

Manga Overview

Comics, Graphic Novels, and Culture



Manga is the Japanese word for comics, or humorous pictures. Manga has a long history in Japan, with its earliest forms dating back to ancient temple paintings and medieval picture scrolls. Its more modern antecedent, *ponchi*, began appearing at the end of the nineteenth century. Notably, all of these comic forms featured caricature and satire, and this type of humor remains in modern manga.

Modern manga originated during the American occupation of Japan, as Japan rebuilt its political and economic systems after suffering catastrophic defeat in World War Two. One of the most prolific and influential manga artists, Osamu Tezuka (*Astro Boy*), began publishing during this time.

Today in Japan, manga is immensely popular with men, women, children of every ages and social class. There are approximately 2.5 million avid manga readers (*otaku*) in Japan and hundreds of manga magazines such as *Shonen Jump* and *Shojo Beat*. Manga is usually serialized, with popular stories such as *Naruto* by Masashi Kishimoto spanning years and typically republished in collected volumes. Many manga titles are turned into anime (and vice versa), and the close relationship between manga and anime has led to the term Japanimation to describe these intertwining media.

Manga comes in a range of genres, each intended for a different audience and each with its own set of stock characters and settings. Many of these genres are known by their Japanese names: these include *Shonen* (for boys), *Shojo* (for girls), *Yaoi* (gay love stories), *Yuri* (lesbian love stories), *Josei* (for women), *Seinen* (for men), *Ecchi* (erotic fantasy), *Hentai* (pornography), *Mecha* (robot themes), *Shojo Mahou* (magical heroine), and more. Manga can also be categorized more broadly by subject—fantasy, school life, romance, comedy, tragedy, harem, historical, supernatural, horror, science fiction, slice of life, gender bender, and more. As Kinko Ito observes, this great variety of genres makes manga both escapist and reflective of Japanese culture:

Japanese comics do not exist in a vacuum; they are closely connected to Japanese history and culture, including such areas as politics, economy, family, religion, and gender. Therefore, they reflect both the reality of Japanese society and the myths, beliefs, and fantasies that the Japanese have about themselves, their culture, and the world (*Japanese Visual Culture* 26).

The recent international success of all Japanimation has led some to question whether manga remains a uniquely Japanese phenomenon. Japanese manga publishers have expanded to the United States, for example, where English-translations of manga continue to grow in sales). And American publishing companies—Penguin, DC Comics—are now producing their own manga titles.

Despite its growing international appeal, reading manga still presents challenges to the westerners, even when the comic is *flopped* to read right-to-left. First, manga is *more visual* and *less verbal* than western comics: the reader is meant to view the panels in quick succession. Consequently, manga often follows the typical nine-panel grid structure without much structural subtlety. Manga does feature long, skinny panels, but these are meant to achieve a *cinematic* effect rather than to reinforce verbal meaning. Another cinematic effect is the zoom movement that characterizes many pages. While the majority of manga transitions are action-to-action, there are more aspect-to-aspect transitions than in western comics.



Manga may also seem less individualized than western comics. Manga artists rely on a set of recognized conventions: typically, characters have oversized eyes (that change to reflect different moods), small noses and mouths, graceful bodies, and largely western features. Depicted simply with minimal lines, these characters are often shown against more detailed, finely rendered backgrounds that are digitally rendered. Action lines are dramatic and sometimes accompanied by verbal explanations (GLARE or SWIPE), and emotions are depicted with exaggeration. A range of symbols (*emanata*) help to further characterize emotions: a fang protruding from the mouth, for example, represents mischief. For comic effect, characters are sometimes replaced by *chibi*, or simple caricatures of themselves. These and other components make up the visual grammar of manga, but this is not to suggest that manga artists lack originality: Osamu Tezuka, for instance, is still noted for his highly unique drawing style.

Manga is widely available online, in *scanslations* sites that publish PDF pages, and at legitimate manga publishing sites such as Viz Media. Two vast Japanimation repositories are mangareader.net and mangago.com, though there are dozens of these kinds of sites. Classic manga titles include *Dragon Ball* (Toriyama), *Astro Boy* (Tezuka), and *Golgo 13* (Saito). Currently popular series are *Naruto* (Kishimoto), *Bleach* (Kubo), and *High School of the Dead* (Sato and Sato).