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Geisha in Japan

Exploring the “Flower and Willow World”

When a geisha enters a room she doesn't simply walk in, she bows slowly and enters with a stooped shuffle. Even if you can't see her white-painted face and ruby-red lips, you will know she has arrived by the rustling of her heavy brocade kimono (full-length robe) and the tiny, fluttering steps she takes. Far from the Western misconception, geisha are not submissive prostitutes; they are hostesses who spend a lifetime perfecting the art of hospitality, conversation, dance, and song.

The word geisha comes from two kanji: gei meaning “art” and sha which is translated “doer.” Today, these ‘doers of art’ still live in sisterhoods within the traditional okiya houses of the five geisha districts of Kyoto; the most exclusive of which are known as “karyukai”—‘flower and willow world.’ Geisha begin their study of music and dance when they are very young and continue to perfect their arts throughout their lives. Each dance they perform tells a story, and only a connoisseur of the art can fully understand the subtle movements.

Perhaps the most well-known art form a geisha performs is that of the ‘tea ceremony.’ This highly prescribed ritual is as ancient as it is precise—it is so scripted that if two geisha were to perform it side-by-side their movements would be perfectly in sync. Ochaya, or tea houses, employ geisha to host the highly-civilized events; and a geisha's time is paid for by a senkodai, an ‘incense stick fee’ that is determined by measuring the time it takes a stick of incense to burn.

Geisha always wear kimono, but the maiko, or apprentice geisha, are distinguished by their highly colorful kimono and extravagant obi. These knotted belt-like designs are actually yards of heavy silk fabric that contribute to the exotic stooped balance for which geisha are known. About town, geisha are spotted wearing raised wooden clogs called geta, and white base makeup that covers the face, neck and chest with just a couple of untouched areas at the nape of the neck that highlight what culturally is considered to be an erotic area. It is thought that the thick white makeup in combination with a thin line of skin that is left bared around the hairline give the illusion that a geisha walks through the ‘flower and willow world’ peering out from behind a mask.

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Topics: Japan



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