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Shoujo Manga! Girl Power! Girls' Comics from Japan

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Shoujo Manga! Girl Power! Girls' Comics from Japan
 Masami Toku, editor
 Flume Press (California State University, Chico)
 80 pages, \$14.95
www.csuchico.edu/~mtoku/vc/Home.htm

When editing an issue devoted to *shoujo* manga for *The Comics Journal* a few years back, one of the biggest obstacles I faced was the paucity of research material available on the subject. To the extent that scholars and journalists had written on Japanese comics, it tended to focus on male-oriented works, with at best a token aside mentioning that, oh yeah, there was a sizeable presence for comics aimed at women as well. Even that seminal work, Frederick Schodt's *Manga! Manga!*, was no exception – of the book's 150 text pages, just 17 were devoted to comics for female readers! Eventually I found what I needed, though I had to turn to the Internet to learn more about the post-Forty-Niner landscape for *shoujo* manga. Long after work on *TCJ* #269 was concluded, the lack of scholarship on the subject left a deep impression upon me.

I was quite gratified, therefore, to finally get my hands on Masami Toku's catalog for California State University's traveling exhibition of art and academia, *Shoujo Manga! Girl Power! Girls' Comics from Japan*.

This gorgeous and thoughtful collection of essays, while still more of a beginner's primer than an extended tour of the field, nonetheless fills a gaping hole in the growing body of manga studies in the West. *Shoujo Manga! Girl Power!* collects a dozen essays from a variety of knowledgeable scholars and writers, as well as a handsome section of full-color illustrations showcasing the artists featured in the accompanying exhibition. I could've used this a year and a half ago.

Opening with editor Toku's introduction and basic primer for the world of Japanese comics, the catalog moves on to a look at how the business of manga for girls affected its content, written with obvious firsthand knowledge by Kawasaki City Museum curator Tomoko Yamada. Yukari Fujimoto's essay on gender fluidity in *shoujo* manga draws a line between the early, male-dominated *shoujo* industry's relentless enforcement of cultural norms and the later explosion of



Shoujo standard #1: Women in beautiful, elaborate clothes. Illustration for 'Amatersu,' ©Suzue Miuchi



those norms by the Magnificent Forty-Niners, with Riyoko Ikeda's multivolume series *The Rose of Versailles* serving as the fulcrum between the two. (One caveat: While Fujimoto does a good job of explaining what Keiko Takemiya, Moto Hagio, the unmentioned Yumiko Oshima and such revolutionary fellow travelers as Ryoko Yamagishi did in their work, she never goes into detail as to who the Forty-Niners actually *were* or why they came to be the group that did the heavy lifting -- indeed, the very translation she provides for the after-the-fact name given to these women, the "Magnificent 24," is itself never explained, leaving readers with the erroneous notion that there were in fact 24 of them. Unfortunately, hers is really the only essay to mention the Forty-Niners' accomplishments in any depth, which results in a mildly distorted view of *shoujo* history. The individual artists' biographies in the back of the catalog counteract this to an extent, but as we'll see, this too is somewhat problematic.)

Other essays select a single aspect of the business and art of girls' manga, both as conceived in Japan and how they were interpreted here in the United States, and run with it, resulting in a multifaceted view of how manga, and *shoujo* manga in particular, has evolved in time and been transformed by various creators and industry professionals. The results can be idiosyncratic and occasionally even a tad contradictory, but there's no denying that the multiplicity of viewpoints ultimately strengthens the book, of for no other reason than providing a glimpse of just how wide-ranging the field has become over the past thirty years. Even articles that at first glance have nothing to do with girls' manga itself -- such as Frederick Schodt's look at the modern manga industry from a modern-day Tokyo consumer's viewpoint, or Jillian Sandell's essay on a series of "afro-asiatic" paintings by American artist Iona Rozeal Brown -- provide context for the cultures in which Japanese comics move.

A word should also be put in for the illustrations used in *Shoujo Manga! Girl Power!*. The catalog's designer, Laura Kling, uses select examples of art and photography for context yet gives the text foremost prominence on the page, allowing the illustrations to augment the catalog's ideas without overpowering them. Given what must have been the urge to go nuts with *Shoujo Manga! Girl Power!*'s intensely visual subject matter -- a temptation that Schodt's *Manga! Manga!* indulges, occasionally to its detriment -- one must admire the restraint and sensitivity with which Kling goes about her work. The visuals take center stage only in the catalog's gorgeous color section, where lush, well-reproduced plates by the exhibition's featured artists are given the care and respect they deserve. This is a good-looking book, yet its design sensibly places function over form, an excellent and necessary artistic decision that does Ms. Kling great credit.

Alas, there are some mild problems with this catalog, most of which have to do with lapses in editing. Some are obvious: Cartoonist and Western girls'-comics scholar Trina Robbins, for example, is quoted through the book, yet at several points her last name is misspelled "Robins." And when did American anthology "*Shoujo-Beat*" acquire the hyphen? Translated names of works are used inconsistently. Is Moto Hagio's groundbreaking *shounen-ai* work called *Heart of Thomas* (page 14) or *Thomas' Heart* (page 52)? Further, the use of previously established name translations is inconsistent: Anyone who saw the illustration from Fumi Yoshinaga's *Western Antique Pastry Shop* on page 54 and turned to Amazon.com to see if it might have been translated for English-language readers would likely have a difficult time finding Digital Manga's four-volume series, *Antique Bakery*.

Further complicating matters are the occasional factual errors that creep into the text. While Forty-Niner Moto Hagio, in her interview with Matt Thorn for *TCJ* #269, freely acknowledges that Keiko Takemiya introduced her to the possibility of using homosexual themes in manga, and had begun planning her own work before Hagio did, the fact remains that Hagio beat her then-roommate into print with an example of the form by several years: Her "November Gymnasium" was published in 1971 (specifically, the November 1971 issue of *Special Edition Girls' Comic*), making it the first example of boys-love manga to see print, and not the 1976 debut of Takemiya's *Song of Wind and*



Shoujo standard #2: Naked, sexually ambiguous teenage boys. Illustration for "Poem of Wind and Trees," ©Keiko Takemiya

Tree (or is that *Poem of Wind and Trees?*), as stated in Takemiya's biography -- which you'd know if you looked to Hagio's own biography on the facing page.

Still, these are minor flaws, all things considered, and shouldn't detract from editor Masami Toku's worthy accomplishment in producing this catalog and adding to the available English-language record of female-oriented comics from Japan. Given the importance -- both cultural and commercial -- of *shoujo* manga's rise to artistic and economic prominence in one of the largest and most artistically significant markets for comics on the planet, the lack of attention given to it so far has been baffling and inexcusable. *Shojo Manga! Girl Power!* is a welcome and necessary step in correcting this deficit in English-language comics scholarship, a well-presented and fascinating further look into a subject to which we've only had a brief glimpse to begin with. More, please.

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