

Hello. Today I'd like to talk about what inspires me the most. It's manga. Yes. Japanese comic books. I love manga so much I ended up joining a volleyball team after reading the volleyball manga, Haikyu!! As I had no interest in any kind of sports, it literally changed my way of life. I don't know if it's appropriate to talk about manga in such an honorable speech contest, because I know many teachers and parents don't see it as being good for children. But it is now gaining huge admiration overseas. Even the renowned Louvre Museum has been eagerly celebrating manga for almost a decade. Unfortunately, Japanese people don't acknowledge manga as an art form, maybe because it is so ubiquitous in our daily lives. So let me try to tell you what it really is, and why people all over the world see it as the hottest and coolest part of Japanese culture.

In the late 19th century, Japanese culture was introduced to Europe for the first time, and many artists instantly fell in love with it. It was called Japonisme. My favorite 19th-century illustrator Alphonse Mucha was also heavily inspired by Japanese ukiyo-e. Both Mucha and ukiyo-e had a similarly flat, two-dimensional style with avant garde compositions which were mass produced and sold to the general public. Indeed, Mucha and ukiyo-e were the pioneers of "popular art." Then, ukiyo-e continued to evolve and morphed into another popular art which represents modern Japanese culture. Yes, it is manga.

Manga isn't just simple illustration anymore. It can form a long, complex story with its dynamic composition called koma-wari. Then there is manpu, the mysterious secret codes that express the feelings of characters. Just a single drop of sweat streaking down a character's face can express anxiety and tension or confusion and astonishment. Yet the creators and readers magically share the exact same meaning, as if it were its own language.

But what makes manga even more special is its flexibility in drawing style. One of my favorite manga, Peleliu, was particularly unique. It is about the famous and bloody Pacific battle in WW2. Despite its tragic story, the author drew all the characters like cute puppets talking and running in the war zones. At first, it didn't look right. It even seemed to lack respect for those involved in the horrible combat. But then I realized that the author illuminated the internal conflict of the characters by avoiding visual harshness. It succeeded in evoking my empathy and compassion without scaring me. It was a truly magical reading experience only manga can offer.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, manga's popularity spread to every corner of the world. In 2020 alone, United States manga sales surged by 170%. Just as 19th-century Parisians loved ukiyo-e, French people today are so obsessed with manga that France is now the second-largest manga market.

Unlike classical art, which was patronized by the nobility, popular art emerges in a civil society. It's not about sophisticated fanciness. It's about freedom. Just as Europe saw freedom in ukiyo-e in the 19th century, what the world is seeing now in manga is the freedom of our culture, the freedom of our society and the freedom the world lost and craved during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is the 21st century Japonisme, or as I dub it "Japonisme 2.0." If we don't acknowledge it, it's a shame. Manga serves as the perfect gateway to Japan's rich history and culture. So everybody, be an evangelist for manga.

家坂 絹穂

高崎市立高松中学校

Manga: Japonisme 2.0