

Manga (British Museum)

— A Review of the British Museum’s Exclusive Publication
for the 2019 Citi Exhibition “Manga” —

2019 年の大英博物館とシティグループが
提供したマンガ展の特別出版 [Manga]

Antonija Cavcic

Abstract

Following the success of its critically acclaimed Shunga exhibition in 2013, sponsored by Citi Group, the British Museum held the very first large-scale manga exhibition outside Japan in 2019. Not only was it an opportunity to showcase a diverse range of works from Japanese *manga-ka* (manga illustrators), but the intention was to “explore how the medium has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon and include a recreation of the oldest surviving manga bookshop in Tokyo” (Brown, 2018). While reviews about the exhibition itself have been mixed, its very existence highlights the extent to which manga has become a global export or even mainstream. Analyst Peter Tasker reinforces this with his comment, “The fact that it is taking place is a tacit acknowledgement of the genre’s emergence as a respected art form and officially sanctioned emblem of Japanese ‘soft power’.” (Tasker, 2019). To evaluate how this was effectively achieved by the museum would arguably involve visiting the exhibition itself. However, *Manga*, the exclusive catalogue for the exhibition provides both details about the exhibition and insight into the background and evolution of manga. On this note, this review will consider the way in which *Manga* presents the history and evolution of manga as a cultural phenomenon to regular museum-goers and readers in general. This will be followed by a brief summary of the catalogue’s strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords: manga, soft power, museums.

General overview

Published by Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum and edited by Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere and Matsuba Ryoko, *Manga* is essentially a comprehensive 351 page catalogue accompanying the exhibition going by the same name. While museum catalogues come in many forms and styles, the purpose remains the same—“a publication should both respond to the exhibition (supplementing the visitor’s experience of the works of art with stimulating critical and contextualizing writing and a wider range of images than could be displayed) and have validity as a reference book independently of the exhibition” (Carey, 2017). Accepting this definition as valid, *Manga* can certainly be considered an exhibition catalogue. In terms of content and structure, the catalogue opens with several forewords, a note for the readers, and a concise yet comprehensive introduction by Coolidge Rousmaniere, which is followed by several interviews with several renowned *mangaka* featured in the exhibition. To follow there are six distinct chapters and a resources section. The chapters are thematically organized in the following order: Understanding Manga through Reading, Drawing and Producing; The Power of Storytelling; The Power of Seen and Unseen Worlds; Manga and Society; Motion Through Line; and Expanding Manga’s Boundaries. Each of these chapters are quite dense and largely comprise of interviews, “manga extracts” (basically, sample pages of notable works featured in the exhibition) and articles contributed by manga historians, theorists, and key players in the industry. While this review will not cover all of these contributions thoroughly, a general overview will be provided.

Overall, although the catalogue is relatively dense, it is not only resourceful for manga or art enthusiasts and general readers alike, but it is easy to digest on the premise that it is colorful, printed on high-quality paper, packed full of illustrations and commentary on the excerpts. As a result, it effectively eliminates the distance between the readers/museum-goers and *mangaka*

Overview of content

Prior to a discussion of the chapters, it is worth acknowledging the “Note for the Reader” addition after the foreword. For readers who might be unfamiliar with the format and reading style of manga, it is crucial to convey this information, so on that part, the introductory section of the catalogue is commendable. Coolidge Rousmaniere’s introduction proceeds by basically outlining the content of the catalogue and explains that each chapter mirrors each section of the exhibition. This is followed by brief interviews with *mangaka* (such as Chiba Tetsuya, Hoshino Yukinobu, and Nakamura Hikaru) in which they share their thoughts on the future of manga, whether manga should be considered as an UNESCO-registered intangible cultural heritage, and how they feel about manga being exhibited at the British Museum. For Chiba, the museum’s effort to “introduce manga to a global audience is truly remarkable” (p.12). In a similar fashion, Hoshino stated that for manga to be “honoured with a large-scale exhibition at the British Museum represents an exciting opportunity that will no doubt kick-start a new cultural dialogue” (p.16). Evidently, both the *mangaka* and editors share the same enthusiasm for the exhibition and glorify manga as an art form. However, they do not question whether manga truly has a place in museums, or consider the possible negative repercussions of the global expansion of manga.

Coolidge Rousmaniere’s “A Manga for Everyone” follows by running through the history of manga from decorated *dōtaku* in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, Buddhist handscrolls, *etoki*, *kusazōshi*, and so on. What is important is that she reinforces the argument that Hokusai and other *ukiyo-e* artists were not responsible for the development of manga as we know it. Rather, the introduction of comic strips from the West during the Meiji Period is perhaps what really triggered the serialization of images into a narrative and the eventual evolution of manga. The evolution of manga in pre-war and post-war Japan is also discussed in the article. Needless to say, Tezuka Osamu’s story-manga and the development of *shōjo* manga are pivotal to the discussion. Finally, the article concludes by introducing current trends in manga consumption and production both in Japan and worldwide—reinforc-

ing that manga is no longer a uniquely Japanese cultural form. As Coolidge Rousmaniere herself notes, “Manga is an international phenomenon that shows no signs of abating. People of all ages become fans of manga, on every conceivable theme [...] There is indeed a manga for everyone” (p.33).

The introductory section then closes with notes about Noda Satoru’s *Golden Kamuy* and an excerpt from the series. Why this particular title was selected as the one of the main features of the exhibition is questionable. Sugimoto Sa’ichi, the main character of the series, is featured on both the cover of the catalogue and the poster of the exhibition. Although it is critically acclaimed, exhibits great artistry and is exemplary of a manga that concerns identity and diversity, it is not particularly well-known among the average manga reader abroad and possibly in Japan. It is only a speculation, but perhaps due to its niche readership, it signifies the great diversity of manga and the idea that there is “indeed a manga for everyone.”

Chapter One then launches straight into more manga excerpts, but the standout is Kōno Fumiyo’s *Giga Town* (2017). Why this excerpt is particularly significant is due to the fact that it thoroughly introduces the flow of frames in manga, the meaning of certain background lines in manga panels, and the various forms of *fukidashi* (speech bubbles) to convey feelings or ideas. For novice manga readers, it is a comprehensive guide to understanding the flow of the story and how certain emotions are portrayed in manga. This contribution to the chapter and exhibition was possibly the most valuable in the sense that it fosters manga literacy. The latter half of the chapter includes interviews from members of the four major manga publishers in Japan—namely, Kodansha, Shogakukan, Shueisha, and Hakusensha. Some of the topics of discussion include describing their roles as editors, the future of manga and publishing in general, the importance of manga, and the key features of a good story. Once again, comments regarding the future of manga are relatively positive in spite of the expansion of the internet. While the future is certainly debatable and detailed statistics regarding the recent sales of manga are not provided by the publishers, Kodansha’s Furukawa Kōhei makes the important point that manga has become the major inspiration for films, television series, games and other content available online so “the fu-

ture of the manga industry looks bright indeed” (p.87).

Also featuring about three manga extracts, Chapter Two delves deeper into manga history with Adam L Kern’s contribution “The Power of Manga in Comparative Historical Perspective”. Furthermore, Tezuka’s life and major contributions to the proliferation of manga are discussed in greater detail in Stéphane Beaujean’s “Manga no Kamisama”. The genealogy of *shōjo* manga is thereafter detailed in Yamada Tomoko’s “What Is Shōjo Manga?”. For those particularly interested in the roots of manga and Tezuka’s role in the development of story-manga and *shōjo* manga, the aforementioned articles might be insightful. Since they are concisely written and no more than four pages each (including images), they nicely summarize major aspects of manga history while maintaining interest from the average reader by avoiding the use of industry-specific jargon.

In contrast to the previous two chapters, with about 15 articles (including interviews, manga extracts and theoretical papers), Chapter Three is quite dense. While it covers the popularity and greater significance of sports manga such as Chiba Tetsuya’s *Stay Fine*, Inoue Takehiko’s *Slam Dunk* and Takahashi Yōichi’s *Captain Tsubasa*, other genres of manga are also featured such as music-oriented manga, fantasy and science fiction manga. Interspersed are a handful of articles including Ishigami Aki’s “Sexual Expression in Printed Form,” manga critic Itō Gō’s “Manga and Music,” Stéphane Beaujean’s “Post-War Japan: Manga and Sport”, and two articles regarding soft power and the “soft revolution” by renowned researcher on manga and anime, Thomas Lamarre. Although some of the articles correspond to the manga extracts and interviews, others seem out of place and the presentation of the chapter seems somewhat disorganized. The chapter simply tries to cover too much and would benefit from being broken up into several smaller individual chapters.

Chapter Four begins with head of the Japanese section of the British Museum, Timothy Clark’s “Manga Museum” in which he essentially explains why the museum decided to undertake the project. Unfortunately, Clark’s contribution mostly seems to boast about the museum’s collection and its efforts to “preserve and present the historical products of human culture”

(p.251). While he does provide a brief overview of different forms of Japanese graphic art, to include such an entry over halfway through the catalogue seems counterproductive. Again, this article would benefit by being placed elsewhere. Ideally, it should come before or after Coolidge Rousmaniere's introduction, but perhaps the items in that particular section of the exhibition are related to Clark's overview of graphic art in Japan.

Clark's article is followed by an introduction to Kyoto Seika University's "Genga' Dash" project which involves the digital reproduction of original illustrations while striving to remain as true to the original as possible. This is complemented with an interview with *mangaka* and president of Kyoto Seika University, Takemiya Keiko, about the project and the Kyoto International Manga Museum. The remaining two contributions include an interview with two of the key members in Comic Market's Organizing Committee (Satomi Naoki and Yasuda Kahoru), and Okeda Daisuke's "Manga and the Law". As a member of Comic Market's Organizing Committee myself, I could relate to the interview and the statements Satomi and Yasuda made about the importance of creating a platform for artists to express themselves in a public domain and the fact that people are attracted to zine events like Comic Market due to its openness and the diversity of *dōjinshi*. Okeda's piece on copyright law might interest some readers and museum-goers, but it did not seem to add much substance to the catalogue. Overall, rather than being entitled "Manga and Society," this chapter would have been better described as "Manga and Institutions."

Comprised of only two articles, Chapter Five returns to the debate regarding Hokusai's role in the development of manga, and the manifestations of manga during Edo through to the early Meiji Period in the works of Katsushika Hokusai and Kawanabe Kyōsai. Also written by two members of the Japanese section of the British Museum, ideally, these two articles would be better placed in Chapter Two among the other contributions regarding manga history. While chronology or logic may not be the primary focus of the curators or publishers, for ease of reading and continuity, the careful organization of flow is integral.

Finally, Chapter Six closes with two interviews (Akatsuka Rieko and

Akatsuka Fujio, and Inoue Takehiko) and four articles. Firstly, in “Manga and the Rise of the Graphic Novel” Hugo Frey argues that manga were important for the rise of the graphic novel, adding that graphic novel artists were inspired by, and have in turn, inspired Japanese *mangaka* (p.311). Rayna Denison’s “Anime’s Trajectory” then outlines the development of anime in Japan with Toei Animation Studio, Mushi Production, and Studio Ghibli. Essentially, though, Denison argues that anime continues to rely on manga but reinvigorates the original manga and takes them “in new directions” (p.315). While this article does not reveal anything new, it does explain the so-called ‘worlds’ of production and extensive marketing that is prevalent in Japanese popular culture. The article might have benefitted from a brief mention about live-action adaptations of manga or anime since this trend is on the rise. To follow, Ryan Holmberg’s “Garo Magazine and Alternative Manga” looks at counterculture publishing and how it both fostered emerging artists and encouraged political and intellectual debate. To be honest, this article and section of the exhibition might have been of interest to a lot of museum-goers and probably deserved a separate exhibition of its own. With a diverse range of manga extracts and more details about Garo’s history, this section of the exhibition would be fascinating.

Chapter Six concludes with another article from Itō Gō. In “Drawing Manga,” Itō explores the duality of manga and how readers see themselves in manga (both in the everyday world and in the fictional world) (p.328). While the arguments made in this article could be expanded, it might be too inaccessible for the average reader. In any case, the significance of the exhibition and the power that manga wields to draw readers into the fictional world are concisely and effectively argued. As a result, the entire catalogue concludes with the readers feeling a sense of closure—much like reading the very last *koma* on the very last page.

Summary

Like flyers, most catalogues are ephemeral. However, the British Museum and Thames & Hudson’s *Manga* is much more. With over 350 pages of illustrations, insider interviews, informative guides and insight into the his-

tory of manga and its publishing industry and trends, *Manga* is merely a catalogue. It is an accessible and reader-friendly reference book. For museum-goers, manga enthusiasts, and even curious readers with little or no knowledge about manga or Japanese graphic art, everybody can learn at least something new from the catalogue (and exhibition if possible). Although at times the organization of chapters seems disorganized, perhaps this is related to the layout of the exhibition itself. With contributions not only from curators, but from artists, academics and industry players, readers are able to learn about manga from different perspectives. Since the subject of the exhibition is so broad, it is inevitable that so many major series of manga or interviews with their respective *mangaka* were omitted. Due to the nature of special exhibitions and the need to focus on specific areas all the while creating a sense of unity and flow, I can understand that a lot of other interesting artists, genres, and aspects of manga as a phenomenon were omitted. Since the book is highly visual, it provides insight into Japanese graphic art history, popular culture and soft power in an accessible fashion. What it lacks, however, is a Kindle or online version. An interactive format with at least sound for the visually impaired or graphics to guide the readers would be a great way to optimize the overall reader experience and audience reach. Nevertheless, not only is *Manga* a great way to “visit” the British Museum without actually visiting, but it is resourceful for anyone involved in or interested in the history and evolution of graphic art and popular culture in Japan.

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