

Asakusa – History Now

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

At first glance, it would seem difficult to gain much of an impression of the history of Tokyo and the lives of her people from its fierce present-day urban countenance. Surprisingly enough, however, the city manages to support an incredible mix of everything from giant billboard-sized TV screens to very traditionally appointed noodle shops complete with bamboo-adorned interiors. If we care to look deeper into the fabric of the city, we will find that there are a number of locations and events that not only form part of the rich modern tapestry of the metropolis but also serve as indicators of her past.

Ueno, the area north of Tokyo station and beyond Akihabara, is one of these. The park here is crowded with thousands of people in the spring, when the cherry is in bloom. People perhaps celebrate more riotously now than in the past, but the aim is just the same: simply to have a good time eating, drinking and enjoying the balmy spring air beneath the blossom laden trees.

A short distance east of Ueno in Asakusa stands the Buddhist temple of Sensoji, one of the most famous with visitors to Japan. Perhaps more than any other in the city, this temple is a hub of tradition and the focus of a number of festivals, events and markets throughout the year, all of which help to enhance our understanding of the social history of the Japanese in the capital.

Although not directly connected with the temple, the Sanja Matsuri, a festival of many portable shrines in May, brings thousands of traditionally clad men and women out onto the streets here to carry the shrines into the temple compound, squeezing their way through crowds of onlookers with a vigor more akin to a rugby scrum than a religious ceremony.

In July the *Hozuki* market is actually held in the temple grounds, which are transformed into a maze of stalls of various sizes selling *hozuki* or Chinese lantern plants. The clusters of bright orange

"lanterns" are used for decoration and the fruit are eaten. Other cavernous stalls purvey delicate ferns sprouting from frames fashioned into the form of lanterns, abstracted scenes of a full moon and clouds, or sail boats. When watered, they all allude to more restful impressions of the summer depicted in many an ancient woodblock print. The brightly painted glass windbells attached to each of them pick up the slightest hint of a breeze and their tinkling psychologically helps to ease the crushing heat and humidity of summer, especially when hung before an open window of a living room.

At the end of the year, however, two other markets held when the air is dry and crisp create a more solemn but no less colorful atmosphere at Sensoji.

The first of these is the Gaza market which is open from about the middle of December. Despite being a Buddhist temple, the market is composed of stalls selling such things as rice straw ropes and other religious paraphernalia associated with Shinto shrines. The simplicity of the goods on sale is somehow refreshing and sharply contrasts with the battledore sold at the Hagoita market that follows.

The decoratively adorned battledore on sale were once only wooden bats used to hit a shuttlecock back and forth in a game that it is suggested protected children from evil and the mosquito. As played



Traditional images prevail on today's battledore

by the imperial family and courtiers during the fifteenth century, the battledore began to be decorated with images in cloth done in padded relief. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the merchant class were in ascendance, ukiyoe artists produced images of popular Kabuki actors and other favorites of the day. These days images of contemporary pop idols stand alongside the more traditional representations. Once purchased, however, they are held aloft to prevent them being damaged by the happy throngs that gather here every year. So the history of the object, market and place live on. They are all part of a living history. Part of Asakusa now.

(This is the last article in this series)



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Call the Tourist Information Center, Tokyo Office of Japan National Tourist Organization (03-3201-3331) for timing of festivals and markets in Asakusa and Ueno, which can both be reached by the Ginza line subway. Edo battledore and many other crafts can be seen and purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo Tel: 03-3403-2460.

