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GEISHA: BEYOND THE PAINTED SMILE

June 25-September 26, 2004

Asian Art Museum Presents a Rare and Intimate View of Geisha—One of the Most Compelling but Misunderstood Icons of Japan.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, MAY, 2003—Distinguished by their striking white makeup, elaborate hairstyles and exquisite examples of traditional kimono, geisha have been a powerfully evocative icon of Japan and a source of fascination for people around the world since the late nineteenth century. Yet their role as entertainers and artists has been largely misperceived through the lens of Western culture. From June 25 through September 26, 2004, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco offers an intimate look at the exclusive world of geisha culture while addressing cultural perceptions of this uniquely Japanese tradition in the special exhibition *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile*. Featuring some 130 insightful artworks—including paintings, hanging scrolls, woodblock prints, garments, musical instruments, ceramics, contemporary photographs and video installations—the exhibition takes museum visitors on a journey from the early roots of geisha culture to the present-day teahouses where geisha perform.

“Geisha have been a source of fascination and fantasy for nearly 250 years, but they have also been misunderstood and misrepresented,” says Emily Sano, director of the Asian Art Museum. “This exhibition presents the story of the emergence and status of these highly trained women—both past and present—while separating fact from fiction. It is our aim to provide museum visitors the opportunity to see geisha not only as cultural icons of beauty and allure, but also as real women of tremendous strength, talents, and dedication.”

Organized by Andrew Maske, the Peabody Essex Museum’s Curator of Japanese Art, *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile* is accompanied by a major publication. Related public programs, including lectures, gallery talks, tea ceremonies, and music performances, will be held in conjunction with the exhibition from June through September. The exhibition is on view at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA, from February 14 through May 9, 2004.

Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile is on view in the museum's Hambrecht and Osher Galleries, located on the first floor. The works are presented generally in chronological order, providing a narrative that offers an up-close look at the origin of geisha, their artistic accomplishments, and their lifestyles—stretching back to the 18th century—while dispelling common misperceptions. The exhibition explores several key themes, including cultural perceptions of geisha and notions of exoticism, as well as feminism; the reality of geisha culture—from the emergence of geisha as artist and entertainer to the aesthetics of the profession; and the day-to-day lives and work of contemporary geisha in Japan today.

A highlight of the Asian Art Museum's presentation of *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile* is a selection of kimono once owned by one of the most famous geishas of 20th century Japan, Ichimaru (1906-1997). Known for her exceptional singing voice, Ichimaru left geishahood to pursue an illustrious career as a full-time recording artist. Even as a superstar diva, she continued to perform in full geisha regalia. The kimono—borrowed from the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria—reflect a sampling of Ichimaru's singular geisha-style and taste over several decades.

The San Francisco staging of the exhibition will also include objects from the museum's collection of Japanese art, as well as private Bay Area collections. Together, these objects make up a captivating exhibition exploring one of the most compelling yet misunderstood icons of Japanese culture.

In short, geisha are artists who dedicate themselves to the highest standards of performance in traditional singing, dancing and instrumental music, and undergo years of rigorous formal training before making their debuts. They typically perform in small, intimate settings, providing entertainment that goes beyond the mere stage show to encompass exquisite performance, masterful conversation, and game playing.

Geisha emerged as artists and entertainers during Japan's Edo period (1603–1868), which saw the development of cities and the rise of a wealthy merchant class that channeled its wealth into luxuries of city life that included theater, restaurants, clothing, and the “pleasure quarters”. These quarters offered freedoms not found in the outside world—romance, elegance, and spontaneity, and a place where money, charm and wit prevailed. This retreat into fantasy offered access to brothels, but men also went there to eat, drink, listen to music, write poetry, enjoy entertainment, and socialize. Here, geisha worked alongside prostitutes and courtesans—all legal forms of entertainment that were subject to regulation by the government. In the 1600s, the first geisha were men who provided music, comic relief, and all-around good company at parties. Women entered the arena in the mid-1700s, and by 1780, female geisha outnumbered males in this profession.

Unfamiliarity with Japan's customs and traditions invariably led to confusion about the geisha profession, and many conflated all Japanese women to be geisha. More pointedly, westerners confused geisha with prostitutes or courtesans. While some westerners may have understood geisha's role as an

entertainer, they were more specifically thought of as entertainers of men, and therefore deemed wanton and risqué. Many of the objects in the exhibition help clarify the true nature of geisha by helping to answer some fundamental questions: How can one tell if a woman is a geisha? What are the attributes of a classic geisha? What props and settings distinguish a geisha? When is a geisha not a geisha? What are the elements that make up an enduring geisha style?

One of the exhibition's first set of works, *Three Beauties and Their Attendants*, a series of three colorful Edo period (1615–1868) hanging scrolls by Hosoda Eishi (1756–1829), helps illustrate the different attributes that distinguish geisha among courtesans and wealthy maidens. To the untrained eye, the woman in the paintings appear to be similar in dress and comportment, but a closer look reveals important differences: The courtesan has a more elaborate hairstyle; the hairstyles of the geisha and the maiden are similar, but the geisha wears a robe with shorter sleeves, which would have been more practical for her work.

Today geisha are women who throughout their lives continue to advance their artistic proficiency. After making their debuts, geisha continue to spend many of their daytime hours practicing musical instruments, dancing, or singing. Appearance in annual or semi-annual stage shows and other events required still further rehearsal. Numerous prints and paintings in the exhibition show geisha performing in teahouses and onstage for larger audiences by invitation. In addition, the exhibition features musical instruments used by geisha, including drums, flutes, and especially the three-stringed *shamisen*.

The venues in which geisha typically perform—teahouses (*o-chaya*) or the traditional restaurant (*ry_te*)—have changed little over the past one hundred years. Such locales follow a rule of “no first-time customers” that, combined with the high cost of geisha entertainment, make the world of geisha seem inaccessible and prohibitive. At the small gatherings held at these venues, geisha provide their clients with an atmospheric evening of banter and fun, pairing their talents in traditional dance and music with conversation, flirtation, and drinking games. The exhibition offers a contemporary glimpse at what an evening of entertainment entails with a video, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum, which follows a man as he takes his friend for an evening of geisha entertainment in the Gion district of Kyoto.

The alluring aesthetic sense of *iki*—akin to the French word *chic*—is maintained through a geisha's dress and manners, in addition to her artistic pursuits. Small-hand-gestures in dance or the elegant manner of pouring sake are as important to a geisha as the selection of a kimono to suit the occasion. Geisha and *maiko* (a geisha apprentice) wear traditional silk kimono, *geta* (high wooden clogs), and white *tabi* (socks), and adorn their sculpted wigs with stunning accessories. They wear only the highest quality kimonos, play the finest musical instruments, and travel first class wherever they go—a matter of professional status rather than personal luxury. On view in the exhibition are exquisite garments worn by Ichimaru and other geisha, including splendid silk kimonos, obi sashes, hair adornments, as well

as woodblock prints, photographs, and a video that shows the intricate process of makeup application, hair preparation and dressing.

Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile includes imagery of the “exotic geisha”—works that convey the various perceptions of geisha as seen through the eyes of both westerners and Japanese people. In the nineteenth century, images of geisha were presented by European, American and Japanese artists in fine art through new media, including woodblock prints, decorated porcelains, and hand-tinted photographs. In reality, not all of these works depict geisha authentically, yet for those who only knew Japan through travelogues and art, they sparked the imagination as to what geisha entertainment was. To help illustrate the transference of Western perceptions of geisha, the Asian Art Museum’s presentation also includes material related to Giacomo Puccini’s popular opera *Madame Butterfly* (marking its 100th anniversary in 2004), the tale of *Ciao-Ciao San* and her tragic love affair with an American sailor.

The exhibition features depictions of “exotically” dressed and coiffed Japanese women in photographs, paintings, ceramics, and even movie ephemera from the 1960s—works that connote perceptions of geisha. Works include ceramics with images of geisha created in Japan in the 1950s for the European and American markets, and photographs of courtesans that have been confused for geisha. Dated notions of Japanese culture from as late as the 1960s are also on display, including authentic lobby cards for *The Barbarian and The Geisha*, a film about an American diplomat in Japan (played by John Wayne) and a geisha who becomes his love interest; and a poster for *My Geisha*, which casts Shirley MacLaine as an actress who masquerades as a geisha to land a part in a film.

The last section of the exhibition takes a behind the scenes look at geisha in the contemporary setting. A poetic series of photographs by Yoko Yamamoto, an artist who spent nearly twenty years photographing in the main geisha districts of Tokyo, captures seldom seen aspects of the culture. A highlight of the series *Iki (Chic) Marichiyo, 86, May 31, 1994, Shinbashi*, captures an honest, yet poignant behind-the-scenes moment of the geisha Marichiyo (age eighty-six), perhaps the most admired geisha dancer of the twentieth century, as she prepares for a performance. This section of the exhibition also includes a video installation featuring a contemporary geisha talking about her role in today’s modern cultural landscape. This section aims to leave a lasting impression of new iconic imagery of the contemporary geisha.

Media Preview

A media preview for *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile* will be held on Wednesday, June 23, 2004, from 9:30 AM to 1:00 PM, with a gallery walk-through at 11:00 AM led by Dr. Yoko Woodson, the Asian Art Museum’s curator of Japanese art. Complimentary refreshments will be served. Please RSVP to pr@asianart.org or call (415) 581-3712.

This exhibition was developed by the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. Its presentation at the Asian Art Museum is made possible by support from the Henri and Tomoye Takahashi Foundation, Mrs. Jesse Lawrence Carr, and Mr. and Mrs. Joseph M. Fee, Jr. Media sponsors include ABC7 KGO-TV, KGO-AM 810, San Francisco Chronicle, and SFGate.

About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding nearly 15,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main library building by renowned architect Gae Aulenti (designer of Paris's Musée d'Orsay) into a showcase for the museum's acclaimed collection and exhibitions.

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500, or www.asianart.org.
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102.
- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, with extended hours until 9:00 pm every Thursday.
- **Admission:** \$10 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$6 for youths 12–17, and free for children under 12. Thursday evenings after 5 p.m. admission is just \$5 for all visitors except those under 12 and members, who are always free.
- **Group Admission Fees:** \$8.00 for adults, \$6.00 for seniors, \$5.00 for youths age 12 to 17 and college students with ID, free for AAM members and children under 12:
Private Guided Group Tour Schedule
Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday: 9:30 am, 11:30 am and 3:00 pm
Thursday: 9:30 am, 11:30 am, 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm
Private Guided Group Tour Fee (in addition to admission fees)
\$100 per docent/guide, per group of up to 20 people
Group visit information: e-mail groupvisits@asianart.org or call (415) 581-3624
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.

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