

More hrrrrrump than kerrrrrang!

This could have been so much more. Manga, the Japanese art of the graphic novel, is now a global cultural phenomenon taking in genres that range from the everyday to the perverse. It's big business too, generating billions of dollars from readers every year. And yet despite these limitless possibilities, the colossal Citi Manga マンガ exhibition now on at the British Museum manages more misses than hits.

Divided into six chapters, the show enthusiastically covers all aspects of manga except its shadiest corners. We learn about how manga is made, how manga relates to society, how manga has annexed other art forms, and the show starts well with a manga 101. Despite its global appeal, a manga story still needs to be read the Japanese way, zigzagging down the page from right to left, while a code-like array of symbols and emojis often convey the characters' emotions. Aimed at making manga accessible to newcomers, this helpful introduction is so comprehensive even manga fans will learn something.



Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), *Kohada Koheiji* from *One Hundred Ghost Tales* 1833 © The Trustees of the British Museum

It's hard to pin down when manga started but the show draws a line back to traditional Japanese art. The earliest piece is a scroll originally painted 800 years ago from the Kōzan-ji temple in Kyoto. Known as the Chōjū-giga, its stories are set in a bizarre Wind-in-the-Willows world in which human-sized frogs and monkeys frolic alongside monks and samurai. Later in the 19th century, the great Katsushika Hokusai and his contemporaries produced books called manga – translated literally as ‘pictures run riot’ – containing collections of woodblock prints.

The show's highlight is Kawanabe Kyōsai's 17-metre-long curtain painted in 1880 for the Shintomiza Kabuki Theatre. Finished in four hours after a bout of heavy drinking (you can even see where Kyōsai rested his hand on the curtain to steady himself!), the curtain crackles with energy. White faced ghosts and demons, their features picked out in red, loom menacingly from the gloom. Now so fragile, this is the last time the curtain will be allowed to leave Japan, which is at least one good reason to visit the show.

But to suggest that modern manga is comparable to these masterpieces of Japanese art is risible and these comparisons do contemporary manga no favours. There is little in the blandly generic drawings in the rest of the show to match the inventiveness of the Chōjū-giga scroll, the eeriness of Hokusai or the vitality of Kyōsai.



Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831-1889), *Shintomiza Kabuki Theatre Curtain*, 1880 ©Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Waseda University

Contemporary manga has its roots in the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War Two. Powerless to resist the influx of American culture, Japan was nevertheless able to absorb and refine these influences, and to create a new art form. Osamu Tezuka, the author of *Astro Boy* and acknowledged as the father of modern manga, gleefully admitted being influenced by Walt Disney. But over the last 50 years, manga has grown far beyond Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse. Not to disappoint, the show includes plenty of the cartoon monsters and action heroes manga is popularly known for, but also features male shounen manga, usually stories about adventure, sport and comradeship, and female shoujo manga with more complicated plots, complex relationships and conflicted emotions.



Moto Hagio (b. 1949), Cover for *The Poe Clan* (1972-1976) ©MOTO HAGIO SHOGAKUKA INC.

Within these genres, entire manga eco-systems have grown up and the show includes stories and themes for everyone. There's the longing for home in *Toward the Terra* (1977 - 1980) by Keiko Takemiya set in a future when the Earth is so polluted it is uninhabitable. Maternal love is the theme of *The Willow Tree* (2007) by Hagio Moto in which a woman stands under a tree as the seasons change. A boy appears in the background and over 20 or so panels, grows up until we slowly realise that this is the story of a dead mother watching over her son until adulthood. Hikaru Nakamura mixes comedy and religious tolerance in *Saint Young Men* (from 2006), a long-running story about Jesus Christ and Buddha sharing a flat in downtown Tokyo, while Gengoro Tagame pleads for an understanding of sexual differences in *My Brother's Husband* (2014 -17), the story of a homophobe's gradual acceptance of the gay love of his recently deceased twin.



Gengoro Tagame (b. 1964), *My Brother's Husband* (2014 – 2017) ©Gengoroh Tagame

But despite its undeniable enthusiasm and attempt at broad appeal, I'm more hrrrrrump than kerrrrrang about this show. It's just too ambitious. In trying to make sense of the amorphous cultural chameleon that manga has become, the show's onslaught of old and new images, interviews, drafts and layouts, props and electronic wizardry is overwhelming.

There's a contradiction too between the exhibition and its prime exhibits. Mass produced by the million, manga books are disposable art meant to be read and thrown away, not pinned to museum walls and appreciated in an awkward process that involves looking back and forth between the exhibits and the wall notes. All the peering and head swiveling becomes tedious and the chance to handle real manga books at the centre of the show is a welcome relief.

It's not clear who the exhibition is for either. If you're a manga fan, you might just be interested in the history and production of manga, but otherwise, you'll already be comfortable in your own corner of the manga world. And if you're a manga newbie, you'll drown in the deluge of material.

Neither does the show offer much depth. It goes in for description rather than explanation. We learn about the 'how' of manga but little about why it's so central to Japanese life and now to global culture. Perhaps manga fits with the infantilism of Japanese culture and the kawaii cuteness of Hello Kitty, cosplay and Boy Love. Perhaps too in a modern world in which novel reading is giving way to the instant gratification of Instagram images and the simplicity of emoticons, manga suits our shortened attention spans. Manga raises lots of questions but for all the intellectual heft of the British Museum, this is a show short on insight.

Ten years in the planning, this show can't be faulted for its ambition and energy, and if you're manga-curious, you should come away with some clues about where to explore next. But for us Japanophiles, this show should have been so much more – more insightful, more fun, more certain of its brief. It's a missed opportunity.

The Citi Exhibition Manga マンガ is on at the British Museum, London from 23rd May to 26th August 2019

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