

***Manga Kamishibai* by Eric Nash, A Review**

It is common knowledge in Japan and often mentioned in passing by Japan scholars in the US that the street-performance (*gaito*) kamishibai of the 1930s and 40s were important precursors of the now globally popular Japanese cartoons (*manga*) and animated films (*animé*). This is not an easy idea for people outside Japan to grasp or even readily accept, however, because the kamishibai cards published in Japan and available in the US today bear little or no resemblance to the illustrations we see in *manga* serials, now lining the shelves in major bookstores, or the *animé* films that are increasingly available in DVD format in libraries and video-outlets in the US, or globally over the internet. The vital link between *kamishibai* and *manga*—the hand-painted storyboards from the 30s and 40s that are tucked away in libraries, museums, and personal collections—have essentially been lost to view, until now!

Eric Nash's colorful and highly accessible *Manga Kamishibai: The Art of Japanese Paper Theater* published by Abrams Comic Arts (2009) makes available in one beautifully illustrated volume, the dramatic techniques and visual style that clarifies the historical connection between *kamishibai* and *manga* and makes it visible even to the casual observer. The highly readable cultural history Nash provides reveals that, from its inception, *kamishibai* was a fascinating confluence of popular cultural influences from both East and West. He traces *kamishibai* and *manga*'s common roots in the early painted scrolls (*emaki*) and Edo-period comic books (*kibyoshi*) to *kamishibai*'s development out of popular entertainments from abroad, such as magic-lantern and silent film. (It should be noted that Nash's description of *tachie*, or "stand-up pictures" [p. 61] is somewhat misleading. *Tachie* were in fact the first "kamishibai," and they are quite different from shadow puppets in Indonesia or elsewhere.)

Familiar with both Japanese and Western comic-book traditions, Nash dexterously draws parallels to the visual techniques of both, while at the same time he is able to clarify what makes *kamishibai*, *manga*, and *animé* culturally unique. Most exciting of all, he is able to demonstrate this with spread after double-page spread of rarely seen, color illustrations. He explains how the *kamishibai* performer would have presented episodes from several genres during each performance and how these genres have led to the astonishing array of characters—especially child-heroes—and subgenres also found in current *manga* and *animé*. We see how the Japanese street artists both borrowed from without and innovated from within. For example, the *kamishibai* “Jungle Boy”—featured on the cover of Nash’s book—was clearly inspired by the popular adventure novels of Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Rice Burrough’s, while “The Golden Bat”—the eponymous hero the most popular and long-lasting *kamishibai* series of all-time—is now recognized as “one of the world’s first, illustrated superheroes” (p. 101).

Nash follows the history of street-performance *kamishibai* through its “golden age” to its demise after 1953 with the advent of television in Japan. He provides insights into how specific artists, 5% of whom went on to become *manga* illustrators, made the transition to this now globally popular art form. While 5% may seem like a small number, it must be remembered that all the *manga* artists, who emerged in the post-war period, would have been brought up viewing *kamishibai* stories on a daily basis, since this was the major source of children’s popular entertainment in Japan until the late 1950s. Most of them would have drawn upon their knowledge of *kamishibai* stories and images to create their own characters and plotlines.

Nash devotes a chapter to the emergence of war-propaganda (*kokusaku*) *kamishibai*, a period when 70% of the *kamishibai* produced were directed at an adult audience. This is well-worth remembering in a time when *kamishibai* both in Japan and abroad are often seen as simple

fare only for children. Since Nash's focus is tracing kamishibai's connection with modern *manga* and *animé*, he offers only cursory explanations for the other directions into which kamishibai developed in the post-war period and which continue to live on today, namely: educational (*kyoiku*) kamishibai and, to a lesser degree, religious kamishibai (Imai Yone, who is credited with developing the first Christian kamishibai stories [Nash, p. 87] also happens to be the "rare" young woman performer depicted in the photograph on p. 16). Nor does Nash mention the *tezukuri* (hand-made) kamishibai movement in Japan, where people currently develop their own original stories to perform for one another at festivals and community centers. He only briefly discusses how the visual style of kamishibai illustration today is different from that of the street performance heyday, and the example he provides of "Classroom Kamishibai" (p. 296) is in fact not *kamishibai* at all, but rather an example of flannel-board storytelling, which is also widely popular in Japan.

Nash mentions Takashi Gozan (Nash, p. 87) in passing, but he does not discuss how, from Gozan onward, increasingly the illustrators of kamishibai published in Japan have come to *kamishibai* from children's book illustration, not from the animation or *manga* industry. Today, Kamishibai has also become an important vehicle for preserving folktales from a disappearing oral tradition and for educating a new generation of Japanese about their own festivals and traditions that are being forgotten in the rush to modernization and globalization. These strands of kamishibai's history are, admittedly, not directly connected to the development of *manga* and *animé*, and their history is still waiting to be written.

What Nash's book accomplishes beautifully is what it sets out to do: namely, to make the connection between street-performance *kamishibai* and *manga* and to show how street-performance techniques continue to be drawn upon in the *manga* and *animé* of today. This is an

invaluable resource for those who want to share this important history with their students and also for those who, like myself, create kamishibai stories with young people. Whether they are aware of it or not, American youth of today are increasingly emulating the visual idiom of *manga*, just as an earlier generation of Americans emulated Disney. The bold and dramatic *kamishibai* illustrations presented in this book will inform students about the roots of these visual idioms and inspire students of cartooning and animation to draw upon these still fresh and innovative techniques in their own illustrated stories.

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