

Asakusa and the Sumida River

The Sumida River is a 27-kilometer-long waterway that runs through Tokyo, emptying into Tokyo Bay. Its path follows the original course of the Arakawa River, which runs from neighboring Saitama Prefecture. In the early twentieth century, a canal was built diverting the main flow of the Arakawa to prevent flooding, and in 1965 the smaller waterway was designated the Sumida River. Taito Ward, where Asakusa is located, is one of six wards through which this river flows. The Sumida River played an essential role in the development and history of Asakusa, in establishing the neighborhood as the spiritual center of Edo (present-day Tokyo) and making it an important hub of regional commerce. The river has become a symbol of home for the residents of Asakusa.

Long ago Asakusa was little more than a small village, and the river—then referred to as Asakusa Lagoon, or the Miyato River—was a bountiful fishing site. According to legend, in 628 two fishermen, brothers Hinokuma no Hamanari and Hinokuma no Takenari hauled their fishing nets out of the river and found a golden statue of the bodhisattva Kannon, the Buddhist deity of compassion. Together with a wise man in the village named Haji no Nakatomo, they established Sensoji Temple, where they enshrined the statue.

When the first shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, moved the capital of Japan to Edo during the Edo period (1603–1867), Asakusa began to develop rapidly. The river was an essential shipping lane for lumber that was much needed for construction. Asakusa was a natural gateway to Edo, and many people would enter the city by boat via this route. Increased traffic meant lots of customers for enterprising local residents, which led to the establishment of Sensoji's Nakamise shopping street. Many of the foodstuffs sold there—particularly snacks and confections made from sweet potatoes from Kawagoe, to the northwest in what is now Saitama Prefecture—were also brought into the city via the river. Asakusa developed as an entertainment district as well, with theaters, restaurants, and the geisha houses of the Yoshiwara red-light district. Patrons used the river as a discreet means of entry to enjoy the area's nightlife.

The river running next to Asakusa also had an important influence on arts through the years. Not only has it been immortalized in woodblock prints by masters like Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), but it was also closely associated with a distinct type of regional pottery, Imado-yaki. The river appears in both kabuki and noh plays, one of which inspired *Curlew River*, an opera written by

British composer Benjamin Britten (1913–1976).

The waterway still plays an important role in Asakusa's art and cultural events in the present day. The annual Sumida Fireworks Festival is one of Tokyo's biggest events, as is the Sumida River Toro Nagashi, an event in August when candle-lit paper lanterns with personalized prayers are sent floating downstream. In early spring, numerous cherry trees along both sides of the river come into blossom, and in May, colorful *koi nobori* carp streamers flutter in the wind. Throughout the year, water taxis and pleasure cruises are available for hire, passing under many of the 26 bridges that span the river and offering views of some of the city's notable architectural sights, such as Tokyo Skytree.