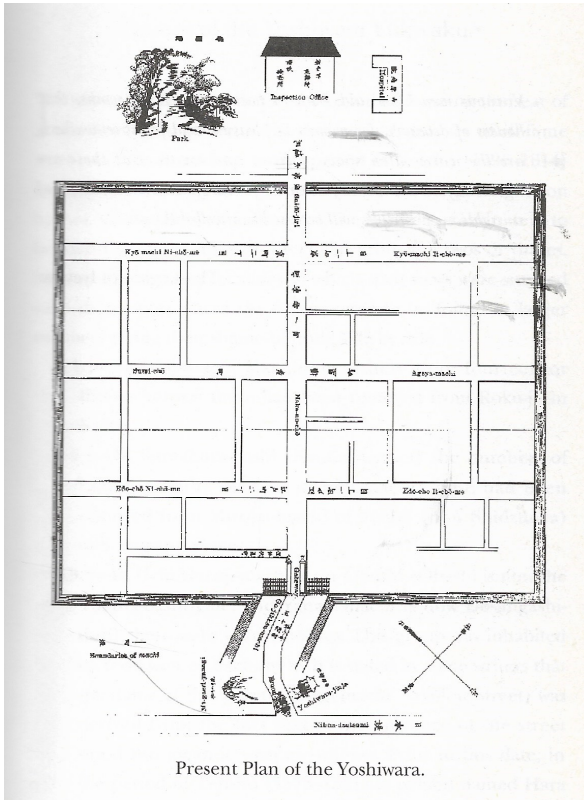
"The Nightless City or the History of the Yoshiwara Yukwaku" J.E. de Becker pub. 1899 p.25

This is on the surface a simple descriptive statement, but in true Japanese fashion it has meanings that far transcend the simplicity of the words. The descriptive picture of cherry blossom is a direct reference to the trees that had been planted along the whole length of the main street, Naka-no-Cho. When in blossom at night and the street was lit by a myriad lanterns it made the whole quarter seem full of flowers. The users of the Yoshiwara would have been aware of the wider significance of this description that alluded to the beauty of the cherry blossom. First there is the fleeting nature of the blossom. It alludes to the Ukiyo, the floating world, a world of passing pleasure. The original meaning of the Ukiyo had connotations with things lost, but in the Yoshiwara it came to mean passing pleasures and fleeting encounters. Cherry blossom was a symbol of that quickly passing sense of pleasure. This idea of things passing by quickly was seen in the lives of the samurai too, whose lives before the Tokugawa peace could easily be cut short in battle. There was a commonly quoted line, *Hanna wa sakuragi, Hito wa bushi (traditional Japanese proverb)* as the cherry blossom is the first amongst flowers, so the warrior is first among men, both subject to a short, beautiful life. This common thread of quickly passing lives and events was understood by visitors to the district. However there was another more subtle reference attached to the cherry blossom. The Yoshiwara was described as containing the streets of the Willow and the Flower. The Willow referred to Geisha, beautiful women, exquisitely dressed, who entertained visitors to the Yoshiwara. They sang and danced and played games to entertain and distract clients from the worldly life they left outside the quarter. The Flowers of the Yoshiwara were the courtesans, they entertained, but their main function was to provide the sex that the quarter was set up to provide to a community dominated by men. The Yoshiwara and the Ukiyo were one and the same in the context of Edo. Other cities had their pleasure districts too, with the Yoshiwara they all were part of the Ukiyo, a separate world of fleeting pleasures and assignations. It was also a world that artists and artisans recorded producing Ukiyo-e, pictures of the floating world. They recorded every aspect of that closed world and

it is through their work we have a glimpse into that world of beauty, pleasure and sex.

THE LIFE OF THE YOSHIWARA

Beyond the Ómon the streets of the Willow and the Flower stretched out on a grid pattern of shops and teahouses. The photograph below is missing the cherry trees of the earlier days of the quarter, but in this hand tinted print its lanterns and colourful noren, door curtains like those of any Japanese shops, are clearly visible. A row of stores and drinking houses were just inside the Ómon and other gates, some provided a service of introduction to courtesans throughout the Yoshiwara.



Present Plan of the Yoshiwara.

The map of the streets of the Yoshiwara is taken from J.E. de Becker's book, "The Nightless City or the History of the Yoshiwara Yukwaku" first published in 1899 and revised in 1905.

Naka-no-cho the main street of the Yoshiwara c1902

Amigasa

Near the various gateways into the quarter there were amigasa-jaya, teashops that rented amigasa, straw hats designed to hide the identity of visitors to the quarter. The hat sat low across the face with a see through panel that allowed the wearer to see out, but prevented others seeing who was wearing it. The pattern illustrated was one of a number of designs of a similar style.

The courtesans, the Yujo, who plied their trade in the teahouses of the Yoshiwara and the geisha who entertained there quite early in its history became the focus of the woodblock print artists who recorded the people and life of the district. Their bijin-ga, 美人画, literally it means, beautiful person picture, beautified the courtesans and geisha that worked in the district. However they were not the only inhabitants of the district there was a whole entourage of people engaged in the process of running the teahouses, attending to the need of their clients and running the whole system as smoothly as possible.

Each teahouse, or brothel, had its Yarite, a female manager who watched over everything that happened in and around the establishment. They were usually called, obasan, aunty. It was the Yarite that oversaw the front of the house and all its comings and goings. Most were veteran courtesans and very little escaped the attention of these wily old foxes. They wore an obi of black satin wound around their kimono simply tied, sometimes they wore a hood or cap over their coiled hair. They were not well paid, but their position allowed them to 'farm' a good living out of their job. They collected interest on loans they made to the girls of the house. They had tips from clients and commission on the sums spent by guests, often it stretched to food brought to the guests too. Yarite had the help of Wakai-mono, male servants. Besides being part of the security, even though some were quite old, they supervised the food and sake guests required and took a commission on whatever was bought. When bills were settled any change became part of their take instead of going to the guest.

Courtesans had their own peculiar entourage to attend them. Kamuro, sometimes called Kaburo, were young girl servants, who began their service aged between five and seven. Originally Kamuro, or Kaburo, were young girl servants in the Imperial Court, who had part of their head shaved leaving a long scalp lock. The little girls who attended the courtesans were dressed in imitation of these child court attendants. Traditionally they were dressed in white, bleached linen on which was a dyed pine tree pattern. However during the Edo period they began to be dressed to reflect the station and popularity of the courtesan they served. When they grew older and reached thirteen or fourteen, if they looked to be a promising courtesan they became, Shinzó, which meant new constructed, and were inducted into the ranks of the courtesans. It was at this time their teeth were blackened in the manner of high ranking samurai ladies. Shinzó were kitted out with kimono, bedding and furniture for their rooms. The level of the money invested in them depended largely on their personal attractions and beauty, after all business was important and making the most of your assets was paramount to the house they served.

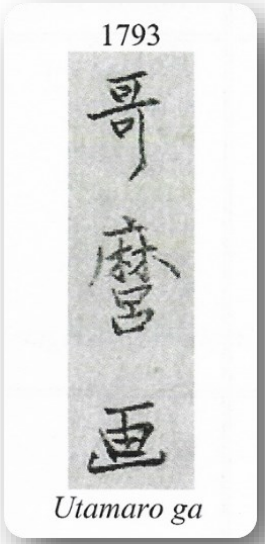
The other important employees of the teahouse, bought in as and when needed, were Hôken and Geisha. Hôken were clowns and jesters employed to lighten the mood and spirits of the guests. They brought humour and kind of knock-about antics that enhanced the good will of the guests. Geisha were important elements of the entertainment too. They were, and still are now in the twenty-first century, accomplished women. Geisha were skilled in music, song, dance and great game players, usually they lead the drinking games that enhanced the gaiety of the evening. They also had a good understanding of lyric poetry. These accomplished women, unlike the

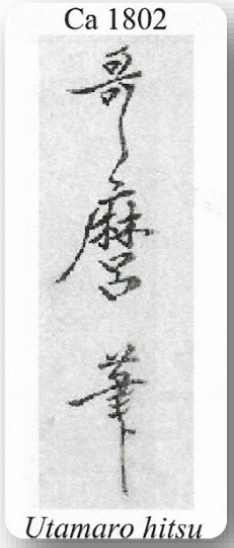
women of Edo society at large, were able to converse with men, if not as social equals, then certainly at the same intellectual level as the men. The employment of Geisha had one peculiarity in the way they were paid. When wakai-mono were sent to acquire the services of a geisha the fee was calculated on the time that passed from the moment her samisen case left the Geisha house to the time it arrived back. The fee was calculated in whole hours. I suspect that in true Yoshiwara traditon the hours were rounded up rather than down in order to increase the fee.

A group of Yujo and their Kamuro.
Photographed in a garden under oiled umbrellas these women are of superior rank.
The photograph is labelled Shin Yoshiwara, meaning the new Yoshiwara of the early twentieth century c1900

Yoshiwara no hana 吉原の花

Flowers of the Yoshiwara





Yoshiwara no hana 吉原の花

Utamaro Kitagawa 歌麿 喜多川(1753-1806) was an artist known for his bijin-ga and other pictures of the Ukiyo. During 1936 seven works by him were discovered in Tochigi city. Amongst them were three large drawings, which were commissioned by a wealthy merchant, Zenno Ihé and produced c1791-92. They depicted scenes with the themes of flowers, moon and snow; Yoshiwara no hana (Flowers of the Yoshiwara), Shinagawa no tsuki (Moon in Shinagawa) and Fukugawa no yuki (Snow in Fukugawa). The first record of them being shown together was November 23rd 1879 in Tochigi city, however having been commissioned by a Tochigi citizen they must have been seen before that date. Utamaro, himself, had many connections with the city, he was involved with the Kyoka poetry society there.

It his drawing of the Yoshiwara that is of particular interest, because it illustrates the Yoshiwara district celebrating haname, cherry blossom viewing. The title is a play on the notion of the reality of blossom in the Yoshiwara and the 'flowers' who plied their trade there. The drawing is large, 186.7 x 256.9cms, and was drawn on eight sheets of Xuan paper joined together. It shows high ranking courtesans, oiran, enjoying cherry and azalea blossom in spring. The oiran are identified by their obi being tied in front. There is however another important revelation revealed in this picture. On the upper floor of the house women are being entertained by geisha, their obi being tied at the back, who are dancing to music provided by two samisen and tsuzumi, hand drums. What is interesting is that the women of the audience have hair styles like those of the women-in-waiting to high ranking daimyo and samurai. Their obis are tied at the rear and they are not geisha, nor are they courtesans. It suggests that not only men visited the Yoshiwara. One explanation may be that they are attending their master to and from the Yoshiwara and are being entertained whilst they wait. The other, perhaps surprising, reason could be that they are visiting for their own entertainment. Haname would have been a rare day off for the inhabitants of the district and in spring Oiran Dóchú festivals were celebrated when the courtesans with their 'aunties' paraded through the district. The print by Toyohara Chikanobu from 1888 illustrates one such parade. The 'aunties' are dressed more sombrely and have the black obi and

The *Bunsui Sakura Matsuri Oiran Dōchū* is an annual event held every April in Niigata. It re-enacts the spring parade of Oiran. Nowadays just three volunteer pretend Oiran parade with attendants.

Spring Oiran Dóchú
Toyohara Chikanobu 1888

less elaborate hairstyles. These parades continue into the present day, however the courtesans who parade with their attendants for the spring festival are pretend courtesans.

Another peculiarity of the Yoshiwara was identified by J.E. de Becker and recorded in his book, "The Nightless City", first published in 1899. His book records in great detail the life and history of the Yoshiwara, During his research he discovered that the Yoshiwara had its own dialect, sato-kotoba and that all courtesans learned it. The dialect enabled courtesans from different parts of the country to disguise their regional accents, but at the same time identified then as denizens of the pleasure district. Becker also noted that the Shimibara, the pleasure district of Kyoto, was mentioned in the "Ukiyo no Monogatari", Stories of the Floating World", as using sato-kotoba words and that the dialect may have originated there. The dialect marks separation from the normal world. Becker, in his book, records many examples of the dialect with the modern Japanese equivalent of the day and an English translation. It is an interesting to note that Samurai women learned "women's script" a simpler form of writing and very different from the official kanji used by men. It too marked a separation of men from women in the Edo world, which was dominated by men.

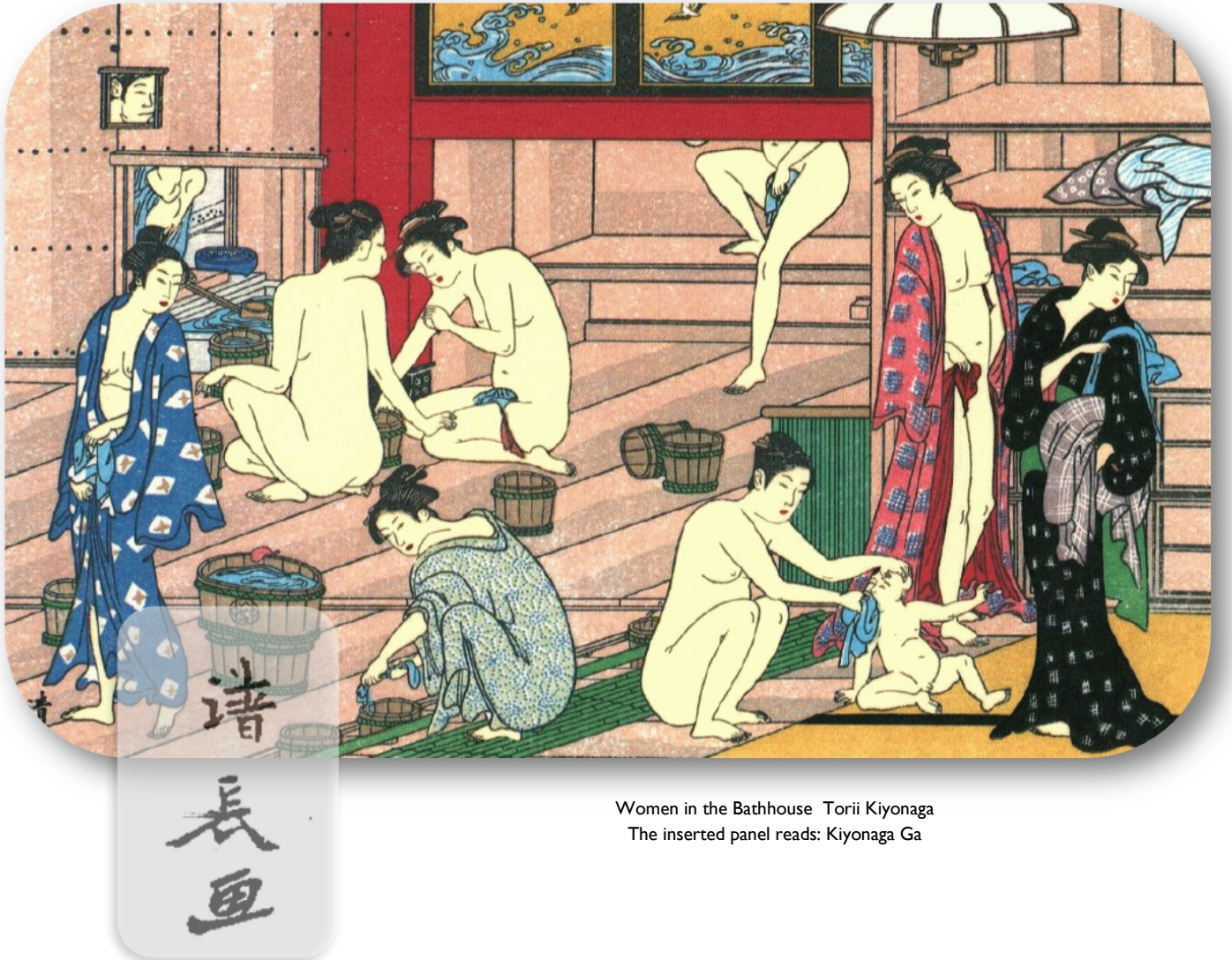
THE DAILY LIFE OF THE YOSHIWARA

Courtesans could have day engagements (hiru-jimai) from noon until 3pm and night engagements (yo-jimai) from 5pm to 10 pm. Closing time was at 10pm, but a kuguri-do (small door) was left open in a gate until 12 o'clock midnight when hyoshigi (wooden blocks) were clapped together four times. This marked the final closure until the morning, when overnight guests could leave, such guests would, in true Yoshiwara tradition, have to pay extra for this privilege. The Yoshiwara was a place for those who had plenty of money. Edo grew and with it not only the samurai class, but also townsfolk merchant classes, which were established to service the needs of the city. It meant that as Edo grew not only the samurai class could afford to visit the Yoshiwara, but also wealthy merchants and townsfolk. It was a place where the stratified social system was overlooked to some degree and it was money that made the whole district work.
Although the system of day and evening engagements operated there were still times within these periods when engagements could be made. The pre-arranged assignations were usually the province of the oiran of the teahouses, at twilight a bell was rung before the shrines of the teahouses and the yujo, courtesans, without pre-arranged assignations, would appear in the display areas whilst a traditional song, a sugagaku, was sung accompanied by a samisen by one of the yujo of the house, sometimes it would be one of the more talented shinzó. Utamaro's image is not just a bijin-ga, but also an intimate moment as the girl tunes her samisen before beginning to play with the text of her song laid out ready for when the twilight bell was rung. The photograph from a much later time shows a lower status teahouse, but illustrates the general principle of the yujo on show so that clients could make their choices.

Flowers of the Yoshiwara by Utamaro c1800

The Flowers of the Yoshiwara on Display c1903

One of the days the courtesans had a holiday from their work was Matsu-no-uchi, New Year. Yujo were woken around 4am by cries from the men from the bath houses announcing that they were ready for use. All the Yujo bathed and dressed carefully before presenting themselves before the owners of their houses. Presents were given, usually clothes, to all the Yujo, Shinzo and Kamuro. During the afternoon the yujo paraded in the streets of the Yoshiwara visiting friends from other houses and giving presents of sake sets in wooden boxes. The Yoshiwara did not fully return to normal business until the 20th of the first month.



Women in the Bathhouse Torii Kiyonaga
The inserted panel reads: Kiyonaga Ga

This is a photograph of the strange custom of Tsumi-yagu no Koto. It shows the display of the expensive bedding and kimono of a great courtesan to demonstrate her popularity. It was a matter of professional pride for courtesans to make such ostentatious displays to demonstrate their popularity and generous nature of their clients. Matsu no uchi, new year, was a common time for such displays because it was a time when the teahouses were temporarily closed for business. Tsumi-yagu no koto were most seen in the best teahouses, although they could be seen in the middle ranked houses too. A tsumi-yagu set consisted of three decorated futons with a sumptuously embroidered coverlet. If the display was during one of the summer festivals then a mosquito net was added, the Yoshiwara was constructed in a swampy area which was prime territory for mosquitos and midges. The name of the courtesan lucky enough to have a patron prepared to pay up for such a display of new bedding was written for all to see. The patron who purchased the tsumi-yagu would, on the first day of the display give all the house servants a tip augmented by a further payment for providing

soba noodles, this tip was called the soba-dai. The display did not last too long because there was the next stage, shiki-zome, the first use of the new bedding, which would be for the patron who bought it for the courtesan. It involved a feast with geisha for extra entertainment. Overall it represented for the patron a considerable outlay of money, not only for the expensive bedding, but also all the entertaining and tips involved. However it would not only reflect well upon the courtesan and her teahouse, but also display the generosity and wealth of the patron. Tsumi-yagu no Koto, in true Yoshiwara tradition, represented yet another opportunity for the house Yarite to milk the situation for tips and other gratuities, although everyone profited in one way or another whether it be in monetary terms or the kudos it accrued.

This ukiyo-e printed in Prussian blue with the hint of red lips picturing an oiran in a sumptuous kimono is evidence, like tsumi-yagu no koto, of a generous patron. It is drawn by a consummate master of the Edo period, Eisen Keisai 英泉 渓斎 (1790-1848). His more usual work was nishiki-e, brocade pictures, full colour prints, but this print still has all the hallmarks of his skill. Like his near contemporary, Utamaro, Eisen produced many bijin-ga.

The dramatically decorative kimono, which shows a tiger in a bamboo grove could be seen as a fortuitous pattern. In Japanese mythology bamboo, take (ta-ke) in Japanese, is one of the three friends of winter, the other two being; pine, matsu, and plum, ume. Bamboo is evergreen and bends before the winter storms. It is pliable and supple. Pine is evergreen and venerable in its strong old age, tenacious, it clings to mountain sides and plum, brings pleasant thoughts of spring to come when it sometimes bursts into blossom in winter. They bring comfort in the depths of winter. However this pattern is a tiger in a bamboo forest of supple and pliable trees that accepts the strength of the tiger, itself emblematic of maleness. The moon is symbolic of beauty and as we have seen in the paintings of Utamaro the moon, snow and flowers are all very much part of Japanese culture representing different kinds of beauty. The kimono pattern of a moonlit bamboo grove bending before the strength of a tiger has many links to the world of the courtesan, whose whole purpose was to service the needs of the men who came to the teahouses, to accept them with supple grace and courtesy providing the fleeting pleasures of the ukiyo, the floating world.

WHO WERE THE COURTESANS?

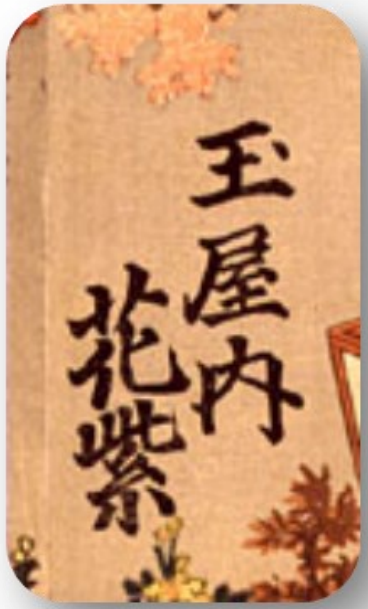
Ukiyo-e artists have left us a record of the courtesans and geisha of the Yoshiwara. Although we know very little about them as people, the artists have provided us a picture record of them. Some tell us who they were and where they worked. They were in many ways the pin-ups of seventeenth and eighteenth century Edo, bijin-ga for a population enjoying the relative peace and prosperity of the Tokugawa shogunate and the artistic Genroku period.

Reading from right to left this reads: Okanotoya House and Shigeoka.

This is Shigeoka, the way her hair is dressed and with her obi tied at the front indicates she is an oiran, a high status courtesan. Her obi features what could be a kitsune, fox, in Japanese mythology a nine tailed fox could be a shape shifter. Her name is written on the far left hand side of the print and tells us that she works for the Okanotoya House on Kyo Street. It is autumn and the lanterns are lit. Unfortunately I cannot at this moment identify the artist. The title on the right has the kanji for Shin-Yoshiwara, new Yoshiwara, 新吉原 which dates it to the second half of the nineteenth century. The Yoshiwara was famous for its lantern be-decked streets and in autumn the golden light from the lanterns enhanced the autumn foliage of the cherry trees lining the main street.

Another flower of the Yoshiwara, the oiran Sugatano of the Ebiya House also on Kyo Street. She has a very fine obi embroidered with a dragon, also set in autumn by the same artist.

Reading the long string from right to left this reads:
Ebiya House and Sugatano



This is the oiran, Hanamurasaki, from the same suite of prints as the other two, who worked for the Tamaya House on Edo Street. Her obi has a shishi motif, the lions that are the guardians of shrines and temples.

Reading from right to left this reads: Tamaya House
and Hanamurasaki

A bijin-ga by the famous Utamaro Kitagawa c1799. It is signed Utamaro hitsu, Utamaro made this. The right hand script tells us it is Osome of the Abura-ya tea-house. She holds a letter, which raises the question is it a much loved letter from an admirer, or a letter she is about to send to a special client. We shall never know, but what we can read in her face is her pleasure. His work has a delicacy and economy of line that enables us still to read a narrative into his image.

This is a nishiki-e, brocade picture, a multicoloured print. The technique of multicolour printing was developed during the 1760s. Harunobu Suzuki popularised the nishiki-e printing technique and used it extensively from 1765 until his death in 1770. Previously printing had been black and white hand coloured after printing. Utamaro used the technique to good effect for the prints from his drawings.

Another Utamaro piece, "Toji san bijin", "Three beauties of the Present Day" c1793. We do not know their names, but despite what appears to be a simplistic drawing, each is a very distinct person different from the others beautifully rendered by a master artist, who uses the nishiki-e print technique with masterful restraint and delicacy. There is a certain ambiguity to the print it is not clear if they are courtesans or geisha. The obis are not visible enough to determine whether they are tied in front or at the back.
The balance and compositional elegance of this print is breath taking; curves of combs and sinuous collar shapes interact and combine to keep interest and move the eye around the image. Even the placement of the title, signature and official stamp add to the whole balance of the picture. The things that are sexy and matter to the Japanese eye are all present; the curve of the neck, without actually seeing it there is the intimation of the nape of the neck with the hair carefully coiffured to accentuate it, the tilt of the head and the gentle grace of these beautiful women.
The photograph from 1917 of a courtesan and her kamuro by a western photographer, whilst informative, it lacks the sensitivity and grace with which the artists of the ukiyo portrayed their subjects. Even the title, "Japanese Prostitutes" reveals the lack of respect and the parsimonious attitude to those they photographed. It only serves to show the strengths of the artists of the Edo period and their ability to look beyond the profession of the courtesans and see their humanity.

THE ORDINARY EVERYDAY AND INTIMATE WORLD OF THE YOSHIWARA

Teahouses were more than just brothels, they were the homes of the yarite, yujo and all those that served the house, only geisha came and went as and when needed. They all lived, worked, ate and slept in the teahouse. There were ordinary everyday chores to be done; cleaning, shopping, cooking and all the other tasks that made the houses ready for their guests. Utamaro captured the everyday chores of the houses in two prints, which can be arranged as a diptych made in the late 1700s. The left hand print shows that children too lived in the teahouses, they were often the children of yujo who became pregnant. They were supported and their children became part of the teahouse system. In these two prints activities like peeling vegetables, tending the charcoal hibachi stove causing ashes to be blown into the eyes of the other girl is all part of the daily life of a teahouse.

A print from Utamaro's series of twelve prints of women's handicrafts c1797-98. Dressing the long hair of both courtesans and geisha required skill and perseverance. There was not just one style but many, by the time de Becker wrote his account of the Yoshiwara in his last revised edition of 1905 he recorded up to sixteen separate styles worn by the courtesans of the district. The styles were dictated partly by the status of the courtesan, the most complex styles being used by the highest ranking oiran and the house traditions. Utamaro shows his skill in handling the subject, the hair passing through the comb, the fall of the hair and the concentration. The hairdresser is not a courtesan, her obi is tied at the back, she is as the print series suggests a specialist in her trade.

Utamaro visits an ordinary domestic situation within a teahouse made c1794-95 Hari-shigoto, needlework, is an example of the ordinary life of those that live and work within the Yoshiwara. This print is a masterpiece of design and craft. Utamaro's drawing made into a nishiki-e woodblock print by a master carver and printer. The detail shows the delicate skill of both Utamaro the artist and the craftsmen who translated his drawing into the final woodblock print. It is the minute details that capture the moment; a needlework box and scissors on the floor, threads, the translucent quality of a sheer material held up to the light and the child playing around a mother as she works. Once more Utamaro's use of line, composition and narrative power are demonstrated with consummate skill. Amédée Ozenfant writing in the late nineteenth century said,

Art is the demonstration that the ordinary is extraordinary.

Utamaro exactly fulfils this statement, the ordinary becomes an aesthetic and beautiful moment in time.

Utamaro was particularly sensitive to the whole Yoshiwara experience. Japan in summer, especially in Edo, now Tokyo, was very hot and humid, Utamaro's image of a courtesan wiping sweat from her cheek is yet another of his portrayals of the more intimate moments in the lives of the courtesans and geisha of the Yoshiwara. "Ase o fuku onna" c 1789 captures the moment beautifully, the strand of hair stuck to her temple and the fact that even the act of wiping sweat from her face can still be a graceful movement. It prompted me to write a haiku.

A bright flower blooms
It glows in the summer heat
Pleasure always calls.

I have tried to be faithful to the Japanese tradition. A flower can be a courtesan; there is a notion that women do not 'sweat' they 'glow' and the profession of the courtesan has to serve the needs of the teahouse clientele. Perhaps an unnecessary explanation, but one which chimes with the way I have tried to elucidate more clearly the wider cultural connections.

Utamaro again capturing one of those moments we are all familiar with, both women and men, checking we are presentable for a special event. Here the courtesan, Takashima Ohira, is shown using two mirrors to check her hair in readiness for the Asakusa Marketing Festival. The festival in question is most likely one of the social events of the autumn, the Tori-no-Ichi festival, when market stalls are set out selling decorated kumade, rakes, to rake in good fortune. The Japanese tori means bird, it can also symbolise the rooster of the eastern zodiac. During the Edo period, as it still is today, the festival would have drawn crowds of people to the market with its bright lights and myriad of colours as they purchased their good luck rakes and visited the Shinto Ootori Shrine and the Buddhist Chokokuji. Returning to Takashima Ohira, she would have been particularly checking that the hair at the nape of her neck was dressed properly to accentuate the very sexy nape of her neck.

The print on the wall is difficult to interpret, but is most likely a popular image of Gomo, the Japanese version of the Taoist worthy Wu Meng, and symbol of virtue. Aged eight he is said to have allowed mosquitos to bite him to spare his parents from their biting when they were asleep in the same room. He is often shown carrying a feather fan and shown killing or driving away a giant snake.

During his artistic life Utamaro produced more than two thousand images of the ukiyo. He recorded every aspect of the quarter. This print, "Lovers in an upstairs room" of 1788 is one of his more erotic images, an example of uta makura, poem of the pillow. He also produced more explicit images of the sex life of the Yoshiwara, euphemistically referred to as 'spring pictures', shunga, 春画. Japanese culture sees the nape of the neck as very sexy and Utamaro is quick to exploit this in this image. Despite the obvious erotic nature of the print there is a certain delicacy and refinement to the image, which uses the patterns of kimonos and the hardly noticeable eye of the man looking directly into the eyes of the courtesan, whose delicate hand caresses the face of her lover. I have not reproduced any 'full on' shunga but for those who may be interested any Google search using 'shunga' as the search word will give access to the hundreds of pillow book prints.

POSTSCRIPT

The ukiyo-e, pictures of the floating world, present a world full of colour and beautifully dressed women, graceful and charming. There are many idealised bijin-ga. However there was a darker side to the Yoshiwara. Although there were great oirans, celebrated in pictures and poems, who teahouse owners went out of their way to look after and cultivate, there were more lowly courtesans who had very different lives. If they fell sick they would be palmed off to a quack doctor. Some died as a result of their poorly informed treatments, or over work, or exhausting illness. If they died and their parents were just too far away to collect their bodies for burial, or poverty prevented them from burying their girls, the teahouse owners, or managers, would deal with the situation. Most courtesans were buried at either Dótetsu or Jôkan-ji cemeteries, these were common burial sites. The slang name for Dótetsu was 'nage-komi', literally 'throwing place'. J.E. de Becker in his book, "The Nightless City" quotes a line from a poem about such burials,

She is hurried to the grave in a pauper's coffin, with but one solitary little maid to mourn her.

"The Nightless City" J.E. de Becker p. 232

This was not the fate of every courtesan. Some were so revered they were still celebrated a long time after their death. J.E. de Becker noted that on the anniversary of the death of a famous oiran, Takao in 1893 in the cemetery of Dótetsu in the Asakusa district,

..a grand religious service was held in this temple and was attended by large crowds of people from the Yoshiwara.
On the grave of Takoa was written

Samu kaze ni
Moroku mo kutsuru
Momiji kana!

Alas! Poor maple leaves
which are crushed and scattered
by cold winds

"The Nightless City" J.E, de Becker p235

Keith Oram