



ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE

# Gate of Hell: A Colorful History

by Stephen Prince

## RESTORED

Original Title:

Jigokumon / 地獄門

Director:

Teinosuke Kinugasa

Runtime: 89 minutes

Country: Japan

Language: Japanese with  
English subtitles

Rating: PG (Some Violence)

### AWARDS

#### BEST INTERNATIONAL FILM

Academy Awards 1955

#### GRAND PRIX (BEST FILM)

Cannes Film Festival 1954

#### GOLDEN LEOPARD

##### (BEST FILM)

Locarno International Film  
Festival 1954

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Celebrating the classics of Asian cinema and beyond, *Restored* is a regular series showcasing Asian films that have been meticulously preserved and restored by different institutions from across the world. The platform revisits these classics in a new light and allows them to be appreciated by new generations of audiences.

The restoration of Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* (1953) is an occasion for celebration, the reclamation of a great cinematic treasure from the dustbin of history, where it languished for many decades. Viewers can now see the movie as it has not been seen for half a century. Hailing from Japan's golden age of cinema, when now classic films by the country's leading directors were embraced by overseas markets and commanded attention and excitement at international festivals, Kinugasa's film won the top honor, then the Grand Prix, at the Cannes festival in 1954, and earned the Academy Award for best foreign-language film and another Oscar for best costume design. But after attracting all this recognition, *Gate of Hell* went on to become a virtually lost film; the fragile photochemical process used to make it caused its colors to fade, and viewers could no longer see the spectacular designs Kinugasa and his team had created.

*Gate of Hell* was one of Japan's first color productions. At the time, using the proprietary three-strip Technicolor process, Hollywood cinema led the world in color moviemaking, and had done so since the 1930s. Color production in Europe and Japan lagged far behind, but this changed after Eastman Kodak, Technicolor's competitor, marketed a single-strip camera negative in 1950 carrying three dye emulsions capable of producing the full spectrum of color. Kodak's innovation was inexpensive and convenient because it could be used in existing cameras, enabling them to shoot color or black and white, depending on a filmmaker's preference. The technological basis for widespread color filmmaking had arrived, and color productions in overseas markets took off.

The veteran director Kinugasa, far from being intimidated by this new color filmmaking, used it to create a glorious reconstruction of Japan's medieval past, finding inspiration in scroll painting and the graphic arts. *Gate of Hell's* cinematography and art direction are bold and breathtaking, making it a kind of painting in motion, composed of vibrant gold, green, red, and royal blue hues. Like Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, it is a boisterous celebration of color filmmaking, but unlike Demy's film, it avoids overtly stylized designs. It achieves instead a kind of hypernaturalism by accentuating color in sets and costumes that are facsimiles of the story's twelfth-century historical setting. Although the decor and lighting effects are naturalistic, they achieve a hieratic force through the always insistent color design. Based on a play by Kan Kikuchi, the film takes place mostly indoors, shot on studio sets that offered exactly the kind of controlled lighting that Kinugasa needed to emphasize the colors supplied by his costume designer and art director. Color filters on the off-camera lights simulated candlelight and moonlight, and high-intensity studio lights heightened the coloring of kimonos and armor, banners and heraldry.

While Kinugasa was not the household name internationally that Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, or Ichikawa was, he was an established studio director at home and had a long and prolific career, directing more than one hundred films from the silent era until 1966. He began work in 1917, for Nikkatsu studios, as an onnagata, a male performer who specialized in playing female roles, a practice widespread in early Japanese cinema. He was reputed to be quite good at such impersonation, and he continued at it until 1922, when he and the other onnagata bolted from Nikkatsu in protest over the studio's decision to begin hiring female actors. As the era of the onnagata ended, he made the transition to directing films for the Makino production company in 1923 (he had already directed his first film at Nikkatsu, in which he also played the female lead). He specialized in period films and worked frequently with the actor Kazuo Hasegawa (who has the lead role of Morito in *Gate of Hell*). This intimate collaboration continued for the rest of their professional lives and took them to Shochiku, Toho, and Daiei studios.

Kinugasa's enduring significance in cinema history rests on two films, *Gate of Hell* and the earlier *A Page of Madness* (1926), a remarkable avant-garde production whose rapid cutting, lack of intertitles, depictions of madness and dreams, and nonlinear approach to narrative were influenced by the French impressionism of Abel Gance's *La roue* (1923), the German expressionism of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and the antinaturalism practiced by Japan's *Shinkankaku* (new impressionist) group of artists and writers. After its premiere, *A Page of Madness* vanished (most films made during the silent era are lost) until Kinugasa found a positive print in a storage shed in 1971, made a new duplicate negative, recut the film, and reissued it with a musical score. Today, it is regarded as Japan's major contribution to the international avant-garde cinema that flourished in the silent era.

Compared to the iconoclastic poetry of *A Page of Madness*, *Gate of Hell* seems like a more conventional work in its compositions and editing, yet the aggressive intensity of Kinugasa's color designs reaches back and connects to the avant-garde sensibility of the earlier film. *Gate of Hell* disrupted the black-and-white heritage of cinema with the same kind of artistic violence that *Page of Madness* inflicted on its linear-narrative tradition.

The film's story is set during one of the most dramatic episodes in Japan's medieval past, the Heiji Rebellion of 1160, part of a decades-long struggle for supremacy between the powerful Taira and Minamoto warrior clans. When Kiyomori, the military leader of the Taira clan, left Kyoto on a family pilgrimage, the Minamoto attacked the imperial residence and detained both emperors. (Japan at this time had a cloistered emperor who did the actual governing and a sitting emperor who was a figurehead.) The Minamoto burned the Imperial Palace, but both emperors escaped, and Kiyomori's forces returned to put down the uprising.

The film opens as a visual translation of the famous Heiji monogatari, an emakimono (picture scroll) depicting the uprising that was painted two centuries later. The scroll is removed from its protective box and unfurled. The artwork moves across the frame, enabling its narrative to be read from right to left. Kinugasa artfully shifts from the horizontal movement of the scrolling



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work by dissolving to a series of moving-camera shots depicting a burning imperial building, as the true emperor's warriors try to mount a defense against the attacking Minamoto. Colored draperies billow in raging currents of air unleashed by the fire, and the camera moves in a fashion that emulates the scroll and its manner of animating history.

Thus the flowing movement of the narrative in the scroll painting "authorizes" the camera's movements—history authored by art—which take viewers into a story that is unexpectedly subtle and ironic. The imperial guards recruit Kesa, one of the empress's ladies-in-waiting, to impersonate the empress and flee Kyoto, in a ruse designed to draw the Minamoto away from the emperor. (Kesa is played by Machiko Kyo, a major star at home and a darling of the art-film circuit overseas, appearing in *Rashomon*, *Ugetsu*, *Princess Yang Kwei-fei*, and *Street of Shame*, all nominees or prizewinners in foreign markets.) Morito, a brave warrior, agrees to escort the carriage and protect Kesa. This he does at considerable peril, and when seeking refuge for himself and Kesa at his brother's house, he discovers that his brother has gone over to the rebel side. Making a principled stand in favor of honor and loyalty to the emperor, Morito refuses to join his brother. He rides instead to warn Kiyomori (Koreya Senda) of the uprising and to rally defenses.

The opening act, then, presents Morito as a splendid example of warrior virtues. He is courageous, steadfast, and self-sacrificing. But as the film progresses and grows more subtle, Morito is revealed to be a darker figure. He obsesses over Kesa's beauty and, upon learning that she is married, becomes a maniac in his efforts to possess her. In contrast with Morito's mania, Kesa's husband, Wataru (Isao Yamagata), one of the imperial guards, is a gentle, loving, and tolerant man who treasures his wife, and to whom Kesa appears very devoted.

Centered on these three characters and the conflict between Kesa and Morito, the narrative moves toward a tragic outcome that brings shame upon Morito and a sacrificial honor to Kesa. Her sacrifice, however, so unexpected, leaves Wataru shattered by a knowledge that will haunt him forever—namely, that he failed to see into her heart, that the core of her being had remained closed to him, despite his love and her devotion.

People are not what they seem. Kinugasa sounds this moral with a steady, gradual force that accumulates a political resonance. The figure of Morito, for example, conjoins warrior ideals with impulses to violence and domination that make him a symbol for the militarism that gripped the nation's culture and politics in the twentieth century and plunged it into war. And Kiyomori, who rode the Taira's ascendancy to become one of the most powerful men in Japan, is depicted as an arrogant authority toying with the lives of others. Because it amuses him, Kiyomori entertains the idea of taking Kesa from her husband and giving her to Morito. In Morito, a warrior's virtue cloaks predatory obsession. In Kiyomori, a lord's apparent benevolence conceals the machinations of an oppressor. In this critical outlook, perhaps the modernism and left-wing perspectives of the avant-garde circles in which Kinugasa traveled in the 1920s returned as a palpable, if muted, presence in *Gate of Hell*.

History seems to have winked at Kinugasa—both *A Page of Madness* and *Gate of Hell* were “lost” and then found. In the case of *Gate of Hell*, although it never physically vanished, it certainly disappeared artistically. Eastman Kodak’s new film stock (5248) offered revolutionary cost savings, but unlike those of three-strip Technicolor, its colors did not prove to be long-lasting, a problem not corrected until the 1980s. During this interval, cinema’s heritage of color filmmaking was imperiled, as numerous films suffered the same harsh fate as *Gate of Hell*.

Fortunately, because of the film’s international success, Daiei had made separation masters—black-and-white films that contain a record of all the color information—in order to put more copies of the film into release. Because they are printed on black-and-white stock, the separations do not fade, and they can be used to create a full-color duplicate negative of the film. Separation masters provide a vital means of recovering the color information in films whose negatives and positive prints have faded (they also enabled the restoration of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*). For *Gate of Hell*, they were used, in combination with passages taken from a duplicate negative and several master positives, to reproduce the film’s original Eastmancolor look, which was bright, vibrant, and highly saturated.

Viewers seeing the restored *Gate of Hell* will be astonished by its pictorial beauty and sensuousness. Eastman 5248 was relatively slow stock, meaning that it required a lot of light to shoot with. As a result, it produced fine-grained, extremely sharp images that showcase the film’s lavish pictorialism wonderfully. The horse race midway through the film is an especially impressive example of this: the riders are color-coded in red and purple to distinguish the competitors, a gambit that numerous directors studied and employed in subsequent samurai films. In other scenes, the bright red splash of blood on a warrior’s forehead or the muted gold of a candlelit interior set against the blue of an evening landscape belongs to an elaborate orchestration of color through which the film chiefly speaks.

Cinema is a hybrid art form, composed of performance and sound, narrative and decor. In common thinking, story and performance take precedence. And, indeed, Kinugasa’s inflection of the film’s story with a sly critique of militarism is quite effective. But more important is what *Gate of Hell* reveals about the formal properties of cinema. One of the medium’s greatest color films, it shows us powerfully that, beyond narrative, cinema is also a decorative art; line, pattern, light, and color are its fundamental tools. Using the methods of classical studio-era filmmaking, Kinugasa and his crew created a sensuous language of color and deployed it as a vehicle for poetic symbolism and emotional expression. When Kinugasa made the film, cinema was transitioning away from its black-and-white heritage, and his great achievement was to show the voluptuous power commanded by color in transcending naturalism and in offering audiences a new dimension of immersive, sensory pleasure.

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**Stephen Prince**, a professor of film at Virginia Tech, is the author of numerous books, including *The Warrior’s Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* and the newly released *A Dream of Resistance: The Cinema of Kobayashi Masaki*.

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