



The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives

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Courtesans, *hetaeras*, *tawaif-s*, *ji-s*--these women have exchanged artistic graces, elevated conversation, and sexual favors with male patrons throughout history and around the world. Of a different world than common prostitutes, courtesans deal in artistic and intellectual pleasures in ways that are wholly interdependent with their commerce in sex. In pre-colonial India, courtesans cultivated a wide variety of artistic skills, including magic, music, and chemistry. In Ming dynasty China, courtesans communicated with their patrons through poetry and music. Yet because these cultural practices have existed primarily outside our present-day canons of art and have often occurred through oral transmission, courtesans' arts have vanished almost without trace.

The Courtesan's Arts delves into this hidden legacy, unveiling the artistic practices and cultural production of courtesan cultures with a sideways glance at the partly-related geisha. Balancing theoretical and empirical research, this interdisciplinary collection is the first of its kind to explore courtesan cultures through diverse case studies--the Edo period and modern Japan, 20th-century Korea, Ming dynasty China, ancient Greece, early modern Italy, and India, past and present. Each essay puts forward new perspectives on how the arts have figured in the courtesan's survival or demise.

Though performative and often flamboyant, courtesans have been enigmatic and elusive to their beholders--including scholars. They have shaped cultures through art, yet their arts, often intangible, have all but faded from view. Often courtesans have hovered in the crevices of space, time, and practice--between gifts and money, courts and cities, feminine allure and masculine power, as substitutes for wives but keepers of culture. Reproductively irrelevant, they have tended to be ambiguous figures, thriving on social distinction while operating outside official familial relations. They have symbolized desirability and sophistication yet often been reviled as decadent.

The Courtesan's Arts shows that while courtesans cultures have appeared regularly in various times and places, they are universal neither as a phenomenon nor as a type. To the contrary, when they do crop up, wide variations exist. What binds together courtesans and their arts in the present-day post-industrialized world of global services and commodities is their fragility. Once vital to cultures of leisure and pleasure, courtesans are now largely forgotten, transformed into national icons or historical curiosities, or reduced to prostitution.



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