

Beauty and Desire 1998  
In Edo Period Japan

This is the title of an exhibition currently showing at the National Gallery of Australia, which is on until 9<sup>th</sup> August. This exhibition explores life in the Edo period (1600-1868) in Edo (what is now Tokyo) and of interest to sex workers are the prints, paintings and costumes associated with the pleasure district (or red light area), Yoshiwara. It was common practice in Japan to establish licensed brothels in specific red light areas.

In this exhibition we see images of the physical environment of Yoshiwara as well as get an insight into the lives of the sex workers at the time.

Yoshiwara was enclosed within walls, with a central boulevard and only one entrance gate which was guarded and closed at night, seen in *Dawn in the Licensed Quarters* by Utawaga Hiroshige.

The sex workers ranged from high class courtesans to street workers with a pronounced hierarchy and prices to match. We see images of a high class courtesan with two children who are her apprentices. In Edo, it was common for poor people in rural areas to sell their daughters to a brothel. The girls were contracted to work in the bordello for a fixed period (generally ten years) and the parents would receive regular money. These girls would be apprenticed to high ranking courtesans at the age of seven, and taught the customs of Yoshiwara including how to sing, dance and perform the Japanese tea ceremony. At the age of fourteen they became sex workers and to signify this would have their teeth blackened with dye. The close relationship between the courtesan and her apprentices is depicted in a print entitled *Kaomachi of Tama-ya* by Utawaga Kunisada I.

We see images of street workers, dressed very differently to the high class courtesans and carrying a bamboo mat which they would throw on the ground and lay down with their clients on it.

Overall the exhibition provides a fascinating insight into the history of our profession in a nearby country. I highly recommend going to see this exhibition if you happen to be in Canberra. I am not sure whether the exhibition is traveling anywhere else, but if it comes to a venue near you- Don't miss it.

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