THE RISE OF ANIME AND MANGA
From Japanese Art Form to Global Phenomenon

Bradley Steffens
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A Niche No More

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The Emergence of a Style

One reason for the popularity of manga and anime is the stylization that the artists employ when drawing the characters, especially their faces. The lines are simple, the proportions of facial features are idealized, and the expressions are somewhat static, changing only slightly to convey what a character is thinking and feeling. In their simplicity, manga and anime faces resemble masks, presenting the characters as universal types, rather than as particular individuals. It is a technique that has been a hallmark of Japanese artwork and drama for centuries.

The power of stylization is something that the Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats recognized early in the twentieth century. Yeats criticized the realistic theater that was emerging in the plays of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekov, and others as “restless mimicries of the surface of life.” He believed that drama should depict a deeper side of human experience. Working from this premise, Yeats created highly stylized plays that featured characters wearing masks, speaking in poetry, and acting out the play’s climactic scene in dance. Yeats took no credit for this approach. He said that he was inspired by the Japanese Noh, a type of masked theater that has been performed since the fourteenth century. Noh theater, the later Kabuki theater, and Japanese street puppetry, known as Bunraku,
all influenced the development of manga and anime. Like these dramatic forms, manga and anime eschew realistic drawing that mimics exact human features or environmental details to create more universal characters, themes, and stories.

**Masks and Anime**

The influence of Japanese theater permeates all manga and anime, but it is particularly evident in Hayao Miyazaki’s 2001 anime film, *Spirited Away*. The movie tells the story of a ten-year-old girl named Chihiro who enters the realm of the kami, the supernatural beings of the Shinto religion, so she can find a way to undo a spell that has turned her parents into pigs. One of the characters she meets is No-Face, a figure wearing a black shroud and a white mask. “No-Face’s neutral mask aesthetically and thematically resembles the masks utilized in Noh theatre,” observes theater artist Miranda Barrientos. “Miyazaki uses Noh aesthetics [to] create the personality, or rather lack of personality, of No-Face.”

—Miranda Barrientos, theater artist

"Miyazaki uses Noh aesthetics [to] create the personality, or rather lack of personality, of No-Face."
The neutral expression of No-Face’s mask is both mysterious and frightening, conveying the fact that the character is a dark spirit that has no personality of its own but instead takes on the personalities of the creatures it devours. The expression is one of about sixty basic types in Noh theater. “Masks play an integral role in characterization,” explains Eric C. Rath, a professor of Japanese history at the University of Kansas. “The features of a mask establish the character’s gender, age, and social ranking.”

The idea of using masks is not to hide a character’s personality and emotions but rather to convey the emotions quickly and to allow the audience to participate in the drama by reading the expressions. “Even though the mask covers an actor’s facial expressions, the use of the mask in Noh is not an abandonment of facial expressions altogether,” writes Illya Szilak, an artist, writer, and theater director.

Toriyama Explains Goku’s Tail

Goku, the hero of Akira Toriyama’s fantasy manga Dragon Ball, has a tail. In an interview commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Dragon Ball’s debut, Toriyama told the story behind creating Goku’s unusual feature.

I think it boils down to the idea that it’s more interesting to have the weak-looking, plain guys be strong. With Goku, he started out just being a straight-up monkey. Then I thought about it some more and made him a human, but [Toriyama’s editor] Torishima-san said that he needed to have something to set him apart, so I gave him a tail, but it just kept getting in the way....

I’m always thinking about how things are supposed to work, so it was a real pain to figure out how he’d put his pants on or stuff like that. That’s what always bugged me most. Is there a hole in the pants? Does he put his tail through first, then put the pants on? So that made me want to just get rid of the darn thing... which I did, in the end.

and theater director. “Rather, its intent is to stylize and codify the facial expressions through the use of the mask and to stimulate the imagination of the audience.”

**Stock Expressions**

Manga and anime artists also use stylized faces to convey a character’s personality and emotions. They draw the characters’ heads and faces larger than they would be in real life, making it easier for the audience to read the characters’ expressions. The artists also make the eyes, which are the focal point for conveying emotion, disproportionately large. The nose and chin are small, making the eyes appear even larger by contrast. The petite features also give the characters an idealized, youthful appearance.

Manga and anime artists depict the eyes, eyebrows, and mouth in certain conventional ways to show how the character is feeling. For example, to convey happiness and contentment, the artist will draw the character with a big smile and the eyes closed. To show a character in love, the smile will be smaller, and the eyes will be open, with the pupils larger and containing more reflections than usual. To express surprise, the artist draws the mouth in a circular shape and renders the eyes wide open, with the eyebrows raised. For anger, the artist draws squinting eyes, with the eyebrows angled down and the mouth curved in a slight frown. To illustrate plotting or scheming, the artist draws the eyes squinting as in anger but with the mouth drawn up in an evil smile. Fright, embarrassment, puzzlement, and other emotions are likewise conveyed through variations in the character’s eyes and mouth.

Occasionally, manga and anime artists will use a type of icon to convey emotion. For example, the artist may place a single teardrop on the character’s cheek to show sadness, especially if the character is unable or unwilling to cry in a certain situation. Like Noh and Kabuki masks, these expressions have become standardized into basic stock forms. “I don’t consider them pictures,” Osamu Tezuka, the “Godfather of Manga,” once observed. “In reality I’m not drawing. I’m writing a story with
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4. Quoted in Sun, “Anime Might Not Be Cool, but It’s Definitely Getting Popular.”
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**Chapter One: The Origins of an Art Form**


**Chapter Two: The Emergence of a Style**


**Chapter Three: Rise of the Giant Robots**

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