The Somber Scenes of the Yoshiwara: Group 7

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Through images of the Yoshiwara during the Edo period, the glamor of the pleasure district tended to prevail as the primary depiction. However, this romanticized version of the Yoshiwara tends to forget the major suffering at the time that was intrinsic to living in the district. Through our exhibition, *The Somber Scenes of the Yoshiwara,* we work together to illustrate the darker aspects of the Yoshiwara through various paintings and woodblock prints.

One of the major aspects of the Yoshiwara, the Kabuki theatre, consistently held onto stories of tragic love and double suicides as means of entertainment for theatre-goers. This topic is displayed in a large range of woodblock prints, often showing famous real and fictitious couples of different social ranks on their journey to their own demise.

These highly romanticized stories of tragic lovers had imagery that the common citizen (chonin) in Japan during the Edo period craved for. Under the stifling Neo-Confucious shogunates rule, chonin yearned for different avenues for their pleasure and entertainment consumption. The Edo period was a time of immense change not only politically but in what chonin and the newly rising merchant classes' views on fashion and values were. The depictions of shinju (double suicide) became a core source of entertainment as well as a source on personal beliefs in love. Shinju's rise in popularity in the entertainment districts led to an uptick in actual double suicides and a shift in values which the shogunate did not approve of. This led to depictions of shinju being highly regulated and monitored.

Oftentimes, women were depicted with an idealized version coming from a customer's point of view, when in fact that was far from matching up with the reality of the Yoshiwara district. Many of the women in the Yoshiwara found themselves being sold into that life often by their parents, some at a very young age. They were recruited by brothels and sold by their families, who were looking to make some form of income or pay off debts from their poverty life-style. Once in the Yoshiwara there was really no way out, they worked with no form of payment until they served their years or until death took them away. While many were introduced to learning fine arts and etiquette, only a handful got such privileges (oftentimes they were high-ranking). Though no one really forced them into physical abuse to do such things, they were mentally taught that this is the only way to live through life in Yoshiwara and to uphold their families honor. Their only weapon being their appeal to men and beauty.å Living in poor conditions and a continuous cycle of exhausting work, these women suffered malnourishment and diseases that overtook their bodies. Yet, these women suffered in silence without asking for help, to maintain the beautiful image they were made to uphold. If a courtesan was found dead, their body would be wrapped in straw matting and left outside the Jokan-Ji temple. These women were only ever introduced to serving others, first their fathers who sold them into the Yoshiwara, then the men who paid to see them.

These stories are often yet romanticized and created for theatrical purposes, which leaves the audience wondering what the actual stories are based off of. In which can only be said that these records are wiped out by none other than constant fire outbreaks at the time. The greatest record breaking fire which promptly pushed the government to create the Shin-Yoshiwara was due to the incident called “The Great Meireki Fire” or also known as “Furisode Incident”. This disaster left the city to be 60-70% burnt down with casualties of around 100,000 people in the span of 3 days. Though the reason for the incident is still unknown today, and many legends state that it was due to a priest trying to burn a cursed kimono (hence the name “Furisode Incident”), the grim reality of the fire catastrophically destroying the city is still recognized and remembered today. With the Yoshiwara district having only one entrance/exit, its destruction serves to show how much of the dark reality is lost forever in the embers of the Meireki Fire as well as the many young girls and women’s lives becoming cloaked under the dark grueling past of the Yoshiwara.