

# *From Geisha to Diva* The Kimono of Ichimaru

Organized and circulated by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Curated by Barry Till, Curator Emeritus of Asian Art.



Kobayakawa Kiyoshi, *The Geisha, Ichimaru*, 1933, block print.

**Looking Closer** A free gallery guide to get you started

## Introduction

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*From Geisha to Diva* aims to reveal the complexities of geisha and the depth of the role they played within Japanese society. The word geisha is made up of two characters, *gei* (芸) means 'art' or 'accomplished' and *sha* (者) meaning 'person' or 'doer.' Therefore, it can be translated as 'accomplished person' or 'person who lives by the arts.'



The fascinating life of Ichimaru (1906-1997), one of the most famous geishas of the 20th century, is told through this collection of her magnificent kimono and personal effects. Born into a large family in Gifu Prefecture, Ichimaru had to leave home and work as a low-rank geisha or *oshaku*-waitress (one who serves sake) at a hot spring spa in Nagano. One day, Ichimaru was asked to sing a specific song by a customer. Embarrassed by not being able to perform the song, she decided to leave for Tokyo and study the songs of the geisha. At the age of 19, she was accepted into a geisha house in Asakusa called *Ichimatsu-ya*. Determined to make herself stand out from other geisha, she studied singing and shamisen under the famous artist-teacher Enchiga Kiyomoto.

Ichimaru soon became known for her "nightingale-like" singing voice and was asked to perform in high-class restaurants and teahouses in various geisha districts. Discovered by a recording company in 1927, Ichimaru left geisha-hood to pursue an illustrious career as a recording artist, but even as a diva, she continued to perform in full geisha regalia. Combining her experience as a geisha with an extraordinary talent as a vocalist and musician, she became a unique figure in the social history of modern Japan.

*From Geisha to Diva* is a travelling exhibition organized by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, British Columbia with the assistance of the Department of Canadian Heritage, Museum Assistance Program.

## Terminology

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**Geisha:** Japanese women who entertain through performing ancient traditions of art, dance and singing. Geishas are best known for their distinctive white makeup and their elaborate kimono.

**Kimono:** a traditional Japanese, T-shaped garment that is worn by wrapping the left side over the right. It is usually worn with an obi belt, alongside a number of other accessories.

**Obi:** a broad sash worn around the waist of a Japanese kimono.

**Samisen:** a traditional Japanese three-stringed instrument that is played with a large pick.

**Woodblock Print:** a technique for printing text, images or patterns that is used widely throughout East Asia. The most popular style of Japanese woodblock prints is Ukiyo-e.

## Questions to consider

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Hasegawa Sadanobu III, *Summer*, 1950, print

- Consider the pose of the Geisha featured in this print, what does her facial expression and body language communicate to you?
- How many layers do you think were printed to create this woodblock print?
- Examine the foreground and background of this woodblock print. What visual details do you notice?

Unknown, Kimono with Branch Pattern and Embroidery, kimono

- Examine the kimono and the detailed embroidery patterns. How long do you think it took the artist to embroider this?
- Consider the colours featured on this kimono. What feelings or emotions do you associate with the colours you see?
- Compare this kimono to the others in the exhibition. What is similar and what is different about them?





Unknown, *Embroidered Silk and Bamboo Fan of Geisha Ichimaru*, fan

- What purpose do you think this fan would be used for by Geisha Ichimaru?
- Compare the embroidery on this fan to the embroidery featured on the kimonos in the exhibition. What is similar and what is different?
- How do you think this fan would be utilized during a dance or performance by a geisha?

Keigetsu Kikuchi, *Portrait of a Beauty*, print

- Examine the geisha featured in the print *Portrait of a Beauty*. What does her style of dress (clothing, hair, makeup) express about standards of beauty for geisha.
- Consider the pose of the Geisha featured in this print, what does her facial expression and body language communicate to you?
- Take note of the intricate hairstyle the geisha in the print is wearing. Can you find the wig, hairpins and combs featured through the exhibition?



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**Thank you for visiting the Gallery today.**

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