



## The Carnival of Edo: *Misemono* Spectacles from Contemporary Accounts

---

ANDREW L. MARKUS

*University of Kansas*

AT a crowded bazaar, inside the precincts of a major shrine or temple, or at the otherwise undistinguished intersection of two busy thoroughfares, the urban pedestrian of Edo period Japan was sure to encounter one of the most colorful and at the same time ephemeral manifestations of his culture. The *misemono* 見世物—literally, “shows” or “exhibits”—were an inalienable part of the Japanese urban landscape for two hundred years at least; their popularity extended to all strata of society; their oddities and marvels were a favorite topic of scandal sheet and scholarly disquisition alike, and inspired the author and printmaker. The essentially temporary and transient qualities of the Edo period *misemono*, however, have militated against full treatment of this kaleidoscopic cultural phenomenon: many of the shows were forgotten in the space of a few months if not days, and only the most remarkable examples left a lasting trace. In this essay, I shall outline first the general external characteristics, and subsequently enumerate outstanding examples of popular *misemono* attractions during the Edo and early Meiji periods.

Before embarking on this study, however, it is worthwhile to consider the usefulness of such a survey. On first examination, the *misemono* show—generally crude, frequently vulgar, liberally dosed with commercialism and rapacious hucksterism—might seem an

unworthy subject for extended study. In most instances, neither exhibitor nor spectator could claim elevated motives in the showing or the viewing. A more thoughtful consideration of the spectacles, however, suggests the value of the study on several accounts. The *misemono* are a first intimation of a developing leisure culture at all levels of society—a culture far less lavish, it is true, than the merchant-based efflorescence of the late seventeenth century, but erected on a broader popular base. The *misemono* shows, moreover, unhampered by conformity with a traditional artistic archetype—indeed, relentlessly seeking profitable novelty—provide a valuable index to evolving popular taste in any given era. By comparison, the popular entertainments of the kabuki stage or *gesaku* 戯作 fiction are apt to appear conservative and stodgy. The *misemono* show was in many cases a first point of contact between the average citizen and novelty of any sort, be it the regional *kankan* 看看 snake dance imported from Nagasaki to Edo in 1822, the novelty of Western perspective in *uki-e* 浮絵 pictures glimpsed through the smudged lens of a peep show, or the marvels of Western technology, exhibited as side shows for the masses in the 1870s.<sup>1</sup>

The rapid increase in the number of such shows after 1800 may offer demographic insights as well. A recent treatise on the development of American popular entertainments in the latter half of the nineteenth century cites among the prime causes for a noteworthy expansion in popular exhibits and shows the rapid growth of an urban middle class, large-scale immigration to major centers of population, and the simultaneous assimilation of even the most remote provincial residents into a cohesive, essentially urban cultural

<sup>1</sup> On the *kankan* dance, possibly of Chinese origin, see Saitō Gesshin 斎藤月岑, *Bukō nenpyō* 武江年表, ed. Kaneko Mitsuharu 金子光晴 (Heibonsha, 1968), 2: 70. All dated references throughout this paper, in the absence of indications to the contrary, refer to the corresponding annual segments of *Bukō nenpyō*, a chronicle first compiled by Saitō Gesshin (1804–1878) but extensively supplemented by Kitamura Nobuyo 喜多村信節 (1783–1856) and Sekine Shisei 関根只誠 (1825–1893). The two volumes of this standard 1968 Heibonsha reprint hereafter cited as *BN* 1 and 2.

In his own chronicle *Kiki no manimani* ききのまにまに (As I heard it, 1781–1853), Kitamura Nobuyo dates the popularity of the *kankan* dance from 1821, not 1822. See *Kiki no manimani*, ed. Mitamura Engyo 三田村鶯魚, *Mikan zuihitsu hyakushu* 未刊隨筆百種, 23 vols. (1927; rpt., Rinsen Shoten, 1969), 11: 149. This sort of discrepancy is not uncommon in the dating of fads and crazes, since differing dates reflect successive phases of public enthusiasm before all interest ultimately subsides.

network.<sup>2</sup> Although immigration in nineteenth-century Japan was exclusively internal, the other factors in the listing may be said to characterize Japan after 1800. Only a detailed study of the Edo *misemono* can suggest whether this analogy to American entertainments is valid, although the parallels in development cannot be denied.

The student whose interests lie exclusively in the “canonical” manifestations of Edo spectacle may profit from the study of *misemono*, if only because these formalized “indoor” performances were themselves, in their infancy, aberrant “outdoor” shows, close in spirit to later *misemono* extravaganzas. Though refined into an elite private art form during the late medieval period, the stately *nō* drama traces its origins to the popular public *sarugaku* 猿楽 “monkey diversion” show—and in some opinions, ultimately to the *sangaku* 散楽 “miscellaneous entertainments” acrobatics of the Nara period.<sup>3</sup> *Rakugo* 落語 comic monologues, now accorded the status of high art and a serious textual tradition, developed from humble narrative performances in marketplaces and alleys. Most spectacular of all transformations, of course, is the kabuki theater, which evolved into an elaborate institutional entertainment of great complexity from origins as an impromptu, slightly indecent, outdoor burlesque. The line between these formalized “indoor” entertainments, however, and their analogues in the public throughfare was rarely clearly defined. Kabuki in particular was amenable to variety entertainments as an adjunct to essentially dramatic representations: juggling, acrobatics, tumbling, and a whole panoply of gruesome or astonishing illusions, the stock in trade of the street performer, remained perennially favorite elements of any stage performance.

An initial difficulty in discussing the *misemono* shows of Edo and Tokyo is the definition of the term, for in contemporary usage the word was exceedingly elastic. Here I shall confine my discussion to private exhibitions of unusual items, individuals, or skills, conducted for a limited span of time inside a temporary enclosure for the purpose of financial gain. The definition is arbitrary, and excludes many shows or entertainments that contemporaries

<sup>2</sup> Don B. Wilmet, *Variety Entertainment and Outdoor Amusements: A Reference Guide* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 3–5.

<sup>3</sup> Furukawa Miki 古河三樹, *Misemono no rekishi* 見世物の歴史 (Yūsankaku, 1970), p. 14.

generally termed *misemono*. A large number of vendors, particularly vendors of candy or confectionary, incorporated some sort of dance or musical performance into their “sales pitch”; one merchant of *tokoroten* 心太 (a chilled treat of agar-agar jelly) wielded enormously long chopsticks to purvey his delicacy to customers even on the second floor of a house.<sup>4</sup> These talents, openly visible to all passers-by, I have excluded for the most part. The range of beggars’ arts is extensive, and a study in its own right. We find performers of “beggar’s kabuki” who painted one half of their faces, tailored one half of their clothing to resemble one character in a play, made over the other half as a second character, and played two roles at once.<sup>5</sup> Street artists with colored sand, dancers and singers of every description solicited alms for their talents. New Year’s mummers solicited contributions with door-to-door singing and comic shenanigans.<sup>6</sup> Some beggars’ performances were more abstruse. We read, for example, of a man in his fifties who performed “one-man sumo” bouts in contest with an invisible opponent, and “threw” the match for a spectator’s contribution.<sup>7</sup> Another ingenious individual covered his entire body with soot, tied a rope around his neck, and announced himself to all passers-by as a “wild bear, lately captured in the province of Tanba”; a small donation from the credulous or charitably disposed and the “bear” would growl and paw the ground

<sup>4</sup> Kajima Manbei 鹿島万兵衛, *Edo no yūbae* 江戸の夕榮 (1922; rpt., Chūōkōronsha, 1977), p. 97. On performing candy vendors in general, see Kajima, p. 96; see also William E. Griffis, *The Mikado’s Empire*, 8th ed. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1895), pp. 454–55.

<sup>5</sup> On “beggar’s kabuki,” see Kajima, p. 99. For an illustration of such a performer, see Charles J. Dunn, *Everyday Life in Traditional Japan* (1969; rpt., Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1972), p. 142. For further early examples of beggars’ arts, see Engelbert Kaempfer’s (1651–1716) comments upon entering Fushimi in 1691: “We likewise met some particular sorts of beggars, comically clad, and some mask’d in a very ridiculous manner, not a few walk’d upon iron stilts, others carried large pots with green trees upon their heads; some were singing, some whistling, some fluting, others beating of bells. All along the street we saw multitudes of open shops, jugglers and players diverting the crowd.” See Kaempfer, *The History of Japan*, trans. J. G. Scheuchzer, 3 vols. (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1906), 3: 16.

<sup>6</sup> On sand-painting, see Kajima, p. 91, and Tsuchida Mitsufumi 槌田満文, *Meiji Taishō fūzoku goten* 明治大正風俗語典 (Kadokawa Shoten, 1979), pp. 177–78. For a good description of New Year’s mummers (*manzai* 万歳, *torioi* 鳥追, *hazeuri* 爆米壳) in early twentieth-century Tokyo, see T[ai]zō Fujimoto, *The Nightside of Japan* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, [1914]), pp. 171–72.

<sup>7</sup> Kajima, pp. 92–93.

restively.<sup>8</sup> These public exhibitions, however, do not conform to my definition. Small booths in which patrons attempted to hit target figures with a blowgun or a miniature bow and arrow generally receive the name *misemono*, but I have not included these primarily participatory entertainments in this survey.<sup>9</sup> A difficult case is the large number of dramatic or comic storytellers operating in the city. These, too, I have omitted, primarily because they are too complex to be treated in a short study, but also because of the special status generally accorded the narrative artist, a status increasingly divergent from that of common street entertainers.

The term *misemono* dates from the Edo period, although plausible forerunners of the performances appear already in the late medieval period.<sup>10</sup> Among the likely antecedents of Edo period shows were benefit performances undertaken to raise funds for shrines or temples as, for example, a benefit production of *dengaku* 田楽 variety acts in 1346.<sup>11</sup> The acceleration of urbanization during the Muromachi period was concurrent with a growth in the number, variety, and oddity of outdoor exhibits. In 1449, for example, a “white nun,” probably an albino, went on display in Kyoto. This show incorporated all the features typical of later *misemono*: a rarity, an enclosure, a fixed price of admission, and a fanciful text for the exhibitor, since the “nun” supposedly owed her unusual condition to the unintentional consumption of merman’s flesh.<sup>12</sup>

Burgeoning urban centers in the Kamigata region developed early their share of shows and attractions. In seventeenth-century screen paintings of the Kamo riverbed in Kyoto, we find stalls where

<sup>8</sup> Kikuchi Kiichirō 菊池貴一郎, *E-hon Edo fūzoku ōrai* 絵本江戸風俗往来, ed. Suzuki Tōzō 鈴木棠三 (1905; rpt., Heibonsha, 1965), p. 279. No date is given for this performance.

<sup>9</sup> On blowgun booths, see Mitamura Engyo, *Edo seikatsu jiten* 江戸生活事典, ed. Inagaki Fumio 稲垣史生, 14th ed. (Seiabō, 1975), pp. 428–29. An 1803 *kibyōshi* by Santō Kyōden 山東京伝 (1761–1816) is designed entirely around the operation of such booths. See “Ningen banji fukiya no mato” 人間万事吹矢的, in *Kibyōshi nijūgo-shū* 黄表紙廿五種, in *Nihon meicho zenshū* (*Edo bungei no bu*) 日本名著全集 (江戸文芸之部), (Nihon Meicho Zenshū Kankōkai, 1926), 11: 671–702. On miniature archery, see the censorious description in Isabella L. Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (New York: G. P. Putnam, [1880]), pp. 75–76.

<sup>10</sup> Furukawa, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

an acrobat perches a pole on his nose, a woman practices archery with her feet, peacocks strut, and a spiny boar or porcupine bristles before astonished spectators.<sup>13</sup> Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1716), passing through Osaka in 1691, remarks on the great appetite of the inhabitants for curiosities of every description:

For this reason the Japanese call Osacca the universal theatre of pleasures and diversions. Plays are to be seen daily both in publick and in private houses. Mountebanks, Juglers, who can show some artful tricks, and all rary-shew people, who have either some uncommon, or monstrous animal to shew, or animals taught to play tricks, resort thither from all parts of the Empire, being sure to get a better penny here than any where else. Of this one instance will suffice. Some years ago, our East India company sent over from Batavia, a Casuar [cassowary?], (a large East India bird, who would swallow stones, and hot coals,) as a present to the Emperor. This bird having had the ill luck not to please our rigid censors, the Governors of Nagasaki, to whom it belongs to determine, what presents might be the most acceptable to the Emperor, and we having thereupon been order'd to send him back to Batavia, a rich Japanese and a great lover of these curiosities, assured us, that if he could have obtain'd leave to buy him, he would have willingly given a thousand Thails [i.e. taels, or *ryō*] for him, as being sure within a years time, to get double that money only by shewing him at Osacca.<sup>14</sup>

The literature of Genroku, which reveled in the prodigious, could not fail to note the new assortment of *misemono*. A thread dealer pressed for funds in Ihara Saikaku's 井原西鶴 (1642–1693) *Seken mune-zan'yō* 世間胸算用 (Worldly mental arithmetic, 1692) contemplates a show as a possible source of speedy assets:

Wasn't there some attraction or freak of nature that he could exhibit the next spring? He found it hard to think of anything, for already a variety of novelties had been created by the artisans of Kyoto and Osaka. Still, there might be just one article among the imports that would do. Anyhow, it had to be a very special kind of novelty, for anything less would be unprofitable.<sup>15</sup>

He succeeds, though marginally, through the display and sale of exotic imported birds. The wife of a financial agent accused of embezzlement in *Saikaku oridome* 西鶴織留 (Saikaku's bolt end, 1694)

<sup>13</sup> See the undated "Riverbed at Shijō" screens, reproduced in Kondō Ichitarō, *Japanese Genre Painting: The Lively Art of Renaissance Japan*, trans. Roy Andrew Miller (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1961), plates 66–71.

<sup>14</sup> Kaempfer, *The History of Japan*, 3: 6–7.

<sup>15</sup> Translation by Masamori Takatsuka and David C. Stubbs, *This Scheming World* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1965), p. 107. This passage is from *Seken mune-zan'yō* 4: 4; see Ihara Saikaku, *Saikaku shū* (ge) 西鶴集 (下), *NKBT* (1960), 48: 285.

gives birth to an armless child; “Bottle-Boy Mantarō” in turn becomes a *misemono* in the Dōtonbori 道頓堀 theater district of Osaka.<sup>16</sup> A rake in Ejima Kiseki’s 江島其磧 (1667–1736) *Seken musuko katagi* 世間子息氣質 (Characters of worldly sons, 1715) degenerates to the lowest echelons of society: the curtain falls on him as a ticket-taker before a tawdry show booth.<sup>17</sup>

One of the earliest *misemono* exhibits in the burgeoning shogunal capital of Edo was a strong-man baby of 1674, able to elevate a stone mortar upon which four strings of cash had been laid. That same year, the giantess O-Yome 阿与米, 7’3” tall, arrived in Edo from Ōmi; by 1684, she had been joined by Hoshun 甫春, a dwarf or midget from Osaka barely one sixth her height.<sup>18</sup> Records of *misemono* are not lacking from the latter seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Edo, but the phenomenon only attained its zenith after 1800. *Bukō nenpyō* 武江年表 (Chronicles of Edo, 1849–1878), a compendious enumeration of the most significant events in the metropolis every year between 1590 and 1873, presents details of some 125 *misemono*, of which fully 107 took place in the nineteenth century and 86 after 1840. The showmen of old Edo became the showmen of new Tokyo: the substance of the shows lingered well into the 1880s, an excellent example of the continuity of popular culture in the face of momentous political upheavals, nor is the spirit of the Edo showman entirely dead in the 1980s.

The first concern of the *misemono* entrepreneur was to attract an audience, and for this purpose, he demonstrated his skill or

<sup>16</sup> Episode in *Saikaku oridome* 1: 2; see Ihara, *Saikaku shū* (ge), p. 326. Translation in Peter Nosco, *Some Final Words of Advice* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1980), p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Episode in *Seken musuko katagi* 2: 3; see *Hachimonjiya shū* 八文字屋集, in *Kindai Nihon bungaku taikei* 近代日本文学大系, 25 vols. (Kokumin Tosho Kabushiki Kaisha, 1928), 5: 833. Translation in Howard Hibbett, *The Floating World in Japanese Fiction* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1975), p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> For the baby and the team of O-Yome and Hoshun, see Ryūtei Tanehiko 柳亭種彦, “Yōsha-bako” 用捨箱 in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei: dai ikki* 日本隨筆大成・第一期, 24 vols., ed. Nihon Zuihitsu Taisei Henshūbu 日本隨筆大成編輯部, (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975–1979), 13: 218–19. *Yōshabako* was first published in 1841.

O-Yome, Hoshun, and a nameless snake charmer of the 1630s appear in another *zuihitsu* 隨筆 compilation by Tanehiko, *Sokushin’ōki* 足翁翁記 (Records of Old Man Sokushin). See “Sokushin’ōki” in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei: dai niki* 第二期, 24 vols. (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975–1979) 14: 66–68. The passage cites numerous works of the 1680s concerning the appearances of O-Yome and Hoshun in Osaka, as well as the barker’s cry for an Edo “snake woman” from a source of 1682.

located his attraction in the most heavily traveled areas. At first any busy street corner or marketplace served his purpose. With the passage of time, however, the *misemono* “industry,” like other commercial enterprises of the time, concentrated its displays in distinctive sites or specific zones for greater patronage. An extremely frequent context for the show was the *kaichō* 開帳 or temple fair. During the period of the *kaichō*—anywhere from three days to three months—an efficacious image or relic normally concealed from general public view would be revealed to worshipers. Frequently the image displayed in Edo was not a permanent part of the temple properties, but was “on loan” from an important provincial temple. Thousands lined streets and riverbanks to welcome such images to Edo in processions hardly less sumptuous than the cavalcades of *daimyō* 大名 feudatories; tens of thousands crowded temples during the term of the *kaichō*.<sup>19</sup> Religious sentiment motivated many pilgrims, but just as many visitors no doubt sought first of all the showmen’s booths in which wonders of a very different sort—secular counterparts, perhaps, to the sacred artifacts on temporary exhibition—were accessible for a few small coins. The dependable flow of tourists was undoubtedly the primary motive for the showman’s affinity to shrine or temple fairs; the “extraterritoriality” of religious institutions, beyond the jurisdiction of the Edo *machi-bugyō* 町奉行 or civic magistrate, also might have favored such locations.

The growth of a distinct theater district in Nihonbashi 日本橋 by the late seventeenth century encouraged many early showmen to locate their attractions in Sakai-chō 堺町 near the Nakamura-za 中村座 or in Fukiya-chō 葎屋町 near the Ichimura-za 市村座, where they could count on a steady flow of idlers and curiosity-seekers. O-Yome the giantess, for example, made her debut at Sakai-chō, as did a strong-woman from Echigo (1776) and later, a charcoal-eating ostrich (1791); acrobats favored crowds at Fukiya-chō in 1788 and 1797. The *misemono* performances, however, were clearly subordinate attractions in these sectors, largely overshadowed by the presence of the established theaters.

<sup>19</sup> For examples of crowded processions in connection with *kaichō*, see *BN* 2:134 for an 1853 reception accorded an image from Ise; *BN* 2:154–55 for the frenzy created by an image from Narita in 1856; and *BN* 2: 238–39 for an image from Sagami in 1871.



The Okuyama 奥山 area of Asakusa 浅草, however, was another matter. This region, to the immediate northwest of the Asakusa Kannon temple, was crowded with booths and exhibits catering to the ceaseless stream of temple visitors. By the mid-eighteenth century, the area had acquired its enduring reputation as a year-round amusement center. Ōta Nanpo 大田南畝 (1749–1823) mentions a display of exotic parrots and parakeets at the Asakusa Okuyama in 1758; in 1819, a basketry artisan produced wicker replicas of birds, plants, and animals, and displayed them to admiring crowds in the Okuyama.<sup>20</sup> The Asakusa area was an unfailing source of entertainments and novel delights throughout the nineteenth century. “Perpetual Christmas reigns here,” writes one American visitor to this Japanese Vanity Fair in 1871, who later comments, “Every one in Japan has heard of Asakusa.”<sup>21</sup> An intrepid Yorkshirewoman, following on his footsteps in 1878, introduces her disapproving catalog of the Okuyama’s bizarre delights with the concession: “No English fair in the palmiest days of fairs ever presented such an array of attractions.”<sup>22</sup> It was not until the latter Meiji period, however, that Asakusa acquired its undisputed preeminence as a center for popular entertainments of every description.

By far the most familiar site for attractions—indeed, a location whose very name evoked the crowds and carnival gaiety of the *misemono* show—was the Ryōgoku Bridge 両国橋.<sup>23</sup> In an effort to encourage the settlement of the marshy lowlands east of the Sumida River 隅田川, and thus relieve some of the urban congestion that had proven so disastrous during the holocaust of 1657, the magistracy commissioned the first major bridge over the lower Sumida, between Nihonbashi on the west and Honjo 本所 to the east. Completed in

<sup>20</sup> For parrots and parakeets, see Ōta Nanpo, “Hannichi kanwa” 半日閑話 in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei: dai ikki*, vol. 8, pp. 556–57. For basketry exhibit, *BN* 2:63.

<sup>21</sup> Griffis, pp. 378–79.

<sup>22</sup> Bird, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> The Ryōgoku Bridge, a focus for nostalgic evocations, has inspired a literature of its own. My description is a composite of Kajima, p. 129–30; Saitō Yukio 斎藤幸雄 et al., *Edo meisho zue* 江戸名所図会, ed. Miura Tadashi 三浦理, 4 vols. (Yūhōdō Shoten, 1913), 1:114; and Oka Sanchō 岡山鳥, “Edo meisho hanagoyomi” 江戸名所花暦 in *Edo meisho zue*, 4:453–57.

1659, the bridge arched on stout piles, over 570 feet long.<sup>24</sup> Memories of the Meireki Fire lingered strongly in the minds of the designers: to the west, at the foot of the bridge, a large open plaza served as a firebreak; a similar smaller plaza fulfilled an identical function on the Honjo side, and framed the Ekōin Temple 回向院, itself a memorial to the victims of the catastrophe on the site of a grisly mass grave.

Though not the longest bridge in Edo—the Eitai Bridge of 1698 was 140 feet longer—the Ryōgoku Bridge was the hoariest, and perhaps the most traveled of all bridges in the city. A constant procession of functionaries streamed through crowds of citizens and salesmen; a proverb maintained that one never saw fewer than three officials' spears on Ryōgoku Bridge.<sup>25</sup> Crowded at every season of the year, the bridge was particularly congested during the three-month high summer “season,” when merrymakers on pleasure launches and at riverside teahouses, or elbow to elbow along the high balustrade of the bridge itself sought to appropriate some coolness and relief from the river breezes. Fireworks, provided by two rival firms at the behest of private customers, had been a feature of the summer festivities since 1733; countless lanterns on shore and over the water extended the gaiety well into the night. The bridge, an engineering marvel no less than a center of entertainment, was a prime tourist attraction of the metropolis: when the Lilliputian protagonist of Ichiba Tsūshō's 市場通笑 (1739–1812) *Mameotoko Edo kenbutsu* 豆男江戸見物 (Mr. Tiny tours Edo, 1782) arrives in town after an exhausting ride on a horse's tail, the Ryōgoku area is the third stop on his itinerary after the mammoth municipal fish market and Asakusa Kannon.<sup>26</sup> The gaudy bustle over the causeway was no less dear to natives of the city, for whom it served as the epitome of all that rendered Edo unique. Even *Edo meisho zue* 江戸名所図会 (Illustrated guide to famous sites of Edo, 1829–1836), usually sober and austere factually in its descriptions, waxes rhapsodic in its description of this focus of urban vitality:

<sup>24</sup> 1659 is the date given for completion in *Edo meisho zue* and in “Ryōgoku-bashi,” *Edo bungaku chimei jiten* 江戸文学地名辞典 (1973 ed. Kajima), p. 129, however, states that the bridge was completed in 1662.

<sup>25</sup> “Ryōgoku-bashi,” *Edo bungaku chimei jiten* (1973 ed.).

<sup>26</sup> Mori Senzō 森銚三, *Kibyōshi kaidai* 黄表紙解題, 2nd ed. (Chūōkōronsha, 1979), pp. 203–04.

The “cooling” season at this location begins on the twenty-eighth of the Fifth Month and concludes on the twenty-eighth of the Eighth Month. The area is always lively, but it is at its height during the summer months. The shore is crowded with *misemono* attractions; their advertising banners flap and flutter in the breeze. Lofty mansions and tall towers frame the river along both banks; benches of tea pavilions line the water. Lantern lights sparkle charmingly, reflected in the stream. Cabin boats and open boats crowd the current; moored together, they conceal for a moment the entire flow, and it is no different from dry land. Music of strings, songs, drums, and flutes echoes noisily in the ear—truly, Great Edo at its most glorious!<sup>27</sup>

It was inevitable that the plazas at either end of the bridge should become centers for mass attractions; the popularity of the Ekōin as a site for summer *kaichō* fairs further cemented the alliance. The earliest record of a Ryōgoku exposition in *Bukō nenpyō* is a display of two whales, thirty-two feet in length, washed ashore in 1734; a white scaleless fish, ten feet long and advertised as a prodigious sunfish, received similar treatment in 1765. Ryōgoku in the ensuing century became the preferred site for *misemono* shows. An enumeration of the booths and sundry diversions of the location, probably reflecting the situation around 1865, mentions a Brueghelian array:

The entire square to the other side of these teahouses was occupied by the Muraemon-za Theater 村右衛門座, the “Three Sisters” female kabuki, peep shows of *Chūshin-gura* 忠臣蔵, *Naniwa-bushi* 浪花節 chanting (also known as *chobokure*), *uta-saimon* 歌祭文 beggar’s opera (also called *deroren*), raconteurs, archery booths, barbershops, massage healers, and around them peddlers of toys, loquat leaf broth, chilled water, “white jade” and “Dōmyōji” 道明寺 confectionery, chilled and solidified agar-agar jelly, *sushi* 鮓 vinegar rice, tempura, dumplings, stuffed Inari fritters, fried eel livers, insects, lanterns, as well as wandering masseurs and Shinnai 新内 balladeers, peddlers of all sorts, blowgun booths, *dokkoi-dokkoi-dokkoi* [snatches of a refrain], fortune-sellers with lanterns dangling from their collars, vendors of “streetwalker” noodles, drunks, quarrels, pests, public urination.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Saitō Yukio et al., 1: 114. For a good description of the tremendous crush of spectators at a Ryōgoku fireworks night around 1910, see Fujimoto, pp. 102–12.

<sup>28</sup> Kajima, p. 130. That the Ryōgoku Plaza also attracted entrepreneurs of a shadier sort is evident from this *kyōka* “mad verse” contained in *Kyōka Edo meissho zue* 狂歌江都名所図会 (Illustrated guide to the famous places of Edo in *kyōka* 狂歌 verse), a collection published in 1856:

Ryōgoku no  
hashi no tamoto no  
Hirokōji  
tezuma ya tsukau  
suri mo miyuran

The Plaza  
by the edge of  
Ryōgoku Bridge—  
perhaps you’ll spy a pickpocket  
using his own sleight of hand.

The location continued to serve as a magnet for shows of all kinds until the mid-Meiji period. Tayama Katai 田山花袋 (1871–1930) here reminisces about the attractions still available at Ryōgoku during the late '70s and early '80s, when he first moved to the city:

Not much was left by that time of the scenes Ishikawa Masamochi had described around the Ryōgoku Bridge, but there were still a good number of *misemono* attractions. Peep shows enticing their audiences with sentimental tunes, billboards advertising huge snakes, pathetic natives of Pygmy Island—all these shows stood in a row, and their proprietors bawled loudly for patrons.<sup>29</sup>

*Misemono* shows, of course, were no monopoly of Edo: larger provincial cities and country religious festivals alike attracted the showman.<sup>30</sup> The two picaresque protagonists of Jippensha Ikku's 十返舎一九 (1765–1831) *Tōkaidōchū hiza-kurige* 東海道中膝栗毛 (By shanks' mare down the Tōkaidō Road, 1803–1809) encounter shows of various descriptions throughout the course of their peregrinations beyond Edo. At Isoyama 磯山 (now the city of Suzuka 鈴鹿, Mie 三重 prefecture), they try their luck at a blowgun booth, where pasteboard figures from *Chushin-gura* stand as targets; at Furuichi 古市, the decidedly secular recreational zone abutting the Ise shrines, they join other pilgrims in pelting two insouciant chanteuses with coins, and watching the ladies dodge the monetary shower.<sup>31</sup> Performers of every sort cluster around recognized “tourist traps”

---

Quoted in “Ryōgoku Hirokōji,” *Edo bungaku chimei jiten* (1973 ed.) *Tezuma* 手づま, the pivotal word in the verse, means both “fingertips” and “juggling tricks.”

<sup>29</sup> Tayama Katai 田山花袋, “Tōkyō no sanjūnen” 東京の三十年, in *Bungakuteki kaisō shū* 文学的回想集, *Gendai Nihon bungaku zenshū* 現代日本文学全集, 99 vols. (Chikuma Shobō, 1958), 97: 279. This work was originally published in 1917. On entertainments in the Okuyama at the same period, see p. 281.

<sup>30</sup> For a description of a country fair in Fukui in 1871 (“... a scene of wild mirth, drunkenness, and paganism”), see Griffis, pp. 525–26. The attractions included a snake charmer, tortoise tamer, and sword swallower. A rustic celebration near Akita in 1878 appears in Bird, p. 337. Here the amusements included trained animals, mock decapitations, a pig and a sheep—both animals novelties in the region.

<sup>31</sup> On the blowgun booth in Isoyama, see Jippensha Ikku, *Tōkaidō-chū hiza-kurige*, ed. Asō Isoji 麻生磯次, *NKBT* (1958), 62: 260–61. For translation, see *Shanks' Mare*, trans. Thomas Satchell (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1960), p. 191. On the chanteuses of Furuichi, see Jippensha, p. 309 and Satchell, p. 226. O-Sugi お杉 and O-Tama お玉, or their namesakes, were apparently longstanding attractions at Ise, since they are mentioned in *Saikaku oridome*, 4: 3. See “Saikaku oridome” in *Saikaku shū* (*ge*), *NKBT* 48: 412. For translation, see Nosco, p. 171.

like Gion 祇園 Shrine in Kyoto, the Tenmangū 天満宮 shrine of Osaka, or the Ikutama 生玉 Shrine.<sup>32</sup>

Surprisingly, there is little evidence of any provincial touring by *misemono* shows. There is no lack of descriptions of kabuki troupes, professional or amateur, on tour through smaller cities during the Edo period—the bumbling heroes of *Hiza-kurige* encounter the laughable ragtag remnants of one such troupe of amateur players beyond Yoshida—but the *misemono* I have seen described rarely ventured far from urban centers.<sup>33</sup> *Bukō nenpyō* records in passing that the sensational 1821 exhibit of two Persian dromedaries was later “taken north, and made a *misemono*,” but this was apparently an extraordinary case. This lack of mobility contrasts severely with nineteenth-century American popular entertainments, in constant displacement to the most remote regions where the hunger for entertainment was proportionately most acute.

The setup for a *misemono* show was generally very simple: a few reed screens suspended from posts, a few benches, perhaps a platform for the attraction, and business could commence.<sup>34</sup> The entire site could be dismantled (and often was) at closing time.<sup>35</sup> These simplest enclosures were open to the elements, and performances halted on rainy days.<sup>36</sup> More elaborate, although still quite simple, were board fence enclosures or jerry-built wooden huts. The fatal collapse of theater huts in 1811 and 1844 (both accidents blamed on rain-soaked rotten ropes) suggests that these temporary shelters were none too substantial. In a few unusual cases, the organizers of the *misemono* did invest in a respectable building of generous dimensions. A show of 1856 in the Okuyama featured sixty-two

<sup>32</sup> On Gion, see Jippensha, p. 385 and Satchell, p. 284; on Tenmangū, Jippensha, pp. 441–42 and Satchell, p. 326; on Ikutama, Jippensha, p. 473 and Satchell, p. 350.

<sup>33</sup> Jippensha, pp. 196–98 and Satchell, p. 140. For performances by traveling players at Nakatsu in rural northeastern Kyushu around 1845, see Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉, *Fukuō jiden* 福翁自伝, Konno Washichi 昆野和七, ed., 14th rev. ed. (Kadokawa Shoten, 1975), p. 17. For English translation, see *The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*, trans. Eiichi Kiyooka (1960; rpt., New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 4–5.

<sup>34</sup> On simple setup, see Yada Sōun 矢田挿雲, *Edo kara Tōkyo e*, 江戸から東京へ, 9 vols. (1958; rpt., Chūōkōronsha, 1975), 4: 212.

<sup>35</sup> Mitamura, p. 426. The western embankment of the bridge, in theory, also served as a point of assembly for shogunal falconry expeditions. On the infrequent occasion of a falconry party, all *misemono* booths were temporarily disbanded; see p. 427.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

figures, housed in a special edifice seventy-seven by eighty-three feet. Simplicity, though, was more characteristic of these ephemeral showplaces, indeed probably contributed to their appeal.

Exceptionally, broadsides and flyers distributed to barbershops and public bathhouses promoted the attractions in advance.<sup>37</sup> Most commonly, though, the organizers relied upon on-site advertising to draw a crowd. Tall oblong banners fluttered above the roof of each exhibit; billboards and, where available, prints of the attraction decorated the outside of the booths.<sup>38</sup> One or more barkers delivered a prepared spiel to potential spectators, while in 1852, moving figures of Benzaiten 弁才天, (Hōjō?) Tokimasa [北条] 時政 and a mechanized serpent gyrated outside to lure visitors to a whalebone sculpture exhibit within.

A depiction of a *misemono* show in full swing appears in Shikitei Sanba's 式亭三馬 (1776–1822) *Kusazōshi kojitsuke nendaiki* 稗史億說年代記 (Daffy chapbook chronicle, 1802), a work primarily designed to demonstrate past phases in the artistic and literary evolution of the popular *kusazōshi* 草双紙 “chapbook.”<sup>38</sup> Sanba retells, in a characteristically irreverent manner, the old fairy tale of *Hachikazuki-hime* 鉢かづき姫 “The bowl-crowned girl,” who suffers various misfortunes as the result of having an inverted bowl affixed securely to her head. (The bowl, a legacy of her dying mother, later falls off to reveal a cache of precious jewels.) In Sanba's version, the unhappily adorned girl wanders aimlessly and is almost killed by a pack of

<sup>37</sup> For the test of such a broadside, see Yoshihara Ken'ichirō 吉原健一郎, *Edo no jōhō-ya: Bakumatsu shomin-shi no sokumen* 江戸の情報屋・幕末庶民史の側面 (Nihon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai, 1978), pp. 101–02. Examples of such posters may be found in Masuda Tajirō 増田太次郎, *Hikifuda e-bira nishiki-e kōkoku* 引札・絵びら・錦絵広告 (Seibundo Shinkōsha, 1977), pp. 128–34.

<sup>38</sup> These banners are visible in the foreground of the illustration to Saitō Yukio et al., 1:116–17, as well as in Saitō Gesshin, *Tōto saijiki* 東都歳事記, ed. Asakura Haruhiko 朝倉治彦, 3 vols. (Heibonsha, 1970), 2: 64–65. On prints or pictures hung outside, see Ishikawa Masamochi 石川雅望, “Miyako no teburī” 都のてぶり, in *Kyōbun haibun shū* 狂文俳文集, *Kindai Nihon bungaku taikai* 23: 961 and 965. This last source (preface date 1808) is Ishikawa Masamochi's (1753–1830) imaginative reconstruction of the tumult of Ryōgoku and other “low” areas of Edo around 1800. Composed entirely in the grammar and vocabulary of Heian period court literature, *Miyako no teburī* (Manners of the metropolis) might be equated with a description of Forty-second Street in Chaucerian English.

<sup>39</sup> Shikitei Sanba, “Kusazōshi kojitsuke nendaiki,” in *Kibyōshi nijūgo-shū*, pp. 585–616. *Misemono* illustration on pp. 602–603.

unruly farmers, who view her as a creature of ill omen. When all seems darkest, she is rescued by a party of Edo city slickers. These latter, however, are not motivated by unselfishness: they compel the girl to appear in a *misemono* show of her own on Ryōgoku Bridge. (Despite her cooperative attitude and musical talents, the show is a resounding flop, and she moves on to another set of vicissitudes.) In Sanba's own illustration, the bowl-crowned girl sits impassively on a raised board platform; to her left, a huckster points out her various features with a set of chopsticks, while to her right, an assistant collects donations in a sort of verger's basket at the end of a long pole. Both men display bowls for crests on the shoulders of their stiffly formal *kataginu* 肩衣 vests. A file of men and women shuffles past the stage, while outside the board fence, more await their turn. Two barkers, informally dressed, hawk tickets at the entry beneath an oversized billboard of the star attraction, "newly arrived in Edo from the province of Tanba!"

Sources are in close agreement about the cost of admission to the shows. From a standard flat rate of eight *mon* 文 (approximately fifteen cents) in the early nineteenth century, the price of admissions followed the general inflationary trend of the times: a source of 1810 suggests a typical earlier maximum admission of twelve *mon* (twenty cents), but notes that recently thirty *mon* (fifty cents) has become the norm in Edo and the Kamigata region.<sup>40</sup> The dromedary extravaganza mentioned earlier, the most expensive I have uncovered, cost thirty-two *mon* (some fifty-five cents).<sup>41</sup> Even at its most costly, then, the *misemono* show was a relatively inexpensive

<sup>40</sup> On early low prices, see Terakado Seiken 寺門静軒, *Edo hanjōki* 江戸繁昌記, ed. Asakura Haruhiko and Andō Kikuji 安藤菊二, 3 vols. (Heibonsha, 1974), 1:134. On rise to thirty *mon* admission fee, see "Zoku Asukagawa" 続飛鳥川, in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei: dai niki* 10: 40. The equivalents in modern currency are intended only for a rough comparison. I have assumed 5000 *mon* to the *ryō* 両 and used the equation of 1 *ryō* = ¥18,000 suggested in Hayashi Yoshikazu 林美一, "Ryūtei Tanehiko no *Shunjō gidan mizuage-chō*" 「柳亭種彦の春情妓談水揚帳」 in *Hihon wo motomete* 秘本を求めて (Yūkō Shobō, 1972), pp. 140–41. The great difficulty of establishing even a rough equation of purchasing power between 1972 yen and 1983 dollars should be caution enough against this variety of arithmetical excursus. I should also mention that some shows had no fixed admission price; the proprietors simply "passed the hat" in mid-performance. See Mitamura, p. 426.

<sup>41</sup> Kitagawa Morisada 喜田川守貞 (Suetaka 季莊), *Kinsei fūzoku shi* 近世風俗志, 2 vols. (1908, original title *Morisada mankō* 守貞漫稿; rpt. Seishinsha, 1977), 2: 595. Murata Ryōa 村田了阿 (1772–1843), the celebrated antiquarian, composed a *kyōka* verse whose title mentions the high price of admission to see the quadrupeds; see *BN* 2: 68.

form of entertainment. By contrast, a seat in the galleries of a kabuki theater might cost between 1300 and 2100 *mon* (\$22 to \$35) for an unexceptional production in the 1840s, between 2000 and 6000 (\$33 to \$100) for a first-class production.<sup>42</sup> The spectator in the *misemono* booth, it is true, might enjoy the spectacle only a few minutes before being ushered out to make room for others, while the kabuki theater-goer was entitled to a dozen leisurely hours or more of entertainment for the price of his ticket.<sup>43</sup> Still, the modest price of the shows made them available to almost every citizen, and placed them solidly in the ranks of plebeian amusements.

Bakasareta	After watching
misemono wo mite	the bewitching shows
Hirokōji	on [Ryōgoku] Plaza,
shimon-yatai ni	munching stuffed fritters
kuu Inari-zushi	at the seven-cent stand. <sup>44</sup>

---

There is some disagreement among sources concerning the date of the camel exhibit. *Bukō nenpyō* mentions that the animals were imported to Nagasaki in 1821, and implies that the exhibition in Edo was the same year. *Kiki no manimani*, however, states that the camels arrived in Edo in 1824. See Kitamura, pp. 164–65.

In addition to Ryōa's *kyōka*, the beasts inspired a *kyōka* by Kitamura Nobuyo himself:

Isshō wo	People may say
misemono to naru	“You have an easy time of it!”—
kurushisa yo	but what suffering,
raku da raku da to	to be an exhibit
hito wa iedomo	all your life

*Kiki no manimani* also records numerous more erudite Chinese quatrains composed on the occasion.

<sup>42</sup> Kitagawa, 2:514. Undoubtedly seats in the “pit” were cheaper, but even at one tenth the price of *sajiki* 棧敷 gallery places, such an entertainment would still be many times costlier than a *misemono* show. On the high price of *kabuki*, see also Philipp Franz von Siebold, *Manners and Customs of the Japanese in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Terence Barrow (1841; rpt., Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1973), p. 119. On theater admission prices, see also Donald H. Shively, “The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki,” in *Studies in Kabuki* (University Press of Hawaii, 1978), p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ishikawa, p. 966. Here spectators are ushered out unceremoniously after a high wire act.

<sup>44</sup> “Ryōgoku Hirokōji” in *Edo bungaku chimei jiten* (1973 ed.). The verse—no great shakes in the original, either—is from *Kyōka Edo meisho zue*. The wit of the verse lies in the association of *Bakasareta* 化かされた “bewitched, enchanted” with Inari, the fox god capable of magical metamorphoses. *Inari-zushi* 稲荷鮓 “fritters” refers to deep-fried sweet potatoes stuffed with rice doused in vinegar. *Bakasareta* may contain a pun on *baka* (ni) *sareta* 馬鹿にされた “mocked, treated as foolish.”



All *misemono* exhibitions were by definition commercial propositions; certain shows, however, had a more emphatically mercantile tone, inasmuch as their performances were mere preliminaries to a commercial “pitch.” After a feigned duel conducted atop unstable meal trays, two Ryōgoku hucksters reveal their true colors to an assembled throng:

“This sort of swordplay,” one announces, “is a mere ploy to delight the eyes of the masses. Our true family enterprise is the selling of medications.” With this he pulls out two small paper packets. “This packet,” he continues, “is our Hangontan 返魂丹 ‘Resurrection Elixir,’ a fine medicine and a family secret for generations. For stomach cramps, food poisoning, excessive gas from mouth or intestine, seasickness, intoxication—when taken for any ailment it shows immediate results. And in *this* packet is our dentifrice, which cures decayed teeth and eliminates every noxious odor from the mouth. It whitens teeth with astonishing speed.” While delivering this speech, he wipes a coin with the dentifrice; soon it shines as resplendently as the waxing moon, beaming through a rift in the clouds. Everyone buys some and continues on his way.<sup>45</sup>

In an account of 1832, Matsui Gensui 松井源水 of Asakusa sends his tops spinning and dancing, to the delighted amazement of all, but ultimately uses his talents to purvey nostrums.<sup>46</sup> Most celebrated of all “medicine shows” were the regular performances of a certain Nagai Hyōsuke 長井兵助 in O-Kuramae 御蔵前 near Asakusa, who solemnly lectured on the martial specialty of *iai-nuki* 居合抜, the “quick draw” of swords, and proceeded to unsheathe with a lightning hand swords ten feet and longer. This noble exhibit, however, was itself only the prelude to hawking a line of toothpastes and denture accessories.<sup>47</sup>

Edo period sources record little about the showmen themselves,

<sup>45</sup> Ishikawa, p. 963.

<sup>46</sup> Terakado, 1:69–70.

<sup>47</sup> There are many references. See Kajima, p. 95 and Kikuchi, pp. 237–39. For the Meiji period, see Tsuchida, pp. 176–77 and Fujimoto, pp. 133–34. (This last reference describes a performance at the Fukagawa Hachimangū 深川八幡宮; the performers bear the name “Matsui Gensui,” the professional name of a celebrated top-spinner of the nineteenth century.) An amusing *kyōshi* 狂詩 “mad poem” in would-be Chinese, composed around 1840, seems to indicate that the sword-drawing performance occurred only *after* a long-winded sales spiel—a more logical procedure, it would seem. See Osaki Hisaya 尾崎久弥, “Hōge Dōjin-cho no *Edo meibutsu-shi*” 方外道人著の「江戸名物詩」 in *Edo nanpa zakkō* 江戸軟派雑考 (Shun’yōdō, 1925), p. 237. The alarming connection between swordsmanship and dentistry may derive from a play on the verb *nuku* 抜く “to unsheathe” as well as “to draw (a tooth).”

except in unusual circumstances. *Bukō nenpyō* records the names of several individual artisans or performers in *misemono*, but without any suggestion of a superior manager or business agent. Interestingly, the majority of these named exhibitors are assigned origins in Osaka or points west, although these attributions may be the result of the performers' desires to appear exotic. Most famous among the exhibitors named in *Bukō nenpyō* are the polymath Hiraga Gennai 平賀源内 (1729–1779) and the raconteur Utei Enba 烏亭焉馬 (1743–1822), who in 1778 painted the *nenbutsu* 念仏 religious formula on the side of a black calf, and proclaimed it a wondrous *lusus naturae* at a *kaichō* fair; their hoax turned a neat profit.

The audiences for these spectacles were diverse. Not surprisingly, the shows appealed to common people of every sort: men and women, young and old attended willingly. Tourists and migrant laborers from the provinces were a dependable source of trade. In the postscript to *Nansō Satomi hakkenden* 南総里見八犬伝 (Tale of the eight “dogs” of the Kazusa Satomi, 1814–1842), Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴 (1767–1848), a notoriously inhospitable spirit, remembers his initial reluctance to accept, nearly thirty years earlier, the visit that sparked the composition of his magnum opus:

“Most of the people who try to see me are like the souls who go to gawk at the shows and plays around Ryōgoku Bridge: they want something to talk about when they return to their home villages. Send him away, send him away!” said I with a wave of my hand.<sup>48</sup>

The barker before a porcupine exhibit (such a show is attested for Asakusa in 1775) in an 1808 imaginative composite of Ryōgoku shows exhorts the very bumpkins Bakin has in mind:

“Behold the porcupine beast, captured in the mountain wilds of Tanba! A great rarity, never heard of before nor likely to be heard of again. A wonderful subject for a souvenir tale to take back home! Contribute only after you have looked your fill!” So he shouts at the top of his lungs, until quite hoarse, while proudly grasping a creature about the size of a flying squirrel.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴, *Nansō Satomi hakkenden* 南総里見八犬伝, ed. Koike Tōgorō 小池藤五郎, 10 vols. (Iwanami Shoten, 1941), 10:268. For a discussion of this passage, see Leon M. Zolbrod, *Takizawa Bakin*, Twayne World Authors Series, 20 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), p. 93.

<sup>49</sup> Ishikawa, p. 962. On a porcupine (*yamaarashi* 豪猪) display, see *BN* 1:195–96. The chronicler terms this display a hoax, but mentions that a real porcupine was sent from Satsuma as a bribe to the venal Tanuma Okitsugu 田沼意次 in 1772.

In fact the *misemono* shows attracted spectators from every level of society. While some intellectuals demurred, others had no compunction in indulging their natural curiosity. Kōno Tetto 河野鉄兜 (1825–1867), best known as a scholar of Chinese poetry, interrupts the course of erudite observations on Sung 宋 dynasty *tz'u* 詞 prosody to discuss a display of exotic birds. His less enthusiastic companion in this passage is Rai Mikisaburō 頼三樹三郎 (1825–1859), third son of Rai San'yō 頼山陽 (1780–1832), whose obduracy in political matters eventually led to his decapitation:

Every time I go to Kyoto or Osaka, I always go to see newly imported items at *misemono* shows or bird displays. Inhabitants of the capital, however, all laugh at such rusticity. Once when I was in Kyoto, I went with Rai Miki[saburō] to Kiyomizu Temple. When I said to Miki that I would like to see the bird display, he replied, “You, dear friend, may play the tourist to Ise or Rokujō [i.e. the Eastern and Western Honganji temples], but I cannot follow you.” He wandered about aimlessly outside the entrance.<sup>50</sup>

Kitamura Kōjō 喜多村香城 (1805–?), physician to the last Tokugawa shogun, found nothing indecorous in comparing the speed at which the former ministers of the *bakufu* regime had passed from favor to disgrace to the whirling of the prestidigitator Takezawa Tōji's 竹沢藤二 tops at Ryōgoku; from a besieged Loyalist stronghold in 1868, he invokes in his memoirs the gaiety of Ryōgoku as it had been in his youth.<sup>51</sup>

The shogun himself was not above *misemono* displays, although his viewings were conducted privately. Tsunayoshi 綱吉 (ruled 1680–1709) reviewed the first equestrian circus troupe to perform in Japan, a group of Koreans, in 1682.<sup>52</sup> A similar command performance, this time of Osaka-based equestrian daredevils, delighted Ieharu 家治 (ruled 1760–1786) in 1772.<sup>53</sup> When a fifty-five-foot whale beached itself off Shinagawa 品川 in June 1798, the whole carcass was lugged into the Fukiage 吹上 gardens of the shogunal

<sup>50</sup> Kōno Tetto 河野鉄兜, “Sūko” 掬瓢 in *Zoku Nihon zuihitsu taisei*, ed. Mori Senzō and Kitagawa Hirokuni 北川博邦, 24 vols. (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975–1979), 3:106. This miscellany probably dates from 1864 or 1865.

<sup>51</sup> On Takezawa Tōji, see Kitamura Kōjō, “Samidare-zōshi” 五月雨草紙 in *Shin Enseki jishu*, ed. Hayakawa Junzaburō 早川純三郎, 5 vols. (Kokusho Kankōkai, 1912), 2:133; on Ryōgoku, see pp. 87–88 and 125.

<sup>52</sup> Mitamura, p. 428.

<sup>53</sup> Ōta, p. 302.

palace before being returned to the sea.<sup>54</sup> In or about 1849, Ieyoshi 家慶 (ruled 1837–1853) observed the improbable art of a candy manufacturer who kept goldfish and carp alive in the seething heat of his cauldrons.<sup>55</sup>

The attention accorded *misemono* shows by prominent intellectual figures like Kōno Tetto or Saitō Gesshin 齋藤月岑 (1804–1878) is noteworthy. Part of this interest must derive from the academic movement to preserve minutiae of past and present urban material culture, a movement at its zenith during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. This does not explain, however, the surprisingly high number of citations in a work like *Bukō nenpyō*, which is minimally interested in the successes of kabuki actors or *rakugo* performers. While it is only a hypothesis, some of the interest accorded these exhibitions in serious historical sources and memoirs may be due to their prodigious nature. The recording of natural wonders and omens had been an essential element of East Asian historiography since the days of Confucius, and a prodigy was a prodigy, irrespective of its commercial exploitation.

Unlike the kabuki theater, the work of popular fiction, or the *ukiyo-e* print, all frequent targets of official legislation, the *misemono* show was surprisingly free from legal sanctions during the Edo period. Shows did close, but rarely because of official disapproval. In 1848, the magistracy ordered all exhibitions near Ryōgoku to suspend operations two or three days. The move was not to discourage the shows, but to facilitate the investigation of a murderous rampage conducted by an amateur actor against the Honjo pawnshop where his unfaithful lover was employed.<sup>56</sup> In July 1853, a two-month *kaichō* fair at the Ekōin closed prematurely during the general panic occasioned by the “black ships” off Uraga 浦賀; the fair resumed operations in August, however, and larger crowds than before swarmed to admire its mechanical mannequins and kelp sculptures. Although authorities ordered the termination in 1769 of a distasteful exhibition in which one sighted woman wrestled eight lascivious blind masseurs simultaneously, the attitude toward even overtly sexual attractions was curiously permissive.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>55</sup> *BN* 2:59.

<sup>56</sup> *BN* 2:113–14.

<sup>57</sup> Furukawa, p. 291.

The temporary, insubstantial nature of the presentations was in all likelihood their salvation; only when an exhibition showed signs of permanence did it incur the risk of official censure. A case in point is the “haunted teahouse” of suburban Ōmori 大森 in 1830. Izumiya Kichibei 泉屋吉兵衛, a set designer whose forte lay in the depiction of ghost scenes, decorated a teahouse in eastern Ōmori with a sculpture gallery of ghosts and monstrous bogies. The artwork, not originally intended as a *misemono*, soon acquired the status of a full attraction: tourists from Edo made the eight-mile journey specifically to admire the macabre teahouse. Although unexceptional at first, the decorated site had become an objectionable, established magnet for crowds. It was ordered closed by the local *daikan* 代官 deputy soon thereafter.<sup>58</sup> In 1866, a former fireman presented a new variety of kabuki to audiences in Edo: all parts were taken by adolescents, male and female, who acted in pantomime but moved their lips to *jōruri* 浄瑠璃 recitative offstage. The theatrical activity itself was not as objectionable to authorities as the size and permanence of the theater, which boasted an area of nearly 3700 square feet and two floors for spectators. This rival to the authorized theaters was soon closed, and the inventive entrepreneur fined.<sup>59</sup>

The *misemono* shows themselves were as diverse as ingenuity could contrive, although a rough classification is possible. Here I have placed the shows into two broad categories, inanimate and animate, by virtue of the nature of the primary attraction; the “animate” shows permit a further subdivision into shows dependent on a living prodigy and those featuring the performance of an acquired skill. The categories are far from absolute, and many shows featured some composite of static wonders and live performances.

Fancy craftsmanship, known as *saiku* 細工, was at the core of a great many attractions. Novelties of straw, basketwork, mother-of-pearl, and bamboo, wrought in fantastic shapes, delighted the eye. The typical *saiku* attraction inclined either to very finely detailed craftsmanship, or to artisanry on a megalomaniacal scale. As example of the former category we may note an elaborate 1859 depiction at Ryōgoku of a dozen varieties of shops, each faithful down to the last detail of merchandise, as well as stunning

<sup>58</sup> Mitamura, pp. 429–430. Also *BN* 2:92; Kitamura, pp. 183–84.

<sup>59</sup> *BN* 2:203.

re-creations of *bonsai* plants and assorted vegetables—all in the versatile medium of papier-mâché (the show was a failure). More characteristic of *saiiku* displays, though, were grandiose size and ostentation. During a temple *kaichō* of 1798, a gigantic image of Vairocana Buddha constructed of oiled paper around a framework of basketry and ginkgo wood towered 159 feet above the port of Shinagawa. A similar colossus, this one entirely of basketry, dominated the courtyard of the Tennōji 天王寺 temple in Osaka in 1819: a ninety-five-foot recumbent Buddha on the verge of worldly extinction. This hugely popular exhibit, which also featured assorted arhats and animals by the deathbed, was novel also for its high admission fee of eighteen *mon* (thirty cents), unprecedented in the history of *misemono*.<sup>60</sup> Secular figures were popular as well. A giant toad constructed of velvet was available for Edo curiosity-seekers in 1776, while a twenty-foot embroidered image of Daikokuten 大黒天, genius of commercial prosperity, dominated an Ekōin fair of 1851.<sup>61</sup> A large tiger constructed entirely of lamp wicks prowled the Ekōin in 1853; a sixty-foot counterpart, composed entirely of brooms, lurked in the Okuyama seven years later.

Still figures of varying dimensions, alone or in tableaux, were a reliable source of revenue for exhibitors, although some, like a grandiose wooden rendition in 1835 of the Chinese historical figure Han Hsin 韓信 (3rd c. B.C.), inexplicably failed to draw crowds. The use of vegetable wax for candle manufacture was common, but the wax thus obtained was too lumpy and impure for sculptural purposes.<sup>62</sup> A European waxworks exhibitor, though, would have recognized immediately the tableaux created by his Japanese counterpart in papier-mâché, wood, or plaster. A sideshow at a *kaichō* fair of 1838 illustrated with lifeless mannequins the gruesome spectrum of unnatural death in a manner worthy of Madame Tussaud or the Musée Grévin: mutilated corpses bound to tree trunks, disembodied bleeding heads swinging by the hair, a wizened corpse peering from its coffin, etc. (The success of the exhibit,

<sup>60</sup> *BN* 2: 63. Also, Kitagawa, 2:595.

<sup>61</sup> Giant velvet toad in Ōta, p. 324.

<sup>62</sup> On Japanese vegetable wax, see Bird, pp. 193–94. Still, Edward S. Morse (1838–1920) calls the displays “wax figures,” and his attention to material description is unusually precise. See *Japan Day by Day*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 1:267–68.

designed by the creator of the Ōmori “haunted teahouse,” prompted many imitations.)<sup>63</sup> Far more wholesome were renditions of the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety, executed entirely of *konbu* 昆布 dried kelp, and exhibited in 1853. A show four years later at the Ekōin offered one hundred figures of women, of all ages and stations, their faces the embodiment of as many different emotions. The figures displayed were occasionally topical: in 1854, patrons of a show in the Okuyama could view lifelike effigies of the kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō VIII/Sanshō (八世) 市川團十郎/[俳名] 三升 (1823–1854)—on stage, in the greenroom, on the threshold of paradise, at the very moment of nirvana—only months after his sensational suicide in Osaka. An educational overtone was not lacking in the exhibit of the “ten months of pregnancy” in 1864, in which models of an open womb displayed the real or fanciful evolution of a fetus during the term of pregnancy.

An outgrowth of these simple static *ningyō* 人形, “dolls,” or “figures,” was the phenomenon of *karakuri-ningyō* 絡繰人形 “contraption dolls,” or more commonly, *iki-ningyō* 活偶人 “living dolls.” From the descriptions I have seen, these were spring-driven automata, capable of a limited range of repetitive motions. The earliest mention of *iki-ningyō* in *Bukō nenpyō* appears for the year 1853, although the exhibit of automata is clearly far older. The same source records that in 1813, an old woman made dolls dance and play instruments “without any human agency” by connecting their mechanisms to a water wheel in Asakusa. A figure of the “Laughing Buddha” Hotei 布袋, exhibited in 1822, would rouse himself from slumber when called, take up his fan, dance, and laugh (the same figure was still being exhibited in 1859). An 1833 *misemono* in Fukagawa 深川, to judge by an ornamental description in *Edo hanjōki* 江戸繁昌記 (Chronicle of the prosperity of Edo, 1832–1836), displayed lavish tableaux of *iki-ningyō* in climactic scenes from the Chinese vernacular novel *Shui hu chuan* 水滸傳, complete with narrator, orchestra lodged in the rafters, special effects of smoke and colored lights, and mechanical scene changes on each of the four stages surrounding the audience.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> BN 2:92. Also, Mitamura, p. 429.

<sup>64</sup> Terakado, 2:155–160. Kaempfer provides an early reference to automata in his catalog of the wonders and luxury manufactures of Kyoto: “The best and scarcest dies,

The 1850s and 1860s were an especially profitable time for this variety of distraction, and new displays appeared annually. Matsumoto Kisaburō 松本喜三郎 and Akiyama Heijūrō 秋山平十郎 (d. 1867), both originally from Kumamoto 熊本, worked in rivalry to provide Edo audiences with ever more grandiose automated spectacles. Matsumoto inaugurated his offerings in 1855 with a fantastic ethnographic display of creatures from the “Long-Arm,” the “Long-Leg,” the “No-Body Country,” together with such domestic exotics as Dutchmen and courtesans from the Maruyama 丸山 quarter in Nagasaki. In 1856, Matsumoto repeated his successes in the Okuyama with articulated heroes from *Shui hu chuan*, scenes from the kabuki favorites *Chūshin-gura* and *Kagamiyama furusato no nishiki-e* 鏡山旧里錦絵, as well as legendary figures like the cannibal hag of Hitotsuya 一ツ家の姥 and the hermit of Kume 久米. Figures illustrative of “the inner secrets of a brothel” rounded out the exhibit, which numbered in total sixty-two automata. An articulated princess from the submarine Dragon Palace lured spectators into a show of forty-eight “types” in 1860, vivid embodiments of the gamut of humors. Most ambitious of all Matsumoto’s undertakings was a pious representation, fitting for Asakusa, of Kannon’s miraculous efficacy in each of thirty-three prescribed sites of pilgrimage throughout the West. This gigantic mechanical *ex voto* was the prize attraction of Asakusa after its unveiling in 1871; it was still functional in 1878, when a foreign traveler noted its particulars, as well as the “creaking wheel of great size” that provided the drive for the life-size figures.<sup>65</sup>

Akiyama Heijūrō’s exhibits were equally spectacular. His *ikinogyō* displays of 1857 portrayed Yoshiwara 吉原 courtesans, kabuki

---

the most artful carvings, all sorts of musical Instruments, pictures, japan’d cabinets, all sorts of things wrought in gold and other metals, . . . are made here in the utmost perfection, as are also the richest dresses, and after the best fashion, all sorts of toys, puppets, moving their heads of themselves, and numberless other things, too many to be here mention’d.” See Kaempfer, 3: 21.

<sup>65</sup> Bird, p. 76. On the Kannon displays, see Bird, pp. 76–77, as well as *BN* 2: 238 and Griffis, pp. 388–390.

Probably similar, though of indeterminate origin, were the life-size, alarmingly flame-haired mannequins of “typical Westerners” young Clara Whitney (1861–1936) noted in Asakusa in 1875. See Clara A. N. Whitney, *Clara’s Diary*, ed. M. William Steele and Tamiko Ichimata (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1979), p. 36.



celebrities, as well as fictional interludes from Ryūtei Tanehiko's 柳亭種彦 (1783–1842) best-selling masterwork, *Nise Murasaki inaka Genji* 修紫田舎源氏 (An impostor Murasaki and a rustic Genji, 1829–1842). A depiction of Hideyoshi's stalwart general Katō Kiyomasa 加藤清正 (1562–1611) in contest with a tiger was the offering for 1861 (an exhibit with possible xenophobic overtones, given Kiyomasa's hatred of Christianity); animated figures of the twelve cyclical animals were the New Year's presentation of 1865. The vogue for *iki-ningyō*, however, faded as the form's novelty wore off. The Kiyomasa exhibit, for all its elaboration, drew few spectators; Akiyama's final tableaux in 1867, a month or two before his death, made a poor showing.

In competition with these examples of native technological ingenuity were examples of foreign know-how. Western novelties, authentic or self-styled, were a feature of several shows. An exhibit of "Dutch manufactures," their nature unspecified, was the attraction in 1819 at Ryōgoku, while a Fukagawa show of 1853 demonstrated the imported Dutch *charugoro* [simply チャルゴロ], "an instrument that produces various sounds by itself within a box"—possibly a barrel organ of some sort. In 1866, an imported rotary saw and drill press were set up at the less fashionable eastern end of Ryōgoku Bridge; despite their utilitarian promise and novelty, the machines failed to attract the overwhelming crowds the organizers had anticipated. An "exhibit of wonders" in the summer of 1869 offered a drum made to beat by telegraphic impulses in the same booth with more conventional crowd-pleasers like a performer able to walk upside down on the ceiling and dancing cats. This, too, had a limited run. By 1874, an all-Western sideshow of steam-driven flywheels and "telegraphic patterns" in Asakusa managed some profit, as did an 1876 one-*sen* 銭 showing of Western landscapes and oil paintings in Shinbashi 新橋.<sup>66</sup>

The most significant of all Western contributions to the world of *misemono* was undoubtedly the telescope and its core element, the magnifying lens. The renting out of telescopes for a modest fee was among the simplest of all shows: the showman simply provided the instrument, and the bustling urban setting itself served as a ceaselessly fascinating exhibit.

<sup>66</sup> Furukawa, p. 299.

Hitotsu-me no  
 hashi wo mamuki ni  
 Hirokōji  
 katame futagite  
 miru mushi-megane

“Directly before you, sir,  
 the First Bridge [of Honjo]—”  
 squinting, one eye covered,  
 through the telescope  
 on [Ryōgoku] Plaza.<sup>67</sup>

The integrity of the telescope operator was not always above reproach. An operator near Osaka, in urging his device on the unsuspecting Yaji 弥次 and Kita 北 [八] of *Hiza-kurige*, advises them to hold the telescope to their ears to hear the sounds of distant theaters, or to their nostrils to whiff the appetizing odors of remote eels.<sup>68</sup> To save his patrons the trouble of focusing, a showman in Fukagawa in 1798 simply painted the oiled paper Buddha colossus of Shinagawa on the lens of his rental instrument.<sup>69</sup>

*Nozoki-karakuri* 覗機関 (or simply *nozoki*) “peep shows” used the Western optical lens to reveal a specially prepared artificial world inside a box. Common to all peep shows was a large portable console, often decorated with gaudy scenes from the spectacle it contained.<sup>70</sup> “The outside of his box,” writes one American observer, “is usually adorned with pictures of famous actors or courtesans, nine-tailed foxes, devils of all colors, dropsical badgers, and wrathful husbands butchering faithless wives and their paramours, ar some such staple horror in which the normal Japanese so delights.”<sup>71</sup> A row of four or five viewing portholes, at inconvenient waist-high level, was another invariable feature. The content of the peep show, however,

<sup>67</sup> Again, another unremarkable verse, from “Ryōgoku Hirokōji” in *Edo bungaku chimei jiten* (1973 ed.). On original source, see n. 28. There is a pun on *hitotsu-me* 一ツ目 “first” as well as “one eye,” a word also echoed in *katame* 片目 “single eye.”

<sup>68</sup> Jippensha, pp. 436–37 and Satchell, p. 323.

<sup>69</sup> Here again there is some problem of dating. *Kappa daibutsu-den ryaku engi* 合羽大仏殿略縁起 (Abridged history of the oilpaper Great Buddha Hall), a *kokkeibon* 滑稽本 of 1793, is clearly intended to reflect this display, and the work cannot be later than the death of its author, Shiba Zenkō 芝全交, in July 1793. [*Kaitei*] *Nihon shōsetsu shomoku nenpyō* [改訂] 日本小説書目年表, ed. Yamazaki Fumoto 山崎麓, rev. ed. Shoshi Kenkyūkai 書誌研究会, *Shoshi shomoku shirīzu* 書誌書目シリーズ no. 6 (Yumani Shobō, 1977), p. 146 insists on a date of 1793 for the *kokkeibon* and for the exhibit.

<sup>70</sup> For an illustration of such a show, see Kitagawa, 2: 595. A good description may be found in Kajima, pp. 97–98, where the entertainment is called a *Takeda karakuri* “Takeda contraption,” possibly in tribute to Takeda Nuinosuke 竹田縫之助, a manufacturer of automata in the 1850s and 1860s? See *BN* 2: 134, 171, 179, 183, 192, 198, 203, 214.

<sup>71</sup> Griffis, p. 454.

was variable, as was the nature of the display. At its simplest, the spectator saw only a succession of images on a roll or “flats,” sometimes with written captions.<sup>72</sup> Scenes were frequently in the *uki-e* “floating picture” style, in which techniques of Western perspective enhanced the illusion of depth.<sup>73</sup> More elaborate setups provided cardboard figures, jiggled back and forth in grooves by the operator. The exhibitor’s running commentary in a predictable singsong rhythm, sometimes to musical accompaniment, embellished the premier performances.

The peep shows of Edo catered primarily to the tastes of children, and entrepreneurs had an expert knowledge of their clientele:

Karakuri wa  
terako no michi e  
yatsu ni deru

The peep show appears  
along the path from school  
promptly at two.

Kaka-san ni  
nedatte ko’ na to  
nozoki ii

“Tell Mommy you  
*really* want to see it,”  
says Mr. Peep Show.

Hana wo yoku  
kaminasai yo to  
nozoki ii

“Make sure you wipe  
your nose clean first,”  
says Mr. Peep Show.<sup>74</sup>

The wonders inside the boxes were manifold, but all were immediately appealing. Theatrical themes—love suicides, Ishikawa Goemon 石川五右衛門 boiled in a kettle and O-Shichi the greengrocer’s daughter 八百屋お七 at the stake, *Chūshin-gura*—were stand-bys, as were familiar legends or celebrated scenes of China

<sup>72</sup> Kitagawa, 2: 596. The essential similarity of the captioned stories on rollers to heavily illustrated *kusazōshi* fiction, bound in book form, offers food for thought.

<sup>73</sup> On *uki-e* displays, see Miyoshi Ikkō 三好一光, “Uki-e” 浮絵, in *Edo-go jiten* 江戸語事典, (1976 ed.). Santō Kyōden’s 1782 *kibyōshi*, *Go-zonji no shōbai-mono* 御存商売物 (Goods you all know about), an allegorical “battle of the books,” depicts in one of its illustrations a “Great Dutch peep show.” The exhibitor, banging a drum, bears the name Uki-e, while the child squatting to look at the show has the name Mame-e まめゑ, “Miniature.” See *Kibyōshi sharebon shū* 黄表紙・洒落本集, ed. Mizuno Minoru 水野稔, *NKBT* (1958), 59: 93 for illustration, p. 94 for exhibitor’s spiel in text.

<sup>74</sup> Ōmagari Komamura 大曲駒村, “Karakuri,” *Senryū daijiten* 川柳大辞典 (rpt. of 1939–1941 *Senryū jūi* 川柳辞彙; 1977 ed.) for first verse; subsequent two from entry “Nozoki.” No dates are given for the verses.

and Japan.<sup>75</sup> A radical departure from the conventional range of subjects was the more adult *Seiyō* 西洋 *nozoki-karakuri* “Western peep show.” The first such show, exhibited in Asakusa in 1872, spawned seventeen imitations around Tokyo by the end of the year.<sup>76</sup> Instead of the usual lurid sequences, spectators at these newer attractions could enjoy “authentic” and satisfyingly educational visions of the mysterious West. The promoter of one such attraction, in an ornamental account of 1874, promises views of an American fire and a German war, hospitals and museums, and lastly a naked figure of Venus (or Benzaiten, depending upon one’s cultural perspective).<sup>77</sup> A show drawn in a cartoon of 1875 labels its lenses, ambitiously, “The Austrian Exposition,” “The Capital of France,” and “A Complete View of England.”<sup>78</sup> The Western peep shows passed out of fashion by the end of the 1870s, but the traditional form still lingered until the late Meiji period, and intrigued Nagai Kafū 永井荷風 (1879–1959) as a child.<sup>79</sup>

The world of flora and fauna provided ample material for the enterprising showman. Giant chrysanthemums in profusion were on display in the Okuyama in 1856. The practice of creating ornamental figures from flower petals or pruned topiary—more an advertisement of nurserymen and gardeners’ talents than the brainchild of showmen—had a sporadic suburban vogue in 1844 and throughout the latter nineteenth century.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup> On peep show themes, see Kitagawa, 2: 595; Kajima, p. 98; and “Nozoki-karakuri,” *Senryū daijiten* (1977 ed.).

<sup>76</sup> *BN* 2: 251–52.

<sup>77</sup> *Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology*, ed. Donald Keene (1956; rpt. New York: Grove-Evergreen, 1960), pp. 34–36. Extract from *Tōkyō shin hanjōki* 東京新繁昌記 (New chronicle of the prosperity of Tokyo, 1874) by Hattori Bushō 服部撫松 (1842–1908).

<sup>78</sup> Tsuchida, p. 244. Also advertised is “An Italian Bay.” The “Austrian Exposition” probably refers to the 1873 World’s Fair in Vienna. I strongly suspect that these “Western peep shows” used some variety of imported stereoscope cards, but I have no proof either way.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223. The quote is from *Kitsune* 狐 (The fox), one of nine short stories included in the collection *Kanraku* 歓楽 (Merrymaking, 1909). See Nagai Sōkichi 永井壯吉, *Kafū zenshū* 荷風全集 28 vols. (Iwanami Shoten, 1963), 4: 98. The gruesome scenes on the sign advertising the *nozoki-karakuri* included the ghost of O-Kiku, hounded to death for breaking a dish in her master’s household, and episodes from *Shiranui monogatari* 白縫譚 (談) (The tale of Shiranui, 1849–1883?), an enormously long serial *gōkan* romance by Ryūkatēi Kanekazu 柳下亭種員 (1807–1858) and others.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226–28. See also Bird, p. 202; Yoshihara, pp. 97–99; *BN* 2: 104–05 (in

Wildlife was an attraction that knew no seasonal limitations. Audiences flocked to Asakusa to view a porcupine (1775), a donkey (1841), a giant squid seventeen feet long (1853). Ferocity and rarity augmented the fascination of an imported tiger (1861), an elephant cow (1863), and a wolf (1777), which latter escaped from its cage on Ryōgoku Bridge and panicked the city.<sup>81</sup> The two camels of 1821 were outstandingly successful; their intractable dispositions, though, led to the incorporation of *rakuda* 駱駝 “camel” into the vernacular as a synonym for “big lummoX” or as a pejorative prefix.<sup>82</sup> Although whaling was a well-established industry in certain coastal areas, the word *kujira* 鯨 was pressed into service to denote almost any sea monster the Edo showman wished to produce.<sup>83</sup> Authentic whale exhibitions of dead or beached specimens appeared in 1734 and again in 1851. In this latter show, the carcass of a baby whale was transported to the Okuyama from its landfall near Kamakura. The stench of the putrefying attraction deterred all but the most intrepid.<sup>84</sup>

---

1844). 157 (1856), 185 (1861), 189 (1862), 236 (1870), 241 (1871). Particularly interesting is the floral show mentioned in *BN* 2: 191 for 1862 in which characters from the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety series and from *Hakkenden* were made manifest in chrysanthemums. According to *Kiki no manimani*, the first major chrysanthemum extravaganza was held in Somei 染井 village (now roughly the Komagome area of Toshima ward, Tokyo) in 1812, but annual repetitions of the show proved uneconomical after six or seven years. See Kitamura, pp. 116–17.

The protagonist of Natsume Sōseki’s 夏目漱石 (1867–1916) novel *Sanshirō* 三四郎 (1908) marvels before a similar display in Dangozaka; see ch. 5.

<sup>81</sup> *BN* 1: 198–99. See also Ōta, p. 350.

<sup>82</sup> *BN* 2: 68. We find the terms *rakuda-kō* 駱駝膏 “quack salve,” *rakuda-zumi* 駱駝炭 “inferior charcoal,” and *rakuda-rō* 駱駝蠟 “shoddy candles.” See entry “Rakuda,” *Senryū daijiten* (1977 ed.).

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, an 1851 exhibit in *BN* 2: 125.

<sup>84</sup> *BN* 2: 125. On a comparable cetacean showing in England in 1809, also plagued by malodor, see Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 305.

Before leaving the topic, I should also mention trained animals. “There are booths,” writes Isabella Bird, “where for a few *rin* 厘 you may have the pleasure of feeding some very ugly and greedy apes, or of watching mangy monkeys which have been taught to prostrate themselves Japanese fashion.” See Bird, p. 76. Far more elegant are the acts Kyōden mentions at Fukiya-chō embankment in his *kibyōshi*, *Yononaka shareken no e-zu* 世上酒落見繪図 (Illustrated guide to contemporary chic, 1791), including Pekingese hopping through hoops, mynah birds chanting *nagauta* 長唄, even a parrot able to mimic famous actors from the three major kabuki theaters: “‘As my opening act,’” croaks the parrot, “‘I shall perform an imitation of Ichikawa Komazō Kinshō 市川高麗藏金升.’” See Mori Senzō, *Zoku kibyōshi kaidai* 続黄表紙解題 (Chuokōronsha, 1974), p. 248.

Animal hoaxes were a simple means to dupe the credulous. The horn of an *unikōru* (i.e. “unicorn”), a beast indigenous to the “Sweden Sea,” made the rounds in 1836. A diminutive “tiger,” the size and shape of a domestic cat, appeared in Ryōgoku in 1851; to conceal its telltale cries, the exhibitor commissioned a musical ensemble to play continuously at high volume nearby. The *chōei* [simply チャウエイ in the original]—a sort of cross between a lap dog and a long-haired billy goat—claimed its own booth in 1861. Most famous of all Japanese animal hoaxes—and undoubtedly only the merest representative of a whole cottage industry of teratological taxidermy—was the “Fejee mermaid.” This hideous desiccated composite of monkey’s head and fish body made its way from Nagasaki to Batavia, and thence to London in 1822.<sup>85</sup> After a successful showing, it was purchased by the proprietor of the Boston Museum, who subsequently lent it on a perpetual basis to his close friend, P.T. Barnum (1810–1891). First exhibited under Barnum’s care in 1842, the Japanese “mermaid” attracted international derision and amazement for decades.<sup>86</sup>

The *misemono* showman did not hesitate to exhibit the human prodigy in his booths as well. A “demon girl” of preternatural ugliness appeared alongside Gennai’s hoax calf in the Ekōin *kaichō* of 1778. So successful was the girl that her life inspired at least two biographies, and a rival “demon girl” exhibit (also successful) sprang up on the western end of Ryōgoku Bridge.<sup>87</sup> The “testicle girl” of 1806 appeared at first sight an entirely proper young lady, until she revealed a well-formed scrotum beneath her garments. The charm and loveliness of her features, however, won her many admirers, one of whom eventually married her. (Sadly, an operation to remove the vestiges of androgyny proved fatal to the bride.) A seven-year-old from Nihonmatsu 二本松, his body entirely covered with scales, attracted some interest in the spring of 1850; that

<sup>85</sup> On the “Fejee mermaid” in London, see Altick, pp. 302–03.

<sup>86</sup> See A. H. Saxon, ed., *Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 12, 80.

<sup>87</sup> *BN* 1: 200; also, Ōta, p. 353. The two *kokkeibon* biographies, both printed in 1778, are *Kishinron hyōban no musume* 鬼神論評判娘 (Discourse on demons and gods; the famed girl) by the otherwise unknown Muchū Dōjin 夢中道人, and *Kijōden* 鬼娘伝 (Life of the demon girl) by the equally obscure Muki Sanjin 夢鬼山人.

Chan Cheng-chiu 詹正九, mentioned below, was exhibited in 1872. See *BN* 2: 249.

summer, though, his reputation was eclipsed by the "Bear Boy"—actually a young girl—from Tango, whose body was entirely covered with a mat of black fur. (For her, too, fortune proved unkind: after the novelty of her existence had worn off, even tours around the city failed to generate profits. She was reduced to peddling cakes in the marketplace, her too-familiar appearance enhanced by flashy outfits to catch the attention of a jaded citizenry.) Chan Cheng-chiu 詹正九, an eight-foot giant from Nanking not unskilled in calligraphy, was one of the last representatives of this pathetic gallery. Of him *Bukō nenpyō* remarks, not without an element of unkind chauvinism, "He looked like a true rustic, but this was entirely in keeping with the national character."

Exhibits of freaks and deformities are among the oldest and most universal, if least laudable forms of entertainment. In Japan, however, the exhibitor of freaks not infrequently presented his subjects as object lessons in the Buddhist doctrine of karmic causation. A sinful act in a previous life or a more recent parental transgression was held responsible for a penal, deformed present existence—an attitude diametrically opposed to the popular Christian sentiment that the poor, the infirm, or the mentally insane are by virtue of their debility closer to God.<sup>88</sup> The showman of Europe occasionally dignified his exhibits of oddities by urging them as testimonies to the multifarious and wonderful handiwork of the Lord, but never as the evidence of God's vengeful retribution.<sup>89</sup> To the Japanese entrepreneur, however, all freaks were *inga-mono* 因果物 "karma acts." A re-created barker's spiel, dating from the first years of the nineteenth century, gives a good idea of the approach:

Next door was a crude hut in much the same style. On an elevated platform stood a girl covered with a thin veil; behind her was a translucent sliding door covered with alternating squares of blue and white paper. The man to her side grasped a folding fan upside down, coughed significantly by way of preface to his remarks, then addressed the crowd of spectators: "This girl is the child of hunters in such-and-such a village in the Koshi 越 region. The sin of taking life, ladies and gentlemen, was visited upon the child, and thus she came to be born in this remarkable condition. I have led her to this spot in the remote hope that some vestige of her sinful

<sup>88</sup> This interpretation of congenital handicaps is, in fact, expressly forbidden by John 9: 1-3.

<sup>89</sup> For examples of this pious justification, see Altick, pp. 42, 229, 284 and 303.

burden might be shed, and here display her to all and sundry.” With this he removed her veil—and just as he had promised, black fur grew in an unbroken mat from her face to her extremities, to the extent that even the position of her eyes and nose could not be ascertained.<sup>90</sup>

Bordering on the monstrous, although not so emphatically strange, were the possessors of superhuman physical skills or capacities. Most famous of these, perhaps most celebrated of all Ryōgoku *misemono*, was Kirifuri-hanasaki-otoko 霧降花咲男, the “mist-descending flower-blossoming man,” who in 1774 demonstrated his ability to swallow great quantities of air and expel the same in modulated flatulent arias. Not only was his talent the inspiration for Gennai’s *Hōhiron* 放屁論 (Disquisition on flatulence, 1774; sequel 1777), it also earned the practitioner a portrait in the relatively new medium of *nishiki-e* 錦絵 polychrome woodblock prints.<sup>91</sup> Strong-men and their female counterparts performed regularly. Yanagawa Tomoyo 柳川ともよ, a doughty woman from Echigo, inspired her own biography by Gennai in 1776.<sup>92</sup> Muscular prowess was not the only asset of the *ha-jikara* 齒力 “tooth power” performers, who lifted heavy props and weighted boards effortlessly in their dentition. Hajikara Kiemon 齒力鬼右衛門, one such, thought nothing of crushing porcelain teacups in his mouth or holding a temple bell in his teeth (1841). A teen-ager from Dewa exhibited in Edo in 1840 had the unique power to extract and replant his eyeballs in their sockets at will; to enhance the shock value of his presentations, he would attach heavy strands of coins to the extruded lengths of optic nerve filament. Particularly Japanese were the *ashigei* 足芸 “foot skill” performers, who used their feet with the dexterity of hands. Hanakawa Ozuru or Kozuru 花川小鶴, a Ryōgoku attraction of 1868, was able to reel silk, sew, fill a pipe, strike a fire, even accomplish passable *ikebana* 活花 using only her lower extremities.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Ishikawa, p. 962. In a monologue contained in Sanba’s *kokkeibon* [*Rei no sakekusei*] *Ippai kigen* [例之酒癖] 一盃綺言 (Your typical inebriates: Brimful of babble, 1813), the archetypal “drunk who finds himself amusing” suddenly adopts the persona of a barker before a “bear-girl” exhibit; his words parallel very closely the presentation in *Miyako no teburī*. See *Kokkeibon shū* 滑稽本集, *Nihon meicho zenshū* (*Edo bungei no bu*), 14:711.

<sup>91</sup> *BN* 1:193; also Ōta, p. 318.

<sup>92</sup> *Rikifuden* 力婦伝 (Biography of the strong-woman), a *kokkeibon* of 1776, is by Isōrō 潤滄浪 with a preface by Fūrai Sanjin 風来山人/Hiraga Gennai; Gennai, however, is probably the true author of the whole. See [*Kaitei*] *Nihon shōsetsu shomoku nenpyō*, p. 142.

<sup>93</sup> *BN* 2:217–18. Hanakawa was still performing in 1881, but had fallen to con-



The more conventional skills of *misemono* performers were legion. Least skilled of all, perhaps, were young women burdened with heavy cosmetics and opulent robes, who sat immobile inside tiny booths. Their entire show consisted in the simple exposure of their genitalia to prurient paying customers. A refinement of the proceedings was to offer each patron in turn a hollow bamboo tube, an implement conventionally used to revive dying embers. The patron blew and poked at the model under the exhibitor's direction; those spectators able to refrain from laughing in embarrassment during the operation received a small prize.<sup>94</sup>

A fair number of the skilled performers at *misemono* shows exhibited acts that find ready Western analogues. A fire-eater (also a connoisseur of teacups) appeared at Ryōgoku in 1758; acrobatic balancing acts on blocks or ladders were commonplace in the nineteenth century.<sup>95</sup> Ventriloquism is rarer, but a blind woman "able to say things inside her belly" performed in O-Kuramae in 1872. The Osakan acrobat Hayatake Torakichi 早竹虎吉 offered in 1857 and subsequent years sleight of hand, acrobatics, and tight-rope walking. Equestrian circuses are common in records as well. Among the more notable are an 1841 show in the Okuyama, in which horses and riders were winched into the air, and the "Three Sisters" show of 1856 animated by three extremely corpulent Amazonian farmgirls from Kazusa.

Other performances in the showmen's stalls would strike a Western observer as less familiar. To perform *kyokumochi* 曲持, the acrobat lay supine, extended his feet in the air, and spun objects—balls, bricks, parasols, children—rapidly on the soles of his feet. For *kagonuke* 籠脱 "basket jumping," a large basket, roughly woven and open at both ends, was laid on its side. After amassing a sufficient quantity of donations, the stripped performer would take a

---

cluding her act with self-exposure. See Furukawa, pp. 295–96. *Ashigei* performers appear in a portion of *Edo hanjōki* dated 1832, although here the term refers more to foot-juggling. See Terakado, 1:87. See Terakado, 3:133–35 for another exhibit, possibly the 1835 exhibit mentioned in *BN* 2:89–90.

<sup>94</sup> Kitagawa, 2:595. *Kaichō*, in addition to its orthodox meanings of "display of a holy image" or "temple fair," also carried the colloquial meaning of "female genitalia" or exposure of the same. See "Kaichō," *Senryū daijiten* (1977 ed.). Whether the association derived from this sort of display or not is unclear.

<sup>95</sup> For acrobatics, see Ishikawa, p. 965–66; *BN* 2:103 for 1844; and Terakado, 1:72–74.

few steps, then hurtle headlong through the basket to the opposite end of the stage. To increase the difficulty of the stunt, lighted candles or sharpened swords were fixed inside the narrow basket passage.<sup>96</sup> Strictly *sui generis* was the act of a seven-year-old prodigy in 1866, able to write mirror-image script gracefully, in several styles, as well as to execute calligraphy with a brush strapped to his head, or poised between his elbows. The manipulation of toy tops became an exacting art in the hands of Takezawa Tōji. After an early career as a dentist and manufacturer of dental prostheses, he turned in the 1840s to the manipulation of spinning tops. At a first major show in Ryōgoku in 1844, he demonstrated the use of trick tops or tops implanted with springs. A rival immediately imitated the show in Asakusa, and a top craze swept Edo. At a revival performance in 1849, Takezawa and his son drew even larger audiences than before when they combined top spinning with illusions; crowds poured in for over six continuous months. In the course of performances inside a *yose* 寄席 theater in April 1850, the second-floor gallery collapsed from an excessive press of spectators, and several casualties resulted.<sup>97</sup>

Two categories of performance are of particular interest, not so much for their intrinsic content as for their reproduction at a more popular, accessible level of remote or institutionalized forms of entertainment. Women had no place in any of the three primary forms of stage drama in pre-Meiji Japan. In street performances, however, women could and did perform for profit. Women *gidayū* 義太夫 chanters were a standard feature of the entertainment circuit by 1810.<sup>98</sup> Despite repeated attempts to suppress the form, it survived with redoubled vitality through the 1890s.<sup>99</sup> We find performances of women's *nō* 能 in 1869, and women's kabuki from 1868. Popu-

<sup>96</sup> *Kagonuke* in Yada, 4:215–16, as well as Furukawa, pp. 296–97.

<sup>97</sup> See advertisement composed by Ryūtei Tanehiko for Takezawa's "comprehensive dental care" in Masuda, p. 102. General references to Takezawa Tōji in *BN* 2:103 (1844) and 2: 117 (1849). Collapse of *yose* gallery in Yoshihara, p. 102.

<sup>98</sup> "Zoku Asukagawa," p. 40.

<sup>99</sup> A female *gidayū* performance around 1832, complete with a doting stage mother, is described in Terakado, 1:78–81. On later manifestations, see Yada, 4:214–15, as well as Tsuchida, pp. 207–09.

One could also mention here performances of women's *sumō*, held until relatively recent date. One such "stable" even toured Hawaii successfully in 1930. See Masuda, pp. 131–32.

larized or abbreviated versions of established theatrical traditions are another noteworthy category among *misemono*. The *Mibu kyōgen* 壬生狂言 masked pantomime players of Kyoto performed in conjunction with the *kaichō* display of a temple treasure from Kyoto in 1790; numerous indigenous imitations soon arose to capitalize on the popularity of the performances.<sup>100</sup> Those interested in *jōruri* could hear informal unaccompanied vocal performances of recitative in showmen's stalls in 1845, or hear a full-scale presentation by a performer seated within the bowels of a thirty-foot representation of a puppeteer (1860). Crude kabuki performances, in simple costumes on a minimal stage, were a feature of Asakusa and Ryōgoku in the 1860s. These unlicensed *odedeko-shibai* 御出木偶芝居 "jack-in-the-box theaters" provided some intimation of a full-scale kabuki performance for those unable to afford admission to the authorized showplaces in Saruwaka-chō 猿若町.<sup>101</sup>

The popular exhibit, whether macabre, astonishing, or baffling, has universal appeal; aside from comic and dramatic manifestations, limited in appeal to a single linguistic community, appreciation of the marvelous recognizes no national boundaries. It is not surprising, then, to learn that the popular show or attraction was one of the earliest avenues opened successfully between Japan and the West.

A first example of the role played by showmanship in international exchange is the importation of exotic animals, gifts from abroad. A pair of elephants, goodwill gift of an individual in Cochin, landed in Nagasaki in 1727. The female died almost immediately, but her partner toured Osaka, the imperial palace in Kyoto, and reached Edo in July 1728. For twenty years, it lived a peaceable existence in suburban Nakano 中野.<sup>102</sup> An "elephant"—actually two men in costume—marched regularly behind fantastically attired "foreigners" through the streets during the biennial Sannō 山王

<sup>100</sup> *BN* 2:4; see also Mitamura, p. 427. Interestingly, a repeat performance of 1840, just fifty years later, was not a success. See *BN* 2:94. *Kiki no manimani* records the two shows in greater detail; see Kitamura, pp. 28 and 206.

Most famous among the works inspired by the 1790 show was Bakin's maiden *gesaku* work, a *kibyōshi* entitled *Tsukaihatashite nibu kyōgen* 尽用而二分狂言 (Used up in a two-part skit, 1791). See Mori, *Zoku kibyōshi kaidai*, pp. 388–89, as well as Zolbrod, pp. 23–24.

<sup>101</sup> Yada, 4:212–13. Kajima, pp. 149–50 describes one such down-at-heel theater, where admission was probably eight to twelve *mon* at most.

<sup>102</sup> *BN* 1:131–32.

Festival.<sup>103</sup> A “panther”—possibly a wildcat—from the United States arrived safely across the Pacific in 1860, and was subsequently viewed by the teenaged shogun Iemochi 家茂 (ruled 1858–1866); before a month had elapsed, the animal was exhibited at Ryōgoku. Barely nine months old, the beast was four feet in length, and brandished a three-foot tail; it consumed a steady diet of live chickens and puppies.<sup>104</sup>

When permitted to visit the Suwa 諏訪 Shrine festival in Nagasaki in 1673, the captain of the Dutch trading factory recorded his displeasure in the daily log at having to sit through “a lot of monkey play and juggling tricks, although we had plenty of other business to attend to.”<sup>105</sup> Later generations of Europeans, however, were inclined to look with much greater charity on the exploits of Japanese performers. Western showmen in particular were eager to exhibit the recondite arts of Japan in an age when even the commonplaces of Japan were great novelties; their efforts provided for many Europeans and Americans a first glimpse of the island nation. P. T. Barnum, for example, confided in a letter of 1852 his hopes of receiving first sketches of Japanese life and customs during the forthcoming Perry expedition for inclusion in a projected popular illustrated newspaper.<sup>106</sup> A letter of 1860 addressed to the American overseer of the visit by the first *bakufu* delegation emphasizes Barnum’s role in decorating New York City in honor of the legates, and promises a private opening of his gigantic American Museum of curios to members of the mission.<sup>107</sup> During the first Japanese diplomatic mission to Europe in 1862, a British showman exhibited

<sup>103</sup> “Zō,” *Senryū daijiten* (1977 ed.).

<sup>104</sup> *BN* 2:180–81. I am not wholly certain that this was a diplomatic gift, but have drawn the inference from the wording of the passage.

<sup>105</sup> Charles R. Boxer, *Jan Compagnie in Japan, 1600–1850*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), p. 140. See also p. 125. For another European’s reaction to the same festival ca. 1885, see Pierre Loti (=Julien Viaud), *Madame Chrysanthème* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1887), pp. 170–72. Here the attractions included a puppeteer who employed feet as well as hands, and a Komodo dragon.

<sup>106</sup> “To Bayard Taylor,” 16 December 1852, Letter 46, *Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum*, ed. A. H. Saxon (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 62–63.

<sup>107</sup> “To Samuel Francis Du Pont,” 23 May 1860, Letter 88, *Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum*, pp. 105–06. In a letter of 10 October 1890, (p. 330), we learn of Barnum’s tentative plans to visit Japan, but his failing health in 1891 precluded all possibility of undertaking the arduous journey.

a timely nine thousand square-foot depiction of the city of Edo for the eyes of all London, although the source of his original sketches is unclear.<sup>108</sup>

Japanese popular entertainers, peripheral members of their society, were among the earliest groups to travel abroad. In 1864, “Professor” Risley—a New Jersey-born adventurer and acrobat whose checkered fortunes can be traced on at least four continents—arrived in the Western enclave at Yokohama with a miscellaneous troupe of performers and animals in tow to provide Japan’s first modern circus. The venture was not an unqualified success, but with the proceeds from his icehouse and dairy farm (also firsts for Japan), Risley in 1866 signed some two dozen native street entertainers for a two-year tour in the United States.<sup>109</sup> *Bukō nenpyō* enumerates the performers meticulously: eight top-spinners, including the renowned Matsui Gensui; four sleight-of-hand artists; two acrobats and tightrope walkers; two lion dancers; nine foot-jugglers and *ashigei* performers.<sup>110</sup> The progress of this little-known group—a party of Japanese workers under contract two years before the *Gannen-mono* 元年者 expedition to Hawaii—deserves closer study.

Japanese performers in increasing numbers became an installment in European theaters, circuses, and sideshows during the latter half of the nineteenth century—an age when their nationality alone made them remarkable oddities. As a distraction, John Ruskin (1819–1900) attended a London performance of Japanese acrobats in February 1867. In a philosophical letter addressed the following week to a long-suffering correspondent near Newcastle, Ruskin expatiates on the performance:

You may have heard that a company of Japanese jugglers has come over to exhibit in London. There has long been an increasing interest in Japanese art, which has

<sup>108</sup> Altick, pp. 481–82. For a newspaper critique of the exhibit, see p. 294.

<sup>109</sup> On Risley’s career, see Altick, p. 205. See also Pat Barr, *The Coming of the Barbarians* (London: MacMillan, 1967), pp. 36–37.

<sup>110</sup> Listing in *BN* 2:207–09. We note several entire artistic families in this roster of performers. An appended catalog of tricks suggests, in flowery terminology, the range of skills involved, including the manipulation of “great tops” some twenty-two inches in diameter and weighing over forty-five pounds, or of a top large enough to contain an eight-year-old girl. *Bukō nenpyō* makes no mention in this passage of Risley, but states the performers were hired by a certain American named *Benkutsu* ベンクツ.

been very harmful to many of our own painters, and I greatly desired to see what these people were, and what they did.<sup>111</sup>

From the ensuing description, it is apparent that the show was a fairly standard variety bill of top-spinning, juggling, acrobatics, and a masked goblin dance finale. Far from achieving heart's ease from the entertainment, however, Ruskin was plunged into brooding lucubrations about the nature of the Japanese people, and their specious but ignoble art:

The impression, therefore, produced upon me by the whole scene, was that of being in the presence of human creatures of a partially inferior race, but not without great human gentleness, domestic affection, and ingenious intellect; who were, nevertheless, as a nation, afflicted by an evil spirit, and driven by it to recreate themselves in achieving, or beholding the achievement, through years of patience, of a certain correspondence with the nature of the lower animals.<sup>112</sup>

On a less cerebral plane, no doubt, were the reactions of American spectators to Nekohachi 猫八, an emigrant expert in *kagonuke* jumping and cat imitations, who also possessed the ability to imbibe needles and mud, and spit out clear and turbid water in alternating jets; or French spectators to an *ashigei* artiste on tour with the Barnum and Bailey Circus circa 1890:

Miss OGURI, originally from Japan, is a most personable young lady. She, like her colleague Mr. Charles TRIPP, lacks arms, but also like him has learned to use her feet with a wonderful agility. Few persons would be able to accomplish with their hands what this skillful, albeit incomplete Japanese manages with her feet.<sup>113</sup>

Conversely, popular entertainers were among the first foreigners to enter Japan. A fitting prologue to this neglected chapter of international showmanship was a performance by the men of Commodore Perry's ships anchored off Kanagawa. On March 27, 1854, after weeks of difficult negotiations, the Japanese diplomatic envoys were guests of honor at a sumptuous American feast. Shortly before dusk, all assembled aboard the flagship *Powhatan* for the

<sup>111</sup> *Time and Tide*, Letter VI, dated 28 February 1867. John Ruskin, *Time and Tide and Munera Pulveris* (New York: MacMillan, 1928), p. 24.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25. His reaction cannot have been entirely negative, however, since near the beginning of Letter VII, dated four days later, he writes: "I had intended to return to those Japanese jugglers, after a visit to a theatre in Paris; . . ." See p. 27.

<sup>113</sup> On Nekohachi, see Kajima, pp. 90–91. "Miss OGURI etc." from an undated French circus poster, reproduced in Rupert Croft-Cooke and Peter Cotes, *Circus: A World History* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p. 72.

*pièce de résistance*. According to an authorized account of the expedition:

After the banquet, the Japanese were entertained by an exhibition of negro minstrelsy, got up by some of the sailors, who, blacking their faces and dressing themselves in character, enacted their parts with a humor that would have gained them unbounded applause from a New York audience even at Christy's. The gravity of the saturnine Hayashi [i.e. Hayashi Fukusai 林復齋 (1800–1859), dean of the Shōheikō 昌平黌 Academy] was not proof against the grotesque exhibition, and even he joined with the rest in the general hilarity provoked by the farcical antics and humorous performances of the mock negroes.<sup>114</sup>

From the fuller descriptions in the private diaries of American officers and seamen, it is apparent that the shipboard performance was a blackface minstrel show in the classic three-part structure evolved by the late 1840s: humorous repartee, a variety section, and a short skit (in this case, scenes from an 1838 melodrama by Lord Bulwer-Lytton).<sup>115</sup> A hand-painted Japanese scroll recording the progress of the negotiations solemnly depicts nine musicians in “darker” attire, disposed in the canonical semicircle around two cavorting dancers.<sup>116</sup> Four days after the performance, the Treaty of Kanagawa was ratified.

The earliest foreign entertainers in Japan performed primarily for the small foreign communities in the treaty ports, and yet it is apparent that their influence extended beyond those enclaves. “Professor” Risley's ad hoc circus of 1864, primarily an equestrian and acrobatic show, performed exclusively in Yokohama, but attracted visitors from Edo, twenty miles away.<sup>117</sup> In November 1869, Barnum's celebrated midget couple General and Mrs. Tom

<sup>114</sup> Francis L. Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of An American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan* (New York: D. Appleton, 1856), p. 438. “Christy's” refers to the Christy Minstrels, one of the seminal minstrel troupes and, since 1846, an entertainment sensation in New York. See Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 37–38. Ironically, George Christy incorporated the “Japanese Treaty” into a June 1860 show, and advertised the presence of the *bakufu* legation as special guests (and attractions) at a “Grand Japanese Matinee.” Toll, p. 171.

<sup>115</sup> Arthur C. Walworth, *Black Ships Off Japan* (New York: Knopf, 1946), p. 203. On the structure of a minstrel show, see Wilmeth, pp. 119–120.

<sup>116</sup> See illustration facing Barr, p. 64.

For further information on a vogue for “Japanese” content in American minstrelsy of the 1860s through 1880s, see Toll, pp. 170–72.

<sup>117</sup> Furukawa, p. 311.

Thumb arrived in Yokohama on the first leg of their three-year global tour. After performances at the Yokohama Masonic Hall, the diminutive pair visited the capital, and later sojourned in Nagasaki. Mrs. Tom Thumb (1841–1919) comments at some length on the experience in her memoirs: “While in Japan, we exhibited before the high officials, the Japanese ladies and the few Europeans to be found in the empire. We were everywhere received with great expressions of kindness and hospitality.”<sup>118</sup> In an era when foreigners were great rarities in Japan and did not possess unlimited travel privileges, the Tom Thumb party enjoyed relative mobility: “In all the cities we visited in Japan we had no difficulty in freely going about; although the natives would rush from their shops and follow us sometimes to the number of several hundred, they never annoyed us by crowding upon us.”<sup>119</sup> The talents of Japanese showmen challenged the reputations of the most celebrated contemporary conjurers:

We often saw the Japanese jugglers perform their wonderful tricks, before which Blitz, Herrman and Keller would silently yield the palm. No scenery, no accessories—only squatted on the ground in the open street, silently performing these startling wonders so frequently described by travellers—so utterly unfathomable.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>118</sup> M. Lavinia Magri, *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb (Some of My Life Experiences)*, ed. A. H. Saxon (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979), p. 118.

Midget couples or groupings were not unknown in Japan. *BN 2*: 104 mentions dancing dwarves from Echigo, made to perform at the Ekōin in 1844, while p. 188 of the same volume describes an entire “family from the Pygmy Island” on display in 1862.

<sup>119</sup> Magri, p. 117.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118. The references are to Antonio Blitz, Alexander and Carl Hermann, and Harry Kellar, all celebrated illusionists in early nineteenth-century North America; *ibid.*, p. 187, n. 42.

Descriptions of Japanese street entertainers—like one’s first impressions of Mt. Fuji or reactions to a rickshaw ride—became a set piece in nineteenth-century travelers’ accounts of Japan. See, for example, the 1858 “butterfly prestidigitator” in Henry Heusken, *Japan Journal: 1855–1861*, ed. and trans. by Jeannette C. van der Corput and Robert A. Wilson (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1964), p. 204. Sir Rutherford Alcock, recalling his years in Japan from 1858 to 1860, places street magicians prominently among the colorful attractions found near the Zōjōji temple: “Here a party of jugglers may often be seen, too, collecting a crowd from the passers-by. Blondin and the Wizard of the North might both find formidable rivals here;—for the Japanese performers not only swallow portentously long swords and poise themselves on bottles;—but out of their mouths come the most unimaginable things—flying horses, swarms of flies, ribbons by the mile and paper shavings without end.” See Alcock, *The Capital*



One of the first large-scale Western entertainments outside the Yokohama enclave was the French Soullier circus, which opened in Tokyo in December 1871. Exorbitant admission prices, a poor location, and chilly weather encouraged few spectators; relocation to the more hospitable Okuyama in the spring of 1872 greatly improved profits. The Italian circus troupe of Giuseppe Chiarini raised its big top in three different Tokyo locations in 1886–1887. So pervasive was the appeal of its animal acts, acrobats, and clowns that, in a unique hybrid of popular entertainments, circus figures were incorporated into a kabuki production of 1886.<sup>121</sup>

The number of *misemono* shows betrays no particular decline during the 1860s and 1870s. Indeed, in a limited sense the turmoil of the Meiji Restoration produced new classes of performers, for displaced samurai turned on occasion to public demonstrations of *nō* recitation and swordsmanship to alleviate the strictures of poverty.<sup>122</sup> By the 1880s, however, the shows of Edo had declined noticeably in number and vitality.

Legislation was a first factor in the decline of the shows: the disinterested *laissez-faire* policy of the *bakufu* yielded to the puritanical legislative fervor of the early Meiji regime. A law of 1870 prohibited hoaxes and fraudulent exhibits; ordinances of 1872 and 1873 banned the exhibition of deformities on humanitarian grounds, as well as for the incompatibility of such vulgar displays

---

of the *Tycoon*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1863), 1:112. Blondin (=Jean-François Gravelet, 1824–1897) is, of course, the renowned French tightrope walker and acrobat. The “Wizard of the North” is John H. Anderson, an English magician of the mid-nineteenth century whose specialties included “spirit-writing”; see “Conjuring,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910–1911 ed.).

<sup>121</sup> On the Soullier (Japanese: *Surie*) circus, see *BN* 2: 242 and Furukawa, p. 311. For the Chiarini (Japanese: *Charine*) troupe, see Furukawa, p. 312. The kabuki play, entitled *Narhibiku Charine no kyokuba* 鳴響茶利音曲馬 (Resonant Chiarini circus), included among its dramatis personae a one-legged performer, a tiger tamer, elephant trainer, and Mr. Chiarini himself. See Tsuchida, p. 234. Additional brief notices of these circuses and their tours of East Asia appear in George Speaight, *A History of the Circus* (San Diego: A. S. Barnes, 1980), pp. 157 and 174. Speaight mentions that Louis Soullier took a troupe of Japanese acrobats with him to Paris in 1866, but offers no documentation.

<sup>122</sup> On these *gekikenkai* 撃剣会 “sword sparring meets,” see *BN* 2: 256 (in 1873). On street recitals of *nō* chanting or the koto by the erstwhile genteel, see Kikuchi, pp. 269–70. On comparable juggling and acrobatic performances by a displaced samurai of the late seventeenth century, see Mitamura, p. 428.

with the desired moral tone of the new capital.<sup>123</sup> The restriction or elimination of traditional sites was a second feature in the decline of street performances. To clear tracts for telegraph offices, the western Ryōgoku plaza and the southern access to Asakusa were requisitioned in 1872 and redeveloped; teahouses flanking the river were eliminated.<sup>124</sup> Ordinances of 1873 forbade the erection of the hallowed temporary screen hut, which occupied land without the requisite property taxes.<sup>125</sup> Mechanical entertainments, as in the West, undermined all live performances. The gramophone entered Japan by the late Meiji period, the Edison kinoscope in 1896.<sup>126</sup> The new forms of inanimate entertainment coexisted for a time alongside their predecessors: the Rokku 六区 ward of Asakusa, near the old Okuyama, became the center of the movie industry, and cinema patrons of the 1910s might well witness a variety performance between reels.<sup>127</sup> The eventual supremacy of the mechanical forms, however, was a certainty by the turn of the century.

The disappearance of open-air performers from the streets of Tokyo was not tantamount to the demise of the performances themselves. Large numbers of entertainers found refuge in the *yose* or *yoseba* theaters. These permanent institutions, like the analogous vaudeville houses of America, offered continuous, eclectic variety programs at all seasons in all neighborhoods; a single admission sufficed to see and hear what, in effect, was a continuous sequence of *misemono* under one roof.<sup>128</sup> Industrial technology, the quintessential motor of Meiji “enlightenment,” found an unexpected ally in the showmen of Tokyo. A papier-mâché Mt. Fuji, more

<sup>123</sup> Furukawa, pp. 292–93.

<sup>124</sup> *BN* 2: 244.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Furukawa, p. 293.

<sup>126</sup> Kinoscope introduction in Tsuchida, p. 175. An 1878 demonstration of the phonograph in Tokyo appears in Whitney, p. 206.

<sup>127</sup> Fujimoto, p. 2. A similar phenomenon was the lingering use of *katsuben* 活弁 live dramatic narrators during showings of early silent films. See Tsuchida, p. 175.

<sup>128</sup> There is no lack of information on the development of *yose* 寄席. See “Zoku Asukagawa,” p. 40. For a typical program around 1835, including comic *rakugo* performers, a lottery of ticket stubs, mechanical tableaux, projected *kage-e* 影絵 images, and a comic dialogue to conclude, see Terakado, 2: 244–54. On Tenpō Reform legislation against the proliferation of *yose*, see Yoshihara, pp. 75–76. For a colorful description of a variety bill around 1910, including storytellers, a Chinese buffoon and plate-juggler, and musical offerings, see Fujimoto, pp. 17–19.

grandiose than any *saiju* in conception, loomed 108 feet above Asakusa from 1887 until 1890.<sup>129</sup> A panorama theater of 1890, also in Asakusa, enthralled spectators with its optically deceptive canvases of the American Civil or Sino-Japanese Wars.<sup>130</sup> Industrial expositions, the acme of sober pragmatism, were not without their overtones of carnival display.<sup>131</sup>

According to one source, the Edo *misemono* lives on in post-War Japan, *mutatis mutandis*: the observer remarks a “spider girl” at Ikebukuro, “women’s sumo” at Takadanobaba, and an “X-ray girl” able to make manifest her skeletal structure.<sup>132</sup> The spirit of modern-day Tokyo, however, seems inimical to such leisurely, informal, and impromptu diversions: only television provides a precarious arena for the moribund arts. Asakusa today preserves some satisfying residue of seediness, although the cheap movie houses of the Rokku must now share quarters with a flashy off-track betting parlor; still less remains at Ryōgoku, now hardly more than an unprepossessing iron bridge and commuter junction. The live spectacles of Edo, showy effervescence of a culture in its plebeian heyday, have passed into the cultural historian’s preserve.

<sup>129</sup> Furukawa, p. 299.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 302–03.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303–04. The first government-sponsored domestic trade fair was held in 1877. Very interesting, however, is the description in *BN2*: 253 of an extensive exposition on the grounds of the old Satsuma fief manor in December 1872, at which minerals, fossils, works of art, toys, agricultural implements, butterflies, antiques, etc. were put on display. The passage, unfortunately, does not specify the sponsors of the show.

<sup>132</sup> Ozawa Shōichi 小沢昭一, *Watakushi wa kawara-kojiki; kō* 私は河原乞食・考 (Bungei Shunjū, 1976), pp. 91–92.