



# Asian Comics: Evolution of An Artform

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

**barbican**



**FLYING FISH**

# ASIAN COMICS:

EVOLUTION OF AN ARTFORM

# OVERVIEW

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# HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking a Ride on the Spirit Boat inflatable sculpture
- Goddess Statue by Junko Mizuno
- Original Astro Boy comic art, ink, color on paper
- Traditional visual storytelling Kaavad Shrines
- Mecha Robot interactive by Kawamori Shoji & Pentagram
- Fukutani Takashi original drawing desk



# OVERVIEW

Asian Comics: Evolution of An Artform presents a vivid journey through the art of Comics and visual storytelling across Asia. From its historical roots to the most recent digital innovations, the exhibition looks to popular Japanese 'Manga' and beyond, highlighting key creators, characters and publications. Explore thriving contemporary comics cultures and traditional graphic narrative artforms from countries including India, Philippines, Indonesia, China, Korea and Japan.

Delve into a kaleidoscope of diverse stories, from fantastical folklore, pivotal historical moments, revealing memoirs, and challenging expressions of freedom. Discover acclaimed and influential creators from Osamu Tezuka, Miyako Maki, Hur Young Man

and Lat, to genre innovators and under-represented artists including Abhishek Singh and Miki Yamamoto. See how their work has influenced cinema, animation, fashion, visual art, music and videogames.

Curated by Paul Gravett with a team of more than twenty international advisors, Mangasia features over 500 works - the largest selection of artworks from the continent - including Japanese woodblock prints, Hindu scroll paintings, digital media, printed comics and contemporary illustrations. This unique exhibition is a 'gateway to an unexplored world of graphic storytelling and its artistic value.

Spatial and graphic design by Pentagram Design.



# MAPPING MANGASIA



Prepare to explore an amazing continent of comics creativity called *Asian Comics: Evolution of An Artform*.

This is the first exhibition to embrace the narrative comics art produced in East, Southeast and South Asia. It will venture as far west as Pakistan, as far north as Mongolia, as far south-east as East Timor. This mapping of Asia encompasses some two dozen countries, ranging in size from smaller territories such as Hong Kong and Singapore to the two most populated nations of all, China and India.



There is no single Asia, but rather a diverse range of countries over which extends a network of historical, political, spiritual and artistic cultures. Among these is 'manga', defined in this exhibition as comics created in Japan. Over time, manga has grown to become the world's largest and most enduring comics culture and an almost infinitely variable art form, covering subjects that range from children's stories to adult-only fantasies.

Manga has had an undeniable effect on the development of much of Asian comics. This has occurred, for example, historically when countries were occupied by Japan, or more recently as Japanese comics spread abroad as pirated or licensed translations, as animated adaptations, and online.

Nevertheless, there is much more to Asian comics than manga. From Chinese 'lianhuanhua' and Korean 'manhwa' to Indonesian 'cergam' and Filipino 'komiks', each country can also draw on its own national traditions and import influences from elsewhere. The result is the web of artistic approaches, current trends, social and political structures, histories, beliefs and folklore which fuels the brightly burning flame of Asian comics. WONDERLANDS await you...



# FABLES & FOLKLORE

Every culture's stories contain lasting truths of perennial relevance. As a result, they are ripe for reinterpretation as they are handed down from one generation to the next. Across Asia, these tales continue to be transmitted, not only through accessible modern comics, but also using traditional forms of storytelling such as scrolls and 'kaavads'. These often combine wordless sequential visuals with verbal performance and can be considered ancestors on the family tree of comics.

Of China's four great classical novels, the spiritual and comical quest Journey to the West has attracted the most comics adaptations, not least because its fantastical protagonist is the appealing, impetuous Monkey. Highly inventive, even eccentric, reinterpretations of this much-told tale are still being created in comics form in China and the rest of Asia to this day. Equally inexhaustible are India's two greatest Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, sweeping poems about Krishna and Rama.

Comics have offered many their first exposure to the key ideas and figures of Hinduism, Buddhism and the region's other belief systems. Cartoonists have also played a vital role in keeping alive their nation's fables and folktales and the inspiring exploits of more-or-less fictional heroes and anti-heroes from the past.

During Japan's rush to Westernise and modernise since the late 19th century, their rich spirit world of 'yokai' began to fall out of favour. Since the Sixties, however, manga has helped rekindle public appreciation of these age-old creatures. Elsewhere, for example in The Philippines and Thailand, their bizarre bestiaries have never been forgotten. Today the supernatural remains very much a part of everyday 21st-century Asia and its remarkable comics.



# RECREATING & REVISING THE PAST

Asia's complex, interconnected histories are being written from many perspectives. Each nation tells versions of its own history and to reach a broader readership often employs comics. These range from unquestioningly patriotic to outspokenly critical, depending on the market and the freedom of expression permitted. The medium has been used to respond at the time to major upheavals through propaganda, criticism, diary or commentary. With hindsight, cartoonists can also look back to re-assess or re-write those same events. The result is a spectrum of accounts which are contrasting, sometimes contradictory, and never wholly objective.

The multiple histories of Asia are entangled, partly because many of the nations have been colonised, by expansionist Western powers and later by Japan during its empire-building drive until 1945. Since then, several countries have achieved

independence, while others still await it, but this has not always guaranteed freedom. The region has also been ravaged by the Cold War between capitalism and communism, and by a rogue's gallery of ruthless leaders. Relationships between former occupier and occupied, invader and invaded, can remain unresolved, while the wounds created when a country is split are often slow to heal.

Comics offer one means to deal with this legacy, and with ongoing corruption, disputes, repression of rights and other issues. Cartoonists active as citizen journalists are disseminating stories ignored or buried by mainstream news media. Particularly revealing are those works that narrate untold stories, reaffirming that history is built on the real lives of individuals. In much of Asia today, comics seem set to become an essential platform for the personal and political.



# STORIES & STORYTELLERS

We rarely stop to wonder who makes the comics we enjoy and how they are made. Behind every story lies a storyteller. And each storyteller has his or her own personal story. About charting their path to becoming a comics artist, their challenge to create this particular work, and their success or failure at making a living and maybe a career from this most demanding of professions.





Whether as masters of a studio of assistants or solo auteurs, there are striking contrasts in the fortunes of comics creators across Asia. Some of the highest earners in Japanese entertainment are mangaka, who typically own or share in the copyright to their creations and so ideally can earn millions from book sales and their plethora of licensed merchandise and spin-offs. Not all Asian cartoonists, however, benefit fairly from their work, especially when publishers pay them only as work-for-hire freelancers and deny them creators' rights, even credits, to their output. And the relentless pressure to produce has even driven some to breaking point.

Nevertheless, many people in Asia still pursue the dream of making comics. So often it has been creators who have spearheaded expansion and experimentation, notably in Japan in the Fifties when a fresh generation reflected the darker spirit of the times and aimed their more dramatic manga at their own generation. Their 'gekiga' would invade and forever transform Japan's mainstream. By subverting the system or bypassing it altogether, cartoonists are making the most of today's ever-changing creative process, self-publishing opportunities and receptive audiences. Now more than ever, Asian comics can be by and for everyone.

# CENSORSHIP & SENSIBILITY

Comics are often some of the first and most formative reading we choose for ourselves, so it's no surprise that they are strongly associated with childhood. Not everyone, however, wants to confine the medium to the children's market, although the process of permitting comics to grow up and mature with their readers can prove problematic. Throughout Asia, the struggles for comics also to be allowed to deal with non-juvenile subjects involving politics, violence, sexuality and other adult contents have resulted in some extraordinary works, but have also stirred ongoing debates about taste and acceptability.





The regulation of comics often goes through a push-and-pull cycle. As creators and publishers dare to tackle more complex or controversial themes, authorities and moral guardians become alarmed and strive to have them banned or destroyed. This can lead to censorship by the state or local authorities, or to avoid this by the industry, publishers and artists censoring themselves. In Asia, the protection of freedom of expression varies widely from country to country, under changing leaders and political systems, and according to different legal and moral codes, religions, attitudes and tastes

Of all Asian comics, post-war manga has proved the most irrepressible, despite periodic controversies and attempted crackdowns. The staggering volume of self-published 'do\_jinshi' includes unique genres by and for women to question their gender roles and societal constraints. There are undeniable extremes to Japan's comics, which seem to echo their traditions of explicit or violent prints. There is also a spirit of freedom which perhaps is necessary for a comics culture to fully evolve and flourish.

## PLAYING WITH GENRE AND GENDER

The exhibition explores the ways in which manga artists have challenged traditional gender roles and societal constraints through their work. It features a selection of manga panels and illustrations that depict characters in non-traditional gender roles, as well as artists who have explored themes of gender identity and expression. The exhibition also includes a discussion of the impact of censorship on manga and the ways in which artists have found creative ways to circumvent these restrictions.

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# MULTIMEDIA MANGASIA

In their abundance, Asian comics influence and interact with every other medium. Since their earliest popularity, they have provided a well-spring of compelling imagery and narratives ripe for adaptation, from the birth of cinema, animation and television to today's boom in video games, smartphones and the digital revolution. Their striking characters and costume designs inspire innovators in the music and fashion industries, as well as communities of fans who recreate and re-invent these styles as cosplay.

The continuing relationship between comics and animation is particularly intense and deep-rooted. A century or more ago, it was natural that experienced cartoonists were among Asia's founding animators. The visual narration and breakdowns in their comics already resembled a storyboard and primed their readers to grasp the emerging language of cinema.

Live-action versions of comics can be equally influential, when they are turned into radio shows, original audio CDs, movies and TV shows on the screen, and into plays, musicals, dance and other performances on the stage.

Comics are also finding their place in the Asian art world, especially through the spread of Pop Art since the Fifties, and through its successors, such as Japan's postmodern Superflat movement. The line between fine artist and comics artist is blurred, as both not only appropriate iconic figures and tropes into their work, but also produce graphic narratives as part of their gallery practice.

In the internet age, many digital comics no longer flow right-to-left or left-to-right, but scroll vertically, turning each new panel into a surprise. Print may never die, but these webcomics are liberating the medium from the page.





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# SPECS

**Space Required:**

5,000 - 10,000 sq.ft.

**Target Audience:**

Adults, families with teens

**Production Time:**

Fourteen (14) days for installation;  
seven (7) for deinstallation

**Freight:**

Three (3) 40 ft. containers  
+ 16 m3 airfreight

**Included:**

Show travels with setworks, A/V, graphics  
and marketing templates