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Japan: Myths to Manga

Jacopo Cavini

Japan: Myths to Manga at Young V&A
14 October 2023 to 8 September 2024
Curated by Katy Canales, Mary Redfern, Josephine Rout and Masami Yamada

Jacopo Cavini obtained a Master in History of Art at the University of York in 2024, after an Architecture degree and a job in conservation in his country, Italy. His dissertation explored the role of digital social behaviours, quarantine confinements and recent wars in the production of some figurative painters, between the years 2020-2022. Jacopo is passionate about contemporary art as an expression of society's tensions, and about the unexpected connections it creates with other areas.

If you ever travel to Japan, you might notice that the omnipresent earthquake signs, showing indications on how to behave should the catastrophe occur, often display the head of a curious animal (Fig. 1). It is a stylised catfish, with whiskers and an antenna on top of its head, rendered in that *kawaii* 可愛い style so loved by Japanese and Westerners alike. At first you might think it would be absurd to associate a fish with an emergency alarm, until you learn that, in Japanese mythology, the tricky *namazu* 鰻, hiding in the muddy foreshore, is considered to be responsible for earthquakes. Thus, there is a clear connection between the funny animal logo, the national alarm system and millennia-old folk tales.



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Figure 1. Tamayama Takayasu and Fukuda Ko for Dentsu Inc., *Yurerun mascot logo for the Earthquake Early Warning System*, 2007, printed image on card ©Young V&A. Author's photo.

This association between ancient myth and modern culture is central to the exhibition *Japan: Myths to Manga*. Set in a paid section of the Young V&A, the display aims to trace the origins of contemporary Japanese pop culture in the fascinating and complex mythology and folklore of the Land of the Rising Sun. This is also the first exhibition organised after the museum's seven-year-long refurbishment, which involved the change of its name from "V&A Museum of Childhood. As such, the display is entirely conceived for a younger audience, but grown-ups too will probably find it more engaging and interesting than expected.

Pop culture in Japan developed from the mixture of American influences and local traditions in the second half of the twentieth century, reaching the West in the 1970s, initially via TV cartoons. From that moment, the entire world has witnessed an ever-increasing fascination — and sometimes obsession — for Japanese aesthetics, from manga 漫画 to cosplayers of anime アニメ characters. The Japanese features of *kawaii* representation (disproportionate heads, huge sparkling eyes, minuscule noses, bright colours) are now oftenthe norm when it comes to imagining comforting and friendly characters or mascots, especially when the target audience comprises toddlers and children. These younger visitors will surely enjoy this exhibition, but it is worth noting that this aesthetic's decades-long popularity means that millennials and adults will be pleased as well.

In spite of this widespread pop diffusion, references to the rich history and folklore of Japan are usually lost to a Western audience, yet the exhibition does justice to this aspect of a culture that can otherwise seem very distant. Of course, it must be remembered that the museum is made for and dedicated to children, so do not expect an in-depth explanation of Japanese mythology, but at the same time it is satisfying to finally understand the evolution from the *maneki-neko* sculptures, greeting us with their waving paws, to more contemporary lucky cats like *Doraemon* or *Hello Kitty* (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. *Japan: Myths to Manga*, Young V&A, London, 2024. Author's photo.



The exhibition occupies one of the upper wings of the museum hall. It is divided into four sections (sky, sea, forest and city), each marked by different colours and minimal decorations — I loved the small labelling pets made of punctuation marks, another nod to Japanese influence in digital culture. Mind that the whole exhibition is designed for children, meaning that the display cases are quite low. But on the other hand there are plenty of interactive activities that involve adults and children alike, from the table with paper and instructions to create origami 折り紙, to the corner that lets visitors understand and draw the page layout of manga comics.

The exhibition concept is clear: to show side by side a more or less ancient artefact, depicting an episode of Japanese mythology, and a modern product derived from the application of the same folkloric tale to contemporary consumerism. For instance, we see a typical *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 style print of the seven gods of fortune, and immediately next to it a child-size mannequin wearing a sweatshirt with the same gods on the back. The general effect is sometimes a bit baffling (the associations are not immediate without reading the labels). Nevertheless, it

helps to highlight the sense of continuity and the strong role of tradition in Japanese material culture. It is interesting to notice the dichotomy between the introductory labels and the individual labels that describe the single object. As a matter of fact, the former are addressed to children (simple sentences, large font, edulcorated explanation), while the latter are meant for adults, but besides the origin, date and material of the products in question, they do not provide additional information. Adult visitors will probably feel unsatisfied by the quick mention to further topics, such as characters of Japanese mythology, that eventually are not developed in the exhibition panels.

All artworks come from the extensive V&A collections: there is a good variety, ranging from Edo period prints to contemporary video games. Obviously the ever-present Great Wave by Hokusai could not miss a place right at the beginning of the second section, and it clearly fits with the topic and narrative of the exhibition. Visitors might expect some more differentiation for the products of contemporary pop culture. For example, Pokémon, Tamagotchi and Doraemon are all squeezed together in the same case without much explanation, but maybe that is just my expectation as a slightly disappointed 1990s child. Or again, it would have been useful for the rather brief labels to explain what a netsuke 根付 is, since they appear in such a great number throughout the exhibition (for the record, they are small ivory button fasteners that were usually carved in the shape of cute animals and demons, a sort of proto-kawaii gadget).

The whole exhibit is spread along the walls of a single vast room, and in the end one comes out with the feeling that the curators could have done more, maybe by devoting more space to the exhibition to allow for more examples and displays. Nonetheless, it does a great job in showing the connections between folklore and pop. I admit I approached the venue with an equal dislike for Japan's pop aesthetic and fascination for its folklore, and I left quite satisfied with my new discoveries. Besides Studio Ghibli's films, which are famous for being a modern reinterpretation of local myths, the exhibit displays many more aspects of visual culture that still show this bond, but in a bit of a rushed way. Overall, the exhibition sparks curiosity for the subject, but then leaves visitors wishing for more. For example: there is a poster from Tokyo's subway system, that merges together modern underground trains with geishas and samurais represented in a typical Japanese style. The label suggests that the poster references to ancient prints, but at the same time fails to mention them, ignoring the fact that a cosmopolitan audience might not be able to recognize Japanese art without help. I think that, given the target for a double audience (children and their carers), the latter are slightly neglected, especially considering the influence and interest that Japanese aesthetics have aroused in people of all ages for centuries. One thing is sure: the setting, the colours, and the nice and cosy atmosphere will make any child happy (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. *Japan: Myths to Manga*, Young V&A, London, 2024. Author's photo.

