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Galleries

'Shojo Manga!' comics put girls at center of action

March 31, 2006

BY MARGARET HAWKINS Galleries

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Japanese women are demure, docile and delicate, wanting nothing more than to serve men. Right? Wrong, obviously, especially if you've been to see the exhibit of girl comics at Columbia College's C33 Gallery, "Shojo Manga! Girl Power!"

This category of art -- comics drawn by both men and women, representing both men and women but intended for a girls-only audience -- has no comparable counterpart in American culture. We have girls' magazines, but nothing like this, at least not since Wonder Woman. Perhaps a response to the extreme social constraints placed on women in Japanese society, graphic novels for girls have grown over the last 60 years or so into a kind of underground subversive force, free to flourish as "mere" pop culture that ended up exerting a serious influence over generations of women.

These comics picture girls as strong, independent and active, just the opposite of their traditional role. Here girls can imagine themselves not only - or even mainly -- as the stars of boy-girl romances, but as superheroes battling evil forces and even as outsiders looking onto perfect boy-on-boy romances.

'SHOJO MANGA! GIRL POWER!'

Through April 26

- C33 Gallery, Columbia College, 33 E. Congress
- (312) 344-7663

ideal form of love, perhaps because they fall so far outside the Japanese

That's right -- one of the favorite themes of contemporary girl comics is "yaoi," boys' love stories, which are often more romantic than they are sexual. These stories are presented as the most

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traditions of heterosexual marriage that soon reduce romance to a grim treadmill of obligation and neglect. Or, as Masami Toku, the exhibition's female curator explains in her catalog essay, "Some Japanese women no longer believe in love between men and women as a superior love since they see the reality after the happy ending."

"Shojo Manga!" is the first exhibit of its kind, focusing specifically on gender issues in Japanese comics. This show is unique in that it exposes the radical social changes in gender roles in a newly westernized Japan where girls have expectations beyond marriage and family.

Unlike in American culture, where women's movement into the world has been a struggle over sex, salaries, the reapportioning of household tasks and child rearing, in Japanese comics, at least, the possibilities for women are explored as spiritual adventures in which souls are at stake and long-legged, doe-eyed girls are saviors who wield sharp swords and magic weapons. This supernatural rather than practical take on the potential of girl power is part of what makes it so potent.

Just take a look around the show, which features more than 200 works by 23 Manga artists in this unassuming student-style gallery. It's a brave new world of comic books, though the earliest examples of Shojo Manga date from the 1940s. Here romance and adventure stories vie with history and science fiction. Girls are strong, boys are feminized and happy endings are less likely to culminate in an embrace than in a heroic rescue -- not of girls but by girls.

The characters in Shojo Manga are all extremely young and pretty, painted in that soft pastel style we associate with anime. But the girls are also dynamic and athletic.

Many favorite characters on view are outcasts who develop special compensatory powers to make up for their lack of status. Fumi Yoshinaga paints a trio of pretty, dreamy, Anglo-looking boys, one of whom, Kanda, is an assistant pastry chef who is described as "a cake-loving ex-boxer." CLAMP, a collective of four women artists who met in high school, make stories about girls with superpowers who are cute and pretty but armed and dangerous, too. There is Ryoko Yamagishi's gay boy character with secret powers of ESP and, my favorite, Moto Hagio's philosophical take on a dysfunctional family of lonely immortal vampires.

Shojo Manga is made for Japanese girls and it celebrates their power and potential, but like any artistic genre with legs that touches on universal aspirations, it appeals across genders and cultures.

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