

# Manga exhibitions shaking the concept of Japanese comics

## Natsume Fusanosuke

Trans. Jaqueline Berndt

I am very grateful for being invited to speak about manga exhibitions at this conference, but I have to concede that I am not a curator, rather an amateur in that regard. To introduce myself, I was born in Japan in 1950, and as such I took graphic narratives, or story-manga, which had become popular after World War II, for granted. Against this backdrop I have been thinking and writing about manga. In other words, I am one of the postwar baby-boomers, part of the general audience as a reader and half intellectual as a critic. From this point of view I shall speak about my experiences with manga exhibitions.

By and large, manga exhibitions started to become topical in Japan with the Tezuka Osamu Exhibition held by the National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo in 1990 in commemoration of Tezuka's death the previous year. It was reputedly the very first manga exhibition at a national art museum in Japan, whereas most shows until then had been held in department stores or other commercial spaces. However, many manga aficionados, including myself, were dissatisfied with that exhibition, among other things, due to its lack of diligence, or more specifically its neglect of manga research, which manifested itself, for example, in the display of an original drawing as allegedly created in 1947, although the presented version was actually revised much later.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the exhibition confined itself to presenting original drawings in a planar way, without any attempt at recreating our reading experience. Thus, it appeared to be a transitional one, which forced the framework of fine art in classic galleries onto manga. I was left with the impression, that manga ceases to be manga if coopted by "art."

Back in the 1960s, intellectuals tried to claim the status of "art" for manga, but they met with strong opposition by manga critics. As a teenager I understood this opposition well and shared the sentiments. For young aficionados like me it was important to regard manga as "anti-art," as the alternative culture of our generation. We wanted manga to gain autonomy as a discrete domain precisely beyond art. The critics of my generation who promoted manga were proud of their countercultural stance. Our manga discourse, which set in at the end of the 1970s, strongly reflected that desire, and the notion of manga formed then is still effective today. Against this backdrop, the exhibition *Nagai Gō at the End of the Century*, which began at the Iwaki City Art Museum in 1998 and later toured to several others, was – at least for me – the first to approximate our manga experience, because it combined the display of original

---

1 See exh. cat., National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo, 1990, p. 53: the caption indicates *New Treasure Island*, Ikuei shuppan, 1947, whereas the image itself is an original drawing revised for the 1984 edition of *New Treasure Island* as part of *The Collected Manga Works of Tezuka Osamu*, Kodansha.

drawings with anime cels, figures, toys and merchandise, thus demonstrating manga's expansion as character culture. I felt exactly the same kind of delight which I experience when picking and buying things at a convenience store. Admittedly, this feeling was evoked in the main by the selling area located outside of the actual exhibition space.

While our view took the autonomy of the notion "Japanese manga" for granted, it started to totter eventually. First, a younger generation of manga researchers, who appeared in the 2000s, raised the question of how to approach prewar manga. The historical transformation of the notion of "manga" as well as the disclosure of a whole history of exchange with foreign comics shook our view and its almost exclusive entrenchment in postwar manga. Second, at the same time, we began to encounter the discourse about manga's world-wide appreciation, got to know American comics and bande dessinée, and started to consider their history as well. In other words, we were given the opportunity to ponder what similar visual media from abroad and Japanese manga had in common and how much they differed from each other. Due to these two instances, the notion of Japanese manga, which we had been regarding as something like a completely peculiar culture, started to appear ambiguous with respect to its boundaries. Amidst these discursive changes I could not help by relativize my own conceptual framework.

I had been mainly engaged in carving out the specific expressive mechanisms that distinguish manga from other media such as film, novel and painting, and my approach was inclined to cultural uniqueness, i.e. to equating manga with Japanese culture, for example by conjoining the linguistic structure of the Japanese language with graphic narratives made in Japan. However, in an act of self-criticism I realized that I had to broaden my view. Through exposure to academic research I came to see the need to treat manga as a domain comparable to other forms of visual culture, such as painting and film, and to other forms of storytelling, such as the novel, that is, domains that had been recognized as art.

In 1999 I was commissioned by the Japan Foundation to produce the exhibition *Manga: Short Comics from Modern Japan* to be held at the Maison de la Culture du Japon in Paris. In order to present Japanese manga as reading matter, I put the emphasis on introducing short stories by means of reproductions, while keeping original drawings to a minimum. Instead of visuality I foregrounded the experience of reading a narrative. Furthermore, I choose works which would convey an artistic feel to Parisien intellectuals. Coinciding with the French reception of manga going through a transitional phase at that time, the exhibition was well-received, and later it toured to other places in Europe as well. In the main, it was regarded as an subversion of the habitual equation of manga with sexual and violent representation. This made me realize that the "art" status of manga is a matter of its relation to specific audiences, and that it can influence societal recognition if the relation works well. Both the attractivity of manga and the aura of art are constantly shaken and redetermined through processes of negotiating society's dominant values with audiences. An essence inherent to either manga or art proper can by no means be assumed. Even if I myself as a member of the audience may intuitively feel such an "essence," it has to be relativized within critical language.

Since then Japanese manga exhibitions have developed through trial and error into a cross-domain medium, occasionally even providing an opportunity to relativize the notion of manga. But Japanese fans are by tendency very much concerned with seeing the experience of reading manga as a story recreated in the exhibition space. The most exciting example in that regard was the *Inoue Takehiko – The Last Manga Exhibition* which took its departure from The Ueno Royal Museum in 2008. Inoue Takehiko described the exhibition as a "spatial manga to be experienced with your entire body."<sup>2</sup> He attempted

---

2 Inoue Takehiko, untitled essay, in exh. cat. *I-NO-U-E-NO Mangetsu-hen*, Flower Corp., 2008, p. 211.

successfully to make an unfolding narrative palpable in the gallery space. By putting huge pictures on the walls and other objects, calculating the temporal sequencing of the pictures as well as the viewer's route, rebuilding a sand shore, and alternating tight and dark spaces with bright and wide ones, he turned the exhibition space itself into a re-experience of reading manga. This expansion grew into something bigger though, overcoming manga itself.

Likewise in the 2000s, exhibitions organized by specialized manga museums started to surface. The Kyoto International Manga Museum provided its visitors, for example, with the unique experience of walking over original drawings placed under acrylic plates in its exhibition *18,000 Original Manga Drawings by Tsuchida Seiki*, held in 2014. To me, who was also a manga artist once, it was astonishing, as my notion of manga was shaken up again, this time by the sensational materiality of the original drawings. The amount of pages gathered at the venue impressed me deeply; it felt like a materialization of the artist's strong commitment to the expressive form of manga.

In the edited volume *When Manga and Museum Meet (Manga to myūjiamu ga deau toki, 2009)* then-manga curator at the Kawasaki City Museum Kanazawa Kodama pointed out one problem with recent manga exhibitions, namely that their target group is difficult to expand, as it tends to be limited to manga fans, no matter what. Yet, also trusting the potential of manga exhibitions, she wrote that “at art museums it should be possible to think of art and manga not as opposite concepts which can only coopt each other onesidedly, but as benefiting from one another.”<sup>3</sup> I support her conviction that manga can yield a vivid expansion in society, precisely because it has always been an ambiguous popular-cultural domain, difficult to define in the first place. Manga exhibitions hold the potential of being a site where such vivid expansion can be experienced and where expanded experiences arise. We may detect the state of our own contemporary culture here, like in a mirror.<sup>4</sup>

---

3 Kanazawa, Kodama, “Manga x Bijutsukan,” in Omote Tomoyuki, Kanazawa Kodama & Murata Mariko, *Manga to myūjiamu ga deau toki*, Kyoto: Rinsen Shoten, p. 131.

4 This article is based on my conference paper, revised on 2 October 2015.