

Yoshiwara District

In the city of Edo, Yoshiwara was the center of nightlife, fashion, and entertainment arts. The Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867) restricted prostitution to a single designated red-light district in each major city. In Kyoto there was Shimabara and in Osaka there was Shinmachi, and in Edo, there was Yoshiwara.

Formerly located in Nihonbashi, the original Yoshiwara burned down in 1657 during the Great Meireki Fire. The quarter was relocated to Oku Asakusa, where it played an important role in the prosperous development of the district as a whole, and helped establish Asakusa as the center of entertainment in Edo. Visitors would travel to Asakusa to pay their respects at Sensoji Temple during the day, and in the evening, they would enjoy the company of the Yoshiwara courtesans (*oiran*), whose beauty has been immortalized in ukiyo-e woodblock prints and kabuki plays, and lives on in events like Oku Asakusa's Edo Yoshiwara Oiran Dochu.

Like geisha, who would also entertain customers in Yoshiwara (though they were strictly prohibited from engaging in prostitution), the *oiran* were often elaborately dressed and made up, and were expected to be skillful entertainers. Although it was a time when the social classes were very strictly defined, people of all walks of life, from humble merchants to high-ranking samurai, could enjoy themselves equally in Yoshiwara.

Although very little physical evidence of the district remains, Yoshiwara's courtesans had a huge cultural impact on arts like kabuki, ukiyo-e, music, and kimono-making. From the clothing they wore to their distinct style of hair and makeup, and even their manner of speech, the *oiran* were the heart and soul of Yoshiwara.