During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the city of Edo, now Tokyo, was emerging as a leading cultural center, with the invention of an abundance of new popular art forms and genres which were to become fashionable in Japan. The inspirations for these innovative art forms was Yoshiwara, a small walled city north of Edo, devoted to the pursuit of pleasure, where some 3,000 to 4,000 women were trained in the arts of music, poetry, tea ceremonies, and other worldly pleasures. An expansive body of literary, visual, and theoretical artworks developed and became widely popular.

Yet such “low Edo culture” has been largely ignored in the scholarly investigations of the period, according to Sumie Jones, IU professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures and of Comparative Literature. The goal of Sexuality and Edo Culture 1750-1850, a conference held on the Bloomington campus from August 17-20, was to correct this unbalanced image and to explore the importance of sexuality in Edo culture in terms of the issues, themes, and styles of that period. The four-day international conference was attended by scholars from Europe, Japan, and the United States. Conference sponsors included the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Japan Foundation.

“It is telling that in the new genres of Edo literature and forms of Edo art, the beauty and glory of the city were represented not by the shogun’s palace, but by the two ‘notorious places,’ the theater and the pleasure quarters,” said Jones, chair and conference organizer. Other IU participants and presenters were George Wilson, Director of the East Asian Studies Center, and Michael Robinson of East Asian Languages and Cultures. The keynote speaker at the conference was Howard Hibbett of Harvard University, speaking on Edo sexual humor. At a dinner hosted by Dean for International Programs Patrick O’Meara, participants were entertained by popular Edo songs, performed by Nishimatsu Fuei, accompanying herself on the shamisen.

Papers were presented from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, dealing with the topics of gender, humor, textiles, advertising, and kabuki theater, against the background of the pervasiveness of sexuality in Edo society. Three campus art exhibitions were held in conjunction with the conference. Two, featuring some sexually explicit works, were only open to conference registrants. Co-curators for these were Nan Brewer, of the IU Art Museum, and Todd Smith of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction. The third, a more discreet exhibit titled “Erotic Art of Ukiyo-e,” is open to the public at the IU Art Museum and features a collection of 20 Japanese color woodblock prints and painted scrolls depicting Ukiyo-e, the idealized “floating world” subculture of lavishly clothed courtesans. The exhibit runs through December 17, 1995.

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