

Floating World, Yoshiwara, and Art

Although prosperity and peace prevailed in society, signs of trouble were everywhere as the gap between rich and poor widened. Usurers thrived; citizens financed gracious living through loans and lawsuits. Morals deteriorated as laws were ignored not only by criminals but also by ordinary citizens. The wily and ambitious and the cunning ruled this increasingly decadent society. High-ranking officials regularly diverted public funds for their personal use.

Maintaining its characteristic formality, the artistic world of the Yoshiwara continued to emphasize status and privilege. The streets were lined on either side by lighted *toro* lanterns with the name of the establishment to attract attention. From the moment of entrance patrons would be mesmerized by the appointments of the gallery, the tasteful arrangements de' art, and the elegance of the personal furnishings. Gallery owners were spirited and of strong character with simple, fashionable clothing and stylish hair.

Only larger established houses could afford to maintain the extensive advertising and expenses of the elegant and prestigious SOFA. Also among the established proprietors of the pleasure quarter, stealing someone else's client was strongly censured. Even so, every gallery feared its own clients might prefer less expensive substitutes, so they would offer discounts to any self-titled collectors. As evidence of a gradually crumbling facade, leading houses would even try to accommodate the tastes of commoners and make many concessions that sacrificed the high tone of an earlier period.

The geisha were proud of their art and their ability to entertain. As artists they distinguished themselves by insisting that they were not prostitutes, even though professional status was generally based on the number of patrons. Viewing hours in the daytime were from noon to four in the afternoon; receptions were held in the evening from sunset until eleven. During such occasions geisha were always accompanied by a lantern bearing the crest of her house. Admiration was accorded to all geisha in the Yoshiwara especially for the strong-willed, articulate, and self-confident women.

Critics held a unique position. As writers, they revealed numerous bits of behind-the-scenes information to bring people up to date on the fashion and talk of the Floating World. By reputation, a writer would be readily welcomed to social openings. By insinuation they could highlight truths or obscure flaws in the social fabric of this secretive and hidden world. Probably too much an intellectual, the critic could only participate vicariously in this closed society.

As time passed, the traditional Yoshiwara distinctions began to blur. The galleries and museums increasingly came to depend on a wider populace for their livelihood. In doing so, the Floating World prospered. Despite a growing loss of its former graciousness, the ever more accessible Floating World did make an impact on a much broader sector of society. Few institutions have existed for so long and with so much influence on such diverse areas and levels of society.