

The erotic imagery of the geisha

Lesley Smith

Curator, Tutbury Castle, Tutbury,
Burton-on-Trent, UK

Correspondence to

Ms Lesley Smith, Tutbury Castle,
Castle Street, Tutbury, Burton-
on-Trent, Staffordshire DE13 9JF,
UK; info@tutburycastle.com

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BACKGROUND

To see a geisha in real life is an unforgettable experience and one I had only recently when I saw a vision of a perfect white and pink doll face crowned with an equally perfect high dressed and shining black coiffure floating along a London street surrounded by admirers. She appeared very tall, balanced as she was on high wooden shoes that caused her to sway gracefully with tiny steps, and around her body was wrapped a gown of pale green and gold. Her beauty was so extraordinary, almost otherworldly, that I cried out with pleasure at the sight of her.

I, along with others, have heard the stories about geishas once being prostitutes, albeit at a high level. This young woman was about as opposite to any sex worker of the Western world that I have ever met, and I have met quite a few over the years, particularly when I was researching the life of 17th century English prostitutes.

The allure of the geisha lies in the mysterious cool air that surrounds them, which is highly erotic and has no place in hot, raw sex. Writers have described geishas not only as feminine icons but also as highly trained actors, able to weave an atmosphere that enables men to escape from the rushed and stressful world to join the geisha in the play of her making, the word for play being *asobi*. The name geisha, when broken down, means a person who is an artist (*gei*, arts) and *sha* (person). They are women who are living works of art, with centuries of culture and tradition behind each and every one of them.

PROSTITUTES AND COURTESANS

Early in the 17th century, marriage for most Japanese, like many families in Europe, was rather a strained experience with arranged marriages, many of which could well have been loveless. It was inappropriate for a high-born woman to give evidence she was enjoying sex as it was purely for the purpose of having children. Men were also expected to

restrain evidence of any sexual pleasure with a spouse despite the achievement of orgasm. As one might expect in such an ordered and controlled society, brothels prospered and so did the prostitutes and courtesans within them. These properties of pleasure were licensed by the government and steps were taken to ensure they were located far from the main town centres so as not to outrage the sensibilities of the families living there. This scenario of pushing sex workers literally to the edge of society with legislative controls can be found in England from as early as the 12th century.

There were ranks within the world of prostitutes, the lowest order being the common *yujo* who were the ordinary sex workers. They were known to have a fashion of trimming their pubic hair into pretty shapes and they learned the art of sexual pleasure for men that included an ability to provide clients with a fake but enthusiastic orgasm: a technique used by women to please men as far back in history as sex itself. These women, who started in their profession when young girls, had some tricks of the trade such as the use of sea slugs around a client's penis to give the sense of a tight, almost virginal vagina. The pleasure streets were filled with eager men and willing suppliers not only of girls but young boy actors too, and a range of aphrodisiacs, some of which unsurprisingly contained material medica such as the lotus flower.

The wealthy were entertained by expensive courtesans in large houses with music, dancing, fantastic food and witty flirting before being whisked away to a private, silk-cushioned chamber whilst the *yojo* offered small and not very private cubicles, which must have been quite a noisy arrangement as there were rows of cubicles with a client and woman in each one during busy times. Prices for sexual services ranged enormously, with some of the most expensive and desirable courtesans taking whole fortunes from individuals ensnared by their beauty and sexual skills.

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GEISHA LIFESTYLE

Geishas started to appear in the 18th century, but they were all men who played the sexual fool as actors to entertain clients in the brothels. In and around the mid-18th century women took up the geisha role as entertainers, but the male geisha did not completely die out and a few can still be found but they are very rare. Geishas were not allowed to sell sexual favours within the brothel areas but were permitted only to entertain clients. This distinct trading line is the confusion about whether geishas were prostitutes or entertainers. The answer is entertainers, but away from the trade-controlled areas no doubt some geishas sold sexual favours.

Geishas gradually became the most desirable women in town, becoming icons with a highly stylised form of dress, hair and make-up, fully ritualised, and the girls had younger trainee geishas as maids. They became, in some cases, the second wife; a concubine to a rich and powerful man tucked away in a beautiful house and garden or stylish apartment for her man to visit and enjoy her company, sometimes for the rest of their lives. He would pay for her dance and music classes, all her clothes, food and an annual income to spend as she chose. The young girls were usually sold by her family to the geisha house and later the rich man would pay for her, handsomely. The geisha house would have spent a great deal of time and effort bringing her up to geisha standard with rigorous rules and systems rather like an expensive finishing school nowadays.

CONCLUSION

In these days of female emancipation, for most of the world at least, the time of the geisha may seem to be over but they are still being trained in the art of being

a celebrity, for that is what they are now. White oval face, tiny bare fishtail of bare skin at the back of the neck as a promise of warm flesh, tiny bright red rosebud mouth, black eyebrows and eyeliner, stylised hair arrangements and beautiful silk clothes of a design from centuries past. Geishas are every bit as exotic and erotic as they ever were.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lesley Smith is currently a postgraduate student in the Centre for the History of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, where she is developing a PhD in obstetrics and gynaecology in early modern Britain. She holds an honorary degree for 'services to history'. She makes 200–300 public appearances a year and also works as a TV historian in the UK and abroad including the USA. Lesley is also Curator of Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire and is a member of the Society of Apothecaries of London and the Society of Medical Writers. She has recently been appointed a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

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FURTHER READING

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