

Manga x Museum in Contemporary Japan

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1. An astonishing indifference

In present Japan, comics no longer need legitimization. And even if so, depending on the genre in question, the legitimization effort would not rest upon the authority of modern institutions such as fine art or the museum. But fine art as well as the museum are crucial points of reference for western tourists, as those who come to the Kyoto International Manga Museum confirm with their expectations and occasional discontent. Recent surveys¹ reveal significant cultural differences, mainly with respect to the following three issues.

Firstly, most western visitors expect to learn something from watching exhibits, whereas the regular Japanese visitor enjoys browsing through book shelves and reading the material, giving the impression of a library user or manga-café customer. Secondly, especially European visitors tend to assume, that in a facility called museum, manga are made to represent national heritage mirroring the cultural policy of the Japanese nation state. However, as a public institution under the auspices of the City of Kyoto, which shifted the respective responsibility from its Board of Education to the Bureau of Industry Promotion in 2010, the International Manga Museum is supposed to serve, first and foremost, local identity² (and increasingly local economy as well). Thirdly, many foreign visitors expect manga to be acknowledged as a legitimate art form by virtue of the museum, last but not least, against the backdrop of the two national comics centers in Brussels (CBBD, since 1988) and Angoulême (CBDI, since 1990) and also the nationally run Korean Manhwa Museum, opened in 2009 at the KOMACON compound in Korea's self-appointed "manhwa city" Bucheon.³

1 Approximately 20% of the ca. 300,000 museum visitors per annum are foreigners. see Sabre 2011: 320-349 (chapter 10 "Le manga au musée, quelle légitimité pour la pop culture?").

2 Recent Japanese museology textbooks tie the social function of the museum solely to "regional society" (*chiiki shakai*) anyway. For example, Zenkoku daigaku hakubutsukan kōza kyōgikai 2008: 54-56.

3 Abbr. of Korea Manhwa Contents Agency. In contemporary Korea, due to public

Such references to national culture and modern institutions are not specifically foreign. They prevailed in Japan as well, when until the 1990s manga critics claimed a legitimate status for their medium in two directions: on the one hand, by emphasizing manga's parity with "high art", among other things, by leaning on authorized traditional artworks, and on the other hand, by promoting "story manga" (that is, magazine-based serializations of graphic narratives) against the other forms of manga, such as caricatures and comic-strips, which had been acknowledged earlier due to their appearance in newspapers addressed to adult readers. But in the 1990s, the story manga carved a visible place for itself in industrial terms, gaining recognition both in Japan and abroad. Suffice to mention the enormous success of the manga magazine *Shōnen JUMP* which sold about 6 million copies weekly at its best. Against this background of sheer proliferation and commercial success, strong advocacies of manga's cultural importance became less imperative. Instead of struggling for legitimization as such, manga museums are more involved in defining themselves *vis-à-vis* the practices of producing and consuming manga, which includes the defense of specific genres and fandoms against aggravated attempts at regulation.⁴ As distinct from the late 1980s when story manga began to enter the museum realm, manga critics and researchers today exhibit an astonishing indifference towards fine art in particular and legitimization in general. For curators, manga's overwhelming quantity, and how to handle it within the limited capacities of a public museum, is a much more pressing issue (Omote 2009).

In addition, curators have to reckon with readers' reservation against exhibiting and housing manga in museums. The majority of domestic fans tend to presume that the institution of the museum benefits from the popular medium (which helps to increase visitor numbers), while not offering much in return. This has been explained by allocating the institution of the museum to "the west" and manga to "indigenous Japanese culture" (Murata 2009: 166). But in Japan, manga and museum have at least one thing in common: resulting from a particular modernization which involved the localization of imports from western civilization, they are both cultural hybrids. As such they are characterized by cultural particularities as well as a globally shared modernity. Furthermore, they are equally liable to historic change. Thus, the restraint by contemporary manga readers against the institution of the museum may be traced back to its educational mandate rather than its alleged non-Japanese imprint. Imprinted by the home-made educational system and its orientation on entrance exams which not rarely sap any joy from education in general, manga readers tend to suspect

subsidies, the word *manhwa* does not only refer to caricatures or comics in the strict sense of sequential stills, but encompasses also character design, animated moving images (whether in the form of films or games) and digital creations which oscillate between traditional comics and animation, so-called webtoons. For comparison between the museums in Bucheon and Kyoto see Yamanaka 2011.

⁴ Exhibitions on the female genre of Boys' Love manga, for example, are not yet possible in Japanese museums. For a discussion of another contested because erotic genre see Galbraith 2011.

the museum of disabusing them. In this sense, the museum remains “foreign” to most manga readers. If it plays any role at all in daily life, then as a site of affirmation and reconfirmation instead of questioning common sense.

Below, I shall first introduce the International Manga Museum Kyoto and then touch briefly on its relation to fine art, before turning to a manga exhibition which illuminates the typical indifference, if not ignorance of a famous manga artist in that regard, suggesting a reversal of the modern unbalance between manga and fine art instead of its dissolution.⁵

2. The International Manga Museum Kyoto

At present, ca. 1.200 museums are registered in Japan, about thirty of which focus on manga.⁶ Like the first tiny one established in 1966 for Kitazawa Rakuten (*Saitama manga kaikan*), most of them are dedicated to single artists and run by local communities.⁷ The fact, that a national manga museum does not exist, is witness to the longstanding attitude of the central authorities. Only recently does the national government exhibit an interest in manga. In June 2009, the Agency of Cultural Affairs⁸ which has been promoting manga as “media art”⁹ by means of a special award since 1997, astonished the nation with the announcement of a new National Center for Media Arts. Lampooned as the “national manga café”, the center triggered harsh criticism—not because of its subject, but rather because of its half-baked concept and the plan to build a completely new facility in Tokyo instead of supporting already existing ones (Corkill 2009). Now the Agency facilitates an archive-oriented network of 16 institutions, including the Kawasaki City Museum, which opened in 1988 with the innovative concept of intertwining urban ethnology and archeology, photography, graphic design and manga, and the Yonezawa Yoshihiro Memorial Library, established in 2009 by Meiji University Tokyo to house the collection of one of the *komike* founders.¹⁰ Likewise initiated

5 This chapter is based on Berndt 2011.

6 Murata (2009: 182-183) lists up 51 institutions many of which do not attend to comics in the strict sense. In Japanese, there are three terms for “museum”: *hakubutsukan* (allround knowledge + building) signifying today all national museums including those which house premodern art; *bijutsukan* (fine art + building), a term which came into broad use after WWII, meaning art museum, or more precisely, art gallery; and *myūjiamu*, the loanword from English pronounced in a Japanese way. The third term is used by the Kawasaki City Museum as well as by the International Manga Museum Kyoto. It gives a lighter, more accessible impression than the older terms, and it allows for avoiding “fine art”.

7 For example, Hasegawa Machiko Art Museum (Tokyo, 1985), Tezuka Osamu Memorial Museum (Takarazuka 1994), Ishinomori Shōtarō Museum (Ishinomaki, 2001; heavily damaged by the 3.11 tsunami), Yokoyama Ryūichi Memorial Manga Museum (Kōchi, 2002).

8 The Agency belongs to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

9 For a discussion of this term see ICOMAG 2011.

10 Yonezawa Yoshihiro (1953-2006), one of the founders of the now biggest convention for fanzines and fan art called *komike* (abbr. Comic Market) in 1975 and its long-time

and mainly run by a private university is the Kyoto International Manga Museum (MM below).

As a comprehensive cultural facility which aims to focus on manga in all its facets, the MM is quite exceptional in contemporary Japan. Its initial budget was granted by the MEXT, but Kyoto Seika University, an art college founded by pacifists in 1968, took the initiative.¹¹ Seven months after it had launched its Manga Faculty, it opened the MM based on a public-private partnership. The museum's other two main trustees are the City of Kyoto and a local civic association which still owns the ground and the building of the former *Tatsuike Elementary School* (1869-1995).¹² 90% of the museum's start-up funding were provided by a 5-year subsidy called Open Research Center. Under this name, the museum was to further Manga Studies in a manner accessible to scholars and non-academics alike, and this applied not only to events and exhibitions, but the museum itself, as the MM found itself in two positions at the same time: that of researcher and researched subject.

As distinct from the majority of similar institutions, the MM concentrates on printed matter instead of original drawings, that is, on manga as it arrives at the reader's hands. Since the late 1950s, special weeklies and monthlies have given rise to manga as a cultural medium, formed the backbone of its industry and shaped its style. Precisely these magazines come to mind when the Japanese word *manga* pops up. The MM has now about 300,000 items in its depots and public shelves, among them 30,000 magazine issues and 250,000 *tankōbon* volumes. Admittedly, manga are not limited to these publication formats (Suffice to mention manuals and general magazines). The MM does not consider them in order to keep the collection manageable, but, as distinct from usual libraries, it preserves also the *tankōbon*'s cover and banderole (*obi*) for the purpose of cultural and historical insight.

At the heart of the museum is the so-called "manga wall", consisting of book shelves in the hallways which make a total of 50.000 *tankōbon* available to the visitor. On the ground floor, the "wall" contains foreign comics, translated manga and boys' manga, on the first floor, girls' and women's manga, and on the second floor, manga for youth and adult readers. Visitors do not just read while standing anymore, but have come to sit on the floor and the stairs as well as on the wooden deck and the artificial lawn outside. At first glance, this may give the impression of a library, but the MM lacks the function of lending. The registration practice of libraries has proven to be unfit for manga anyway, or more precisely,

director. The present library with its emphasis on manga-related fan cultures is the forerunner of the Tokyo International Manga Library which is scheduled to open in 2014.

11 Kyoto Seika University was the first to introduce a manga class into its design curriculum in 1973, but the notion of manga was limited to caricature and newspaper strips until in 2000, a Department of Manga was established within the Faculty of Fine Art which included story manga. The Manga Faculty was followed by the Graduate School of Manga Studies (2010 master course, 2012 doctoral course).

12 Because local citizens established this school prior to the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890).

to the specific search needs of manga readers and researchers who focus not solely on authors but often on publishers and labels as well. While some western tourists voice discontent that the MM is “only a library”, to Japanese, it may look more like a manga café. Yet, in contrast to such internet cafés where you pay a small hourly fee in order to be left alone in a niche while reading recent bestsellers, the MM offers slightly older, almost historical material as well as the rare opportunity to communicate with other readers.

According to a recent investigation, there are four types of visitors (not necessarily identical with nationality). The first one—mostly domestic—heads straight for the book shelves without wasting a single glance on exhibits, and stays for quite some time in the same place, “privatizing” the public space. The second type—mainly foreign and elderly Japanese tourists—favours watching over reading and roams more or less the whole house. Junior high school classes on their Kyoto trip—the third type—mix the first two forms. A fourth type of visitor is interested in neither reading nor watching, but hangs around like in an amusement park (Murata et.al. 2010: 79-84). The constantly running background music may further evoke Japanese department stores or shopping malls. Composed by Seika professor Komatsu Masafumi, this soundscape seems to perform two interrelated functions: it relieves Japanese visitors of the burden of socializing, for example, the pressure to respond politely to other persons, while saving them from the feeling of social isolation.

3. “Media” and “culture” instead of “art”

On the MM’s website, its *raison d’être* is explained by reference to the appreciation of Japanese manga abroad and to the national cultural policy, stating that manga is “now being recognized as a new art field in Japan” (*geijutsu bunya*). This comes as a surprise, since the museum has so far not devoted itself to manga as an art form. The word “art” is deployed, most of all, in line with the ministry. After all, the MEXT had included manga (and anime) as a new topic in the art-education curriculum of junior high schools in 2002. But whereas in English it is common to refer to comics *artists* and in French to celebrate *bande dessinée* as the 9th art, in Japanese, manga has rather been called “culture” (*bunka*) when people felt the need to stress its equality to as well as its independence from other forms of expression. Significantly, the newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* named the manga award it established in 1997 “Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize”. The comics that have been awarded this prize in the tradition of Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989) are current story manga series available in tankōbon format, such as Urasawa Naoki’s *MONSTER* (in 1999), Inoue Takehiko’s *VAGABOND* (in 2002) and Tatsumi Yoshihiro’s *A Drifting Life* (2009). These manga narratives represent neither exceptional explorations of the comics medium nor are they favorites of the fandom (and as such, for example, subject to fan art and cosplay). They are true manifestations of manga “culture”, insofar as they can be shared by a

broader audience than the usual taste or knowledge communities.

As “culture”, manga attracts attention especially from three different angles: firstly, as a medium; secondly, as national culture in relation to foreign countries; and thirdly, tied to local culture within Japan. The MM highlights manga as a medium. This is evident not only from the “manga wall” and the reading visitors, but also from the bilingual introduction to manga in the Main Gallery (which was opened in spring 2010 in order to meet the expectations of those visitors who wish to educate themselves). Instead of departing from the medieval *Chōjū giga* scrolls of frolicking animals and humans, the historical survey begins with printed material of the late 19th century, and precisely thereby invites occasional complaints by western fans who are apparently unwilling to revise their image of manga’s “origins” and accept the MM’s media-historical approach. Yet, as crucial as printed material may be for manga as a medium, it does not really lend itself to museum exhibitions. First of all, magazines, which form the core of manga proper, are not easily displayed, as monochrome visuals on acidic paper are much less spectacular than supplements or merchandising goods. Produced as throw-away reading material, manga magazines are also materially very fragile. But museum visitors expect to see something different for their entrance fee anyway, for example, original drawings. They usually disapprove of manga experts’ preference for the actually circulating printed matter and stay reserved against exhibitions which focus on the media-specific differences between preliminary drawing, printed magazine series and book edition.¹³

Concerning the second point, that is, the inter/national relation, it is striking that manga artists and publishers are usually not very supportive when curators approach them. In the U.S., comics exhibitions in museums increase the principal value of an artist (Kim 2009), but this is not the case in Japan. Here, most artists want to see their works appreciated by ordinary consumers not critics or researchers, probably because they have never experienced a non-commercial project to be beneficial to themselves. Especially difficult to realize are general exhibitions which focus on one genre and thus cross the rivalry between different publishing houses and magazines. The *Shōjo Manga Power!* exhibition, for example, was only realizable because it was initially put together for U.S. venues and afterwards “re-imported” to Japan (Yamada & Kanazawa 2008). Beyond the borders of Japan, or more precisely the domestic field of manga, artists were not only willing to cooperate, but many of them also realized for the first time, what they had in common as a “culture” (in this case, the culture of girls’ manga; Kanazawa 2009: 118). Usually, such background stays invisible when manga exhibitions are reviewed. But in fact, many of them are less shaped by their

¹³ For the Mangamania exhibition held at the Museum of Applied Art Frankfurt in spring 2008, the Japanese side had prepared the magazine and book editions of about two dozen double-spreads for visual comparison. However, the German curator in charge decided to snap all the books shut for the display in glass cases because he found the colored covers more attractive than the monochrome manga pages inside.

curator's concept than by the un/willingness of copyright owners to cooperate. Thus, curators are advised to build respective connections first (Takahashi 2011).

A good example for the third aspect of “manga as culture”—local identity—is provided by the Phoenix, which has adorned the MM since September 2009. Under the direction of sculptor Sudō Mitsuaki, traditional wood carvers specialized in Buddha statues created this costly work out of red-cedar wood, lacquered gold foil and glass. 4.5m high and 11m long, the three-dimensional version of Tezuka Osamu's famous manga character was a gift to the MM, supposed to strengthen the ties between the City of Kyoto and manga. Noteworthy in this regard is the actual absence of such ties. As distinct from Tokyo or Osaka, Kyoto has never been a center of manga publishing or the place of origin to a whole range of famous manga artists, and even the publication of the often-cited *Hokusai Manga* (1814-1878) started in Nagoya. Furthermore, it deserves attention that “art” is equated with craftsmanship here. But apart from the attempt at upholding traditional craftsmanship by means of manga (or vice versa), Kyoto's local identity can actually also lean on its modern history, which has been characterized by resistance against the center. Throughout the 20th century, craftsmen, artists and intellectuals developed a local and not necessarily backward-looking modernity distinct from Tokyo's. In consideration of this modern tradition, the MM could serve as a site where the local and the global meet without intercession by the “national”.

4. Triumphant manga?

Crucial for manga's legitimization in the 1990s were pioneering exhibitions in art museums, such as the Tezuka Osamu retrospective held by the National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo in 1990, and the extensive show *The Age of Manga*, organized by the two municipal museums of contemporary art in Tokyo and Hiroshima. However, the enthusiasm of public art museums to host manga exhibitions has decreased drastically since then (Kanazawa 2011: 127), one of the major obstacles being the museum's handling of narrativity. Precisely in this regard, the *Inoue Takehiko: The Last Manga Exhibition* broke new ground.

In 2008 conceived exclusively for the Ueno Royal Museum, an art gallery in Tokyo, it was so successful that it was subsequently shown also in Kumamoto, Osaka and Sendai. For the first time, a manga artist had been invited to be the organizer of his own exhibition in a museum space, and he accomplished to “change our notion of a ‘manga show’ completely”, as critic Fujimoto Yukari (2008: 68) noted. Inoue created an original episode related to his famous *VAGABOND* series,¹⁴ and he made the visitor literally read it within the museum space. In addition to doorways and walls attaining the role of manga

¹⁴ Serialized in *Morning* since 1998, 33 volumes so far of which a total of 50 million copies have been sold.

frames, single pictures of varying size and hanging height guided the viewer forward, sometimes across zigzag walls, sometimes through darker rooms. Sequences of typical manga drawings were exhibited, altered by large ink paintings on Japanese paper. Thus, the viewer was made to follow the emotional flow of the narrative but also provided insight into the artist's mastery of the brush. More than any exhibition of original drawings, this evoked the impression of "art", and the respective aura was enhanced by the fact that the artist presented an episode which was not available in print, and that photographs were strictly prohibited. Yet, Inoue did not put all the time and effort into this exhibition project for commercial reasons. On the contrary, it even affected his regular work on running magazine series. According to his own words, he aimed at "transcending the usual limits, becoming free" (op. cit. Murata 2009: 144).

The layout of the exhibition space, the strong sensory appeal and the presentation of manga as a narrative medium evoked fulsome praise, including the assertion that Inoue accomplished this only because he was unimpeded by museum conventions (Murata 2009: 141). However, this distance towards the museum did not only lead to a stance which was refreshingly unaffected by status claims; it also made Inoue's exhibition stay within the limits of both "museum" and "manga". To put it differently, his exhibition may have affirmed manga's legitimacy, but it did not raise any questions about the possibilities and limitations of the museum by virtue of manga, or reversely, widen the self-content field of manga, for example, by pointing to potentials easily overlooked in daily life. The artist felt rather challenged by a technical, or design-related, issue, that is, how to organize a narrative rhythm within a large three-dimensional space. As such the exhibition left a quite conservative impression. A closer look on what exactly the visitor was made to "read" (beyond confirming one's relation to a familiar character), and in which visual forms this narrative was presented may confirm this.

The exhibition presented how the swordsman Miyamoto Musashi, the manga's protagonist, spends the last moments of his life, recalling the people he met, dreaming of past friends and rivals, and above all, remembering the conflictual relation to his father. His last mental resort is to be an infant in his mother's arms, before he vanishes into the horizon, together with his life-long rival Kojirō. The return to the mother takes the form of seven monumental Madonna paintings. Placed near the end of the tour, in the largest room with the highest ceiling, they provided the emotional climax to the majority of the visitors, many of whom shed tears in front of these sentimental images. Neither comics panels, and as such closely interrelated with other images, nor self-contained paintings of a certain autonomy and originality, they looked highly unsettled, suggesting solid craftsmanship rather than fine art. Insofar as they deployed ink, brush and Japanese paper, they were reminiscent of East Asian painting traditions. But not only did Inoue create these pictures standing, as if in the tradition of Western easel painting, the body of the mother-like figure was also rendered in a manner close to traditions of European academism. Undressed, she would have only

remotely looked Asian, not to mention her face.

Such art-historical connotations remained invisible to the supporting curator as well as the visitors of the exhibition (including reviewers). However, the story itself offered a highly questionable closure. The somehow politically correct anti-violence theme—the swordsman repent of his deeds—led to the immersion into a comforting mother, not to reflection upon social power and individual choice or the representation of violence in manga which attracts so much attention abroad. But Inoue’s exhibition was welcomed by a huge taste community which tends to confirm what it shares at the expense of any other perspectives, and thus critical readings did not surface.

With Inoue’s exhibition, manga has become indeed the penetrator which the title of this chapter suggests by deploying the “x” of Boys’ Love discourse: there, it designates a couple, with the first partner being the strong one and the second the weak. The weakness of the museum in its relation to manga is by now common sense among Japanese readers, critics and curators. However, even in Japan with its peculiar positioning of fine art, it might be high time to reflect not only on the limitations of the museum but also its potential—as a social institution for communicating, broadening one’s horizon and changing perspectives. In order to ensure manga’s future in the age of digitalization, not only archives are needed but also sites for divergent positions to meet and commonalities to be negotiated. One of these sites may be called “museum”.

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