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Funny Girls

Shojo Manga evoke the spirit of young women

Isaac Adamson

A famous missionary portrayed as homosexual loner with ESP. The French Revolution through the eyes of a cross-dressing female soldier named Oscar. Ming Dynasty erotica featuring reclining lovers dreamily watching pastel-colored bunny rabbits humping at their feet. Love and gang-rape tragedy at a European boys' boarding school. Something called "XXXHolic."

If Harry Potter makes parents worry, wait until they get a load of this stuff.

According to the New York Times, it won't be long. The "Shojo Manga! Girl Power!" exhibition at Columbia College explores the roots of what has become the fastest-growing segment in US publishing--Japanese comic books for girls. Spurned by the success of translated *shonen manga* (boys' comics), even industry giants like Simon & Schuster and Random House are eager to capture an audience of young female readers too long ignored by domestic comic book publishers.

Featuring some 200 works from nearly two-dozen artists, "Shojo Manga!" is the first exhibition touring the U.S. to show how women in Japan have been staking out their comic-book territory since the medium exploded in the aftermath of World War II. Along the way, the exhibition offers a penetrating glance into the fantasies, insecurities and shifting social roles of women in Japan. (And, in case the shameless sensationalism of the first paragraph didn't clue you in, sexuality and gender issues play a large part, too.)

No single artist played a bigger a role in the birth of modern manga than Osamu Tezuka, famed creator of Astro Boy. "Shojo Manga!" features original drawings from his "Ribbon Knight" fantasy series, one of the first hugely successful comics targeted specifically at girls. Most artists



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of the postwar era writing for girls were men, but it's interesting to note that gender confusion was already on the drawing board, as Tezuka's protagonist Princess Sapphire is a creature born with both a male and female spirit. (In his waning years, he also worked on a retelling of "Faust" featuring a female Mephistopheles.)

As the girls who grew up reading comics in the fifties and sixties started writing their own in the seventies, the *shojo manga* entered what is considered its golden age. The exhibition features colorful illustrations from possibly the most aesthetically emblematic girls' comic of any era, Riyoko Ikeda's French Revolution epic "Rose of Versailles."

What sets girls' comics apart is arguably just as much a matter of visual style as narrative substance. Instead of hard bold lines and garish colors, girls' comics often use pastels and a soft glow effect. Everyone has great hair and glamorous clothes, and historical pieces get a lot of mileage out of frilly shirts, flowing gowns and flowery backdrops. They offer up a fantasy world light years away from the drab school uniforms, glass and steel monoliths, and rabbit-hutch apartment buildings that make up many kids' waking realities. Almost all characters in manga have oversized, twinkling eyes--but in *shojo manga* their eyes don't contain individual stars so much as entire galaxies. Seeing Ikeda's images as they were originally created prior to being shrunk and mass-produced, you get a sense of the painterly craft needed to make these idealized confections sparkle.

Idealization is a huge part of teenage romantic fantasy, and "Shojo Manga!" goes a long way to illustrating what young women in Japan fantasize about. For many, nothing captures the pure romantic ideal quite like stories about pretty (often blue-eyed, blond-haired) teenage boys in love with each other. "Shojo Manga!" boasts excerpts from a giant of the genre, "Thomas' Heart," a tragic love story set in a German boarding school.

"Some Japanese women no longer believe in love between men and women as superior since they see the reality after the happy ending," says Dr. Masami Toku, the exhibition's curator.

But as the exhibit gleefully demonstrates, not all girls' comics are about love or coming of age. Similarly, there's no dominant visual style on display. As the contemporary "shojo manga" world expands and fragments, girls' comics have spawned ladies' comics, romantic homoeroticism has become a genre of self-parody, and (gasp!) artists have even started drawing ugly-looking people with normal-sized eyes.

And since girls' stories were once told almost exclusively by men, it's only fitting that the venerable Osamu Tezuka's daughter-in-law, Reiko Okano, has become a highly respected *shojo manga* artist herself.

Oh yes, one other thing--she writes boys' comics on the side.

"Shojo Manga! Girl Power!" shows at the C33 Gallery, 33

East Congress, through April 26. Reception: March 24, 5-8pm, Special NAEA Convention Reception, (public is welcome to attend); March 28, 5-7pm, College-Wide Reception. Both feature lectures by Curator Masami Toku and an artist at 5:30pm.*

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Also by Isaac Adamson

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