

Art in the Garden

Kabuki: A Revolution in Color and Design

Summer 2017



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For those who associate Japanese aesthetics with the subtle and understated *wabi* taste of the worlds of Zen and the tea ceremony, the bold designs and brilliant colors of the world of *Kabuki* may come as a surprise. The vibrant *shitamachi* downtown culture that arose in the 17th century from the denizens of the “floating world” of Edo (now Tokyo) shatters all such illusions.

The word Kabuki 歌舞伎 refers to the lively song and dance performances that brought to life the exuberant culture of languid, kimono-clad courtesans and their swaggering urbane companions exquisitely depicted in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints.

The Kabuki stage provided an exciting new form of entertainment with music and dance performed by famous actors, who were (and continue to be) the wildly popular celebrities of their day. The brilliantly hand-dyed and lavishly embroidered silk costumes exploded on stage in a riot of color, creating a revolution in the world of color and design, which is still celebrated internationally.

Both the actors and the courtesans that inhabited the entertainment quarter became the fashionistas of their day, providing a coveted departure from the more reserved attire of the samurai and upper classes. The culture of the merchant class among whom this world arose reflected urban life in the streets of Edo, filled with romantic adventures and life and death battles between good and evil depicted in the lively and brilliant performing art of Kabuki.

Kabuki is said to have begun in 1603 when a daring young woman named Izumo no Okuni danced for the townspeople along the dry riverbeds of Kyoto. The popular dance-drama entertainment she started drew the attention of the Tokugawa Shogunate who soon issued a ban against female performers to “protect the public morality,” resulting in the all-male performances of both male and female roles that continues to the present day.

The new urban culture that developed around Kabuki fostered exciting new directions in the design of textiles, painting, and printmaking. This

included the creation of the “playbills” and posters we have come to know as *ukiyo-e*, pictures of the “floating world” depicting life among the actors and courtesans who inhabited the geisha quarters of both cities.

Kabuki continues to flourish today at the Kabukiza Theater in Tokyo. The theater was re-designed in 2013 by Kengo Kuma by commission of the Shochiku Company Ltd., whose costume master Masao Tsuji is guest curator of this exhibition, courtesy Shochiku Costume Company, Ltd.

PAVILION GALLERY

Seven authentic costumes from the Kabuki plays *Shibaraku* and *Sukeroku Yukari no Edo Zakura* are on view in the Pavilion Gallery.

Sukeroku is named after the dashing rogue who visits the Yoshiwara brothel district in old Edo in search of a long-lost and treasured sword. His iconic costume and make-up have become a symbol of the swashbuckling spirit and the devil-may-care flavor of life in the entertainment quarter. *Sukeroku* is in love with the beautiful courtesan *Agemaki*, whose

costumes are without a doubt among the most stunning in the Kabuki repertoire. *Agemaki* holds the secret to the location of a sword that *Sukeroku* is on a mission to find, and the story unfolds over two hours of colorful performance.

Shibaraku is the ultimate tale of the struggle between good and evil—a plot not unfamiliar to all cultures throughout history. The ruthless Kiyohara Takehira captures and threatens to kill the innocent unless they join forces with him. Just when all appears to be lost, a thundering voice comes from behind the audience and shouts “*Shibaraku!*”, which means “Wait!”, and *Kamakura Gongoro* appears in his spectacular costume of chestnut brown emblazoned with bold concentric squares of white, which represents the crest of the Ichikawa Danjuro family of actors for whom the play was created.

TANABE GALLERY

A selection of fine 19th century *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints from the collection of Irwin Lavenberg is on view in the Tanabe Gallery to provide a context in which to understand the costumes in the exhibition.



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📷 All event photos by Jonathan Ley

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