

CULTURAL GUIDE TO ANIME AND MANGA

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***ALL THINGS
ANIME AND
MANGA***

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ART AND OTHER FORMS OF VISUAL STORYTELLING

A single image can tell a whole story. For thousands of years, human beings all over the world have used drawings and paintings to share what they have seen and experienced with others. Many early written languages began as pictograms (picture writing). Japanese artists and storytellers have long combined visual images with verbal narrative to present their stories. Manga and anime are new variations on ancient traditions of visual storytelling. They both draw on the ways that older forms used images, side by side, in sequence to show and tell readers and viewers about the people, places, events, and feelings that happen in their narratives.

EARLY FORMS OF VISUAL STORYTELLING

Before mechanical printing, there were many ways to use visual images in storytelling. During the Middle Ages, some cultures used highly detailed images and designs to illuminate sacred texts like the Bible and Koran. Some decorations were painted right onto the pages to show respect for the meaning and value of the text. During the early 1100s in Japan, a Shinto priest created the famous Bishop Toba Scrolls. Similar to

Aesop's Fables, these told humorous stories about animals, along with ink drawings that showed them doing various human activities. In some ways scroll storytelling is like slow-motion animation because as a scroll unrolls, the images and words appear slowly to the reader's eye, in the order the action occurs. Because of their similarity to comics and simple design, scholars like Frederik L. Schodt consider scrolls to be "among the oldest surviving examples of Japanese narrative comic art."²

In the 1300s another classic form of visual storytelling arose in Japan: Noh theater. Originally, these performances took stories from history and mythology and staged them through acting, singing, music, and dance. It was an improvisational, free-form, and experimental way to put on a show that dramatically acted out stories. Key elements of Noh theater are depicted in the anime *Inu-Oh* by Masaaki Yuasa as the performances feature supernatural fantasy elements, demons, and spirits, as well as extreme human emotions, madness, and revenge. Traditional Noh actors wear large, painted wooden masks and elaborate costumes to express the social status and feelings of their characters. Actors use dramatic gestures and deliberate movement instead of a lot of words.

From the 1600s to the present, Japanese puppet theater (Bunraku) and classical Kabuki dance-dramas continued to develop the visual storytelling methods of Noh theater. Bunraku puppet shows are a popular way to show and tell stories for all ages. Village storytellers attract large audiences and use costumed puppets as actors in classical tales and heroic adventures. Classical Kabuki is famous for attention-grabbing costumes, exaggerated makeup, and its actors' over-the-top emotional expressions. These visual elements combine with narration or dialogue to create entertaining stories about samurai, history, folklore, romance,

FAST FACT

Some anime and manga are about people who make anime and manga. *Bakuman* centers on two boys who become manga artists. *Shirabako* follows five high school friends who graduate and start jobs as professional anime voice actors, artists, and production managers.



Traditional elements of Noh theater appear in the anime Inu-Oh. Elaborate costumes and dramatic gestures highlight the supernatural fantasy elements, demons, and spirits, as well as extreme human emotions, madness, and revenge.

and humor. Favorite scenes from these plays later inspired wood-block prints and illustrated books.

Kabuki performances traditionally focus on moral lessons from the past, supernatural transformations, and human tragedies that cause extreme emotions. One famous element of Kabuki stagecraft is known as *mie*. This refers to a freeze-frame moment when an actor strikes and holds a dramatic pose to

emphasize his or her arrival onstage or a signature pose that shows off the actor's costume. When you see anime characters striking such poses (such as Usagi/Sailor Moon after her transformation sequence or any of your favorite *Gundam* robots), this is because the technique adds dramatic effect. It also saves on the number of drawings the animators need to make.

A less well-known form of Japanese visual storytelling is *rakugo*, in which a lone actor kneels on the stage and entertains the audience with a complicated comic tale using word-play. Such performances began in the mid-1700s and continue to this day. Several anime and manga series feature this unique form of creative storytelling. In *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū*, an ex-convict is accepted as an apprentice *rakugo* performer. In the more lighthearted fantasy series *My Master Has No Tail*, a shape-shifting *tanuki* (raccoon-dog) transforms into a human so he can learn how to be a *rakugo* performer.

VISUAL STORYTELLING IN ART AND PAINTING

From the 1600s through the 1800s, an important style of Japanese painting and printmaking was known as *ukiyo-e*, which means “pictures of the floating world.” These artists used flat, two-dimensional forms that emphasized large areas of a single color to depict landscapes, everyday life, and people. Perhaps the most famous *ukiyo-e* artist was Katsushika Hokusai, best

KAMISHIBAI

Kamishibai (“paper play”) is a traditional form of storytelling in which a street performer recites a story next to a box with a dozen or more painted images that are shown one at a time to accompany the plot. While this practice goes back hundreds of years, it became very popular in Japan during the 1930s and 1940s. The storyteller would gather children around him by selling penny candies and would then perform the story. The storytellers rented printed artwork from publishers so the same fairy tales, adventure stories, and superhero stories could be told all across Japan. After World War II the *kamishibai* practice died out in part because of the rise of manga and television, which was originally called *denki kamishibai* (“electric *kamishibai*”) in Japan.

known for *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1831). Hokusai and other *ukiyo-e* artists made their livings by producing woodblock images that could be reprinted and sold to the rising middle class. This popular form of art directly influenced the comic book style of manga. In fact, the term *manga* (which means “sketchy” or “whimsical” art) was created about this time to describe this art style. Whenever a single panel of manga or a still image of anime uses simple-shaped areas of a single color to emphasize the flat, two-dimensional nature of the cartoon world (like in *Pokémon*), it is directly reflecting this nineteenth-century style.

Traditional Japanese watercolor painting often uses skilled brushstrokes to imply the general shapes of objects, so viewers must fill in the gaps of the artwork with their own minds and imaginations. This style aims to give the impression of an object, not depict it with exact realism as in traditional European art. In the mid-1800s this form of Japanese painting inspired famous European

The art form known as ukiyo-e, a style of Japanese woodblock painting and printmaking, directly influenced the comic book style of manga. Pictured is Katsushika Hokusai's famous 1831 woodblock print, The Great Wave off Kanagawa.



SOURCE NOTES

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3. Helen McCarthy, *The Art of Osamu Tezuka: God of Manga*. New York: Abrams, 2009, p. 8.
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6. Susan Napier, *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018, p. 118.
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Mechademia

www.mechademia.net/journal

Mechademia is an academic journal of scholarly articles about anime, manga, and fan culture.

ANIME AND MANGA WORTH EXPLORING

The Ancient Magus' Bride
Belle
Ghost in the Shell
The Girl Who Leapt Through Time
Grave of the Fireflies
Haibane-Renmei
In This Corner of the World
Madoka Magica
The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya
Metropolis
Millennium Actress
Miss Hokusai
Mushi-Shi
My Neighbor Totoro
Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind
Neon Genesis Evangelion
Night on the Galactic Railroad
Patema Inverted
Princess Mononoke
Ranma ½
Revolutionary Girl Utena
A Silent Voice
Spirited Away
Summer Wars
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The Tale of the Princess Kaguya
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