

## Our Special Guides for Foreign Dignitaries Delve a Little Deeper into Japan's Attractions!

### *Gion Kagai Art Museum*

#### *Awesome Beauty: The Culture of a Geiko-Maiko Entertainment District*



The overwhelming beauty captivates you in an instant. Dressed in kimono, obi, footwear, and other items of clothing that look as though they should be exhibited in a museum as the essence of art, the female entertainers display an elegant and dignified demeanor, right through to their fingertips, that is the fruit of relentless effort and daily practice. This deportment and way of speaking unique to Kyoto not only flows in the DNA of the Japanese people but also no doubt strikes a chord in the hearts of visitors from overseas as well.

Previously it was not so easy to come into contact with this art and beauty, but in May 2024 the Gion Kagai Art Museum opened in the Gion Kobu district of Kyoto to enable visitors to experience a tradition that has continued since the Edo period (1603–1868). The museum is operated by an executive committee consisting of, among others, representatives from Yasaka Nyokoba Gakuen, a school for *geiko* (or *geigi*) female entertainers and *maiko* (apprentice female entertainers). It displays the world of geiko and maiko and offers options to watch Kyoto dance and take a commemorative photo with geiko and maiko. The museum faces the Chisen Water Garden, which was built in 1913, and is housed inside the Yasaka Club building, a nationally designated tangible cultural property. It is also adjacent to the Gion Kobu Kaburenjo Theater, another nationally designated tangible cultural property that was also completed in 1913. This unique architectural style is another highlight adding to the ambience of the Gion area. The museum has excellent facilities, including a shop and café.

I recently visited the Gion Kagai Art Museum and spoke with Mr. Yasunari Kikuma, the head of planning there. The purpose of the museum, he told me, was to convey information to visitors to deepen their correct understanding of geiko and maiko. For example, he said, many foreigners still call them “geisha,” but in Kyoto they should be called “geiko” and “maiko.” The museum seeks to properly transmit the artistic culture of Gion to society. Mr. Kikuma added that they want to show the 15,000 sightseers who visit Gion Hanamikoji street every day that Gion culture is being cherished. Since the museum’s opening, it has been visited by people from around 90 countries, so it is helping to transmit Gion’s artistic culture to the world. Furthermore, Mr. Kikuma said that, rather than limiting it to history, they would continue efforts to link geiko and maiko culture to the future too.



Inside the museum, together with easy-to-understand introductory panels, there are exhibits on the arts, culture, and lives of geiko and maiko. By scanning a QR code, you can read explanations in English on your smartphone screen as well. Foreigners account for 70%–80% of visitors. There is also a seating space where you can look out on the garden, and I saw people leisurely immersed in the atmosphere there. The exhibition is well arranged so that, as you see the displays, you come to understand, in order, not only the artistic items, such as the kimono and hairpins, but also the daily lives, customs, and so on of the geiko and maiko. The panels are adequate to answer any questions that usually you don’t have much chance to ask. Before introducing the exhibits, here is some preliminary knowledge.

### *Kyoto’s five geiko-maiko entertainment districts*

There are five geiko-maiko entertainment districts (*kagai*) in Kyoto: Gion Kobu, Gion Higashi, Kamishichiken, Miyagawacho, and Ponto-cho. The Gion Kobu district, which operates the Gion Kagai Art Museum, developed from the first half of the seventeenth century to entertain the many worshippers visiting the nearby Yasaka Shrine.



### *Teahouses (ochaya)*



It is a little difficult to understand this unique system, but the teahouses play the role of ultimate concierges and general organizers. They provide geiko and maiko party rooms and food, arrange incidental transportation, theater tickets if necessary, gifts, and so on, and pay expenses in advance. Given the nature of these services, using a teahouse requires adequate trust. You cannot do so without an invitation from a trusted precursor. These teahouses are not restaurants, so the food is delivered by caterers. To have a kind of account with a teahouse, you have to be a longstanding regular client.

The hospitality is not one-way. Customers also need to show deep respect to the entertainers and to have the pride and readiness to become patrons (supporters of geiko and maiko and assistants in providing party rooms and helping in other ways). Precisely because they have the strength to support Japanese culture and arts in general, teahouses are ultimate places for receiving top-class entertainment. They are a genuine tradition flowing at the roots of Japanese hospitality.

### *Boardinghouses (okiya)*

Maiko live in boardinghouses, where they study under the female proprietress about the customs of Gion, behavior, the Kyoto language, and the arts. They also learn about preparing kimono and hairpins, putting on a kimono, and makeup. Because they live like a family, they call the proprietress “mother” and the senior geiko there “older sisters.”

### *Until becoming a maiko*



First of all, young girls go to live in a boardinghouse, sometimes immediately after graduating from junior high school, and begin their practice there. While performing the household chores in the boardinghouse, they attend dance lessons, learn about face powder and dressing in a kimono, and accustom themselves to the ways of Gion. As well as dance, they receive lessons in such subjects as Noh dance-drama, singing, the shamisen, the flute, other musical instruments, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and calligraphy.

After about a year, if the dance instructor gives permission, the girl becomes a pre-apprenticeship intern. There are times when she can study in party rooms, greet clients, and perform dances, but at this stage the girl wears a half-dangling obi, which is half as long as the dangling obi characteristic of maiko, and a shorter-sleeved kimono and can only color her lower lip. Then, after about a month, she makes her debut as a maiko in what is known as *omisedashi*. On this day, wearing a black crested kimono, she goes round the teahouses to offer formal greetings and ask for their support.

### *Maiko*



Now an apprentice female entertainer, a maiko wears a gorgeous *yuzen* kimono, a beautifully designed collar, a dangling obi, an obi clasp called a *pochiri* (sometimes passed down over the ages at her boardinghouse), a floral hairpin, and high clogs called *okobo*. About a year after her debut, she can color her upper lip too. Accumulating more and more experience in party rooms, participating in events in the entertainment district, and making relentless efforts in her daily practice, she becomes an even more refined maiko who captures people's attention.

The dangling obi, which measures 5.4 m and weighs 6 kg, comes in a variety of designs, such as a collection of congratulatory patterns or the 12 zodiac signs of Chinese astrology. The bottom part of the obi shows the family crest of the boardinghouse to which the maiko belongs. The kimono and obi together are rather heavy, so a male attendant who specializes in kimono dressing goes to the boardinghouse every day, in accordance with the maiko's party room schedule, to help out.



## *Geiko*



When a maiko, in her early twenties now, completes her apprenticeship and graduates, she changes her collar to an adultlike white and is called a geiko. This act of graduation is known as *erikae*, or “changing the collar.”

During her last few days as a maiko, the girl enters party rooms with a different hairstyle and wearing a black crested kimono. Until then she had been arranging her own hair, but now she wears a *shimada*-style wig. Her kimono sleeves are short, her obi is the usual length, the obi clasp is string, and she does not wear high clogs on her feet anymore.

Now a geiko, she also graduates from living at her boardinghouse and becomes independent. There are two roles for geiko: *tachikata* and *jikata*. The former performs dance, flute, and other musical instruments; the latter is in charge of shamisen and singing. Selecting programs to suit the party, at last she is on the way to becoming a professional of the arts and hospitality exuding beauty and charm.

## *Inoue School of Kyoto dance*

The Inoue School of Kyoto dance has a history of two centuries since the time of the first-generation Inoue Sato, who was born in 1767. Prior to the first Kyoto Exhibition in 1872, when the third-generation head of the Inoue family was 35, the then vice-governor of Kyoto asked Jirouemon Sugiura, the ninth-generation owner of the Gion Mantei teahouse (now the Ichirikitei teahouse), for his opinion on how to enliven the event, and that led to the first performance at the exhibition of the Miyako Odori dance by the Inoue School. The tradition has been rigorously continued to this day. As the highlight dance of Gion Kobu, it is courtly, Noh-like, and extremely elegant.

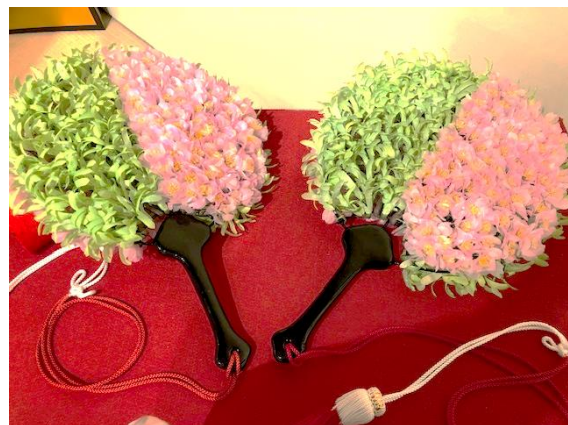
The present head of the Inoue family, Yachiyo Inoue V, was born in 1956 and designated as a living national treasure in 2015. Also, the current proprietress of the Ichirikitei teahouse in Gion Kobu, Kyoko Sugiura, is also the president of Yasaka Nyokoba Gakuen, a school for geiko and maiko, and director of the Gion Kagai Art Museum. They are both playing important roles in supporting geiko, maiko, and the culture of their entertainment district. At the museum a video is shown of an interview with Yachiyo Inoue V and the dance. The stimulating talk and dignified dance are uplifting.

The museum has many highlights, so those introduced here are but a few. As you read the panels, you realize that the events throughout the year are varied and meaningful, and you begin to feel that you yourself are living together with the geiko and maiko of Gion.

## 1F

### *Miyako Odori*

This dance is performed at the Gion Kobo Kaburenjo Theater three times a day for a month from April 1. The first performance took place at the Kyoto Exhibition in 1872, and this year (2024) marks the 150th program. It is a colorful and solemn show featuring a massive turnout of geiko, maiko, and musical accompanists. A theme is chosen each year. This year's theme is *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji). Even today, it is possible to partake of tea served by geiko and maiko in a style conceived for guests from overseas by Ura Senke XI back in the year of the very first performance.



### *Congratulatory posters (mokyuroku)*

When a maiko makes her debut and graduates (“changes her collar”), congratulatory decorations are hung at the entrances to her lodging and teahouses. She is given a joyful send-off by patrons (people who support geiko and maiko) and her older sisters (seniors).

### *Dance fans*

When a maiko makes her debut, she receives a congratulatory dance fan from the head of the Inoue School. On this occasion, it is a fan with three red lines. When she becomes

a geiko, it will be a fan with five purple lines. When, after 10 to 20 years of further effort, she becomes an accredited master (a pupil whose skills are recognized by the head of the school), she receives another fan and can go by the name of Inoue.



### *High clogs(okobo)*

The high clogs are prepared by the boardinghouse on the day of the maiko's debut. They are made of paulownia wood and make a distinctive sound when walking. At first the thongs are red, but later, with each change, they switch to pink and light blue. The clogs have a height of more than 10 cm.

### *Ornamental hairpins*

Maiko have several types of hairstyle, and every month they attach a seasonal hairpin. For example, in January the design will feature winter chrysanthemums on pine, and in February it will be apricot blossoms. Each one is carefully crafted by an artisan.



### *Baskets*



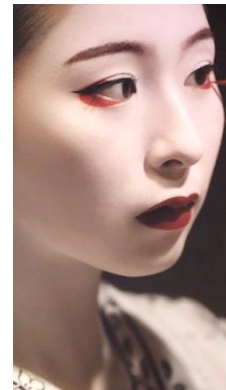
This is the maiko's handbag. Contents include a mirror, comb, name cards, name tags, a pocket for two fans, and a tenugui for dance.



**Combs** Even on days off, a maiko will wear a kimono and have a Japanese hairdo. At such times, she adds a touch of style with her combs. From June to October, when dressing in casual wear, she often uses a *makigushi* (literally, twined comb). The spine of this comb is covered in cloth on which a decoration is woven using silver thread. From October to May she will use a *tsumamigushi* (literally, pinch comb), which is decorated using the technique of folding fabric flowers. The colors change according to the number of years of the maiko's apprenticeship.

### *Red and white powder*

Geiko and maiko paint white powder on their napes, necks, and faces and apply red eye and eyebrow makeup. Maiko learn from their seniors and mothers and practice applying the white powder themselves in front of facing mirrors. A maiko begins to practice this white-powder makeup about 10 days before becoming a pre-



apprentice intern. In the age when there were no electric lights, a technique was developed to make the maiko appear even more beautiful under candlelight. This technique has been handed down to this very day.

### *New Year's hairpins*

The maiko's floral hairpins change by the seasonality of the month. In the month from New Year's, she wears a hairpin featuring the celebratory pine, bamboo, and apricot. Every year, toward the end of the year, the boardinghouse proprietress and senior maiko prepare something new. After the maiko has gained three or four years of experience, her hairpins become a more sober color.



On the first three days of the New Year, January 7, when school begins, and January 15, which is known as the "little New Year," the maiko wears a formal black crested kimono and places a pine-bamboo-apricot hairpin in front of a tortoiseshell comb. On other days from January 1 to 15, she wears a colored crested kimono. Much importance is placed on the custom of changing the kimono and hairpin in accordance with the event or tradition. Even just a subtle use of color or positioning of the hairpin is meaningful.



## 2F

On the second floor there is a kimono and obi display and artistic items arranged according to seasonal theme.

As an option, on the second-floor stage visitors can watch a dance by geiko and maiko and take a commemorative photo with them. A really precious opportunity!



## 1F

Returning to the first floor, you can proceed to the shop and café.



After that, you can take a look inside the adjacent Gion Kobu Kaburenjo Theater. Completed in 1913, this theater has more than 700 seats. The Tachujojuin hall at Kenninji temple was renovated and moved to this present site. Purely Japanese-style architecture, the building, a two-floor structure made entirely of cypress, was designated as a tangible cultural property in 2001. The ceilings and lighting are Japanese design too. Performances include the Miyako Odori in spring and the Onshukai (which is also a kind of recital for maiko) in autumn. Repair work on the building, including bolstering its earthquake resistance, was completed in 2023. As part of the museum, it has been specially opened to the public. Performances are open to the public as well.

After viewing the theater, visitors can leisurely enjoy a video of the Miyako Odori dance.



Once again I had a talk with Mr. Kikuma, the head of planning at the museum. At present, with the desire to encourage young people to know more about traditions and culture, the museum is welcoming visits by students on school trips to Kyoto. Apparently they are fascinated by the geiko and maiko. He told me one story about how, on the occasion of a public showing as part of the museum's kids' program, one rather reticent child was absolutely dazzled by the beauty when they saw the geiko and maiko dancing and, in a dramatic change, became quite talkative. Going forward, Mr. Kikuma said they wanted to organize various projects to attract even more young people and also wanted to think about projects to support artisans engaged in crafts supporting the traditions and culture of Gion, who are declining in number year by year.

Gion Hanamikoji street has become very popular recently, leading to the problem of overtourism. Sightseers chase after geiko and maiko who might be working or busy with their daily lives and force them to pose for photos or whatever. It is essential for visitors to behave in a proper and respectful manner.

The Gion Kagai Art Museum is a wonderful place where you can fully immerse yourself in a Japanese atmosphere and quietly enjoy the world of geiko and maiko.

***Editorial cooperation:***

Gion Kagai Art Museum

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<https://gion-museum.com/en/>

\*The museum has temporary holidays, so opening days should be checked beforehand.

\*Advance online reservations are recommended for watching Kyoto dance by geiko and maiko.