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Story

Art: Go Girls, go!

May 24, 2007

MCAD shows romantic illustrations from Japanese comics for women.

By [Mary Abbe](#)





Illustration by Hideko Mizuno

Anyone who frets about the pernicious effect of popular culture on girls' psyches may find comfort in "Shojo Manga! Girl Power," a sassy new show of Japanese illustrations at Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD). The exhibit samples more than 50 years of Japanese comic books (manga) designed especially for girls (shojo). Their themes are things that concern young women everywhere: romance, acceptance, anxiety, loneliness, high-school bullying, sexual curiosity, fantasy careers, cute guys, big hair and bigger eyes.

MCAD is "very much about illustration, animation and comics, so this really fits in," said Kristin Makhholm, the college's gallery director. To complement the traveling show, MCAD has added an offshoot exhibition, "East and West," which features manga-style illustrations by alumni and local high school students.

There's a playful, wistful innocence about many of the Japanese images even when the characters are embroiled in fights, wandering in bleak landscapes or caught in sexually ambiguous situations. Executed in a fine-lined, delicately colored style that's rooted in Japanese woodblock prints, the characters have perky pointed noses, artfully tousled hair and notably big eyes.

"The big eyes came from Disney cartoons," said MCAD professor Frenchie Lunning, a manga expert. "They're not drawn that way out of envy for the West, though the Japanese were fascinated by the West, having been isolated so long. But the big eyes were a fad they pulled in and made their own."

At first all the manga illustrators were men, but eventually women began to enter the field, introducing more refined drawing and female themes. Riyoko Ikeda is a 59-year-old illustrator and opera singer who created a fanciful illustrated history of the French Revolution from a Japanese point of view. Called "Versailles no Bara (Rose of Versailles)," it stars a beautiful blond girl who, disguised as a soldier named Oscar, becomes entangled with Marie Antoinette. Begun in 1972, the series became so popular it spawned two TV series, two films and a stage production.

In the show, Ikeda depicts "Oscar" as a fiercely beautiful girl with flowing hair brandishing a rifle in one hand and the French tricolor in the other. In true manga-romance style, stars sparkle from her eyes and the medals on her uniform.

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The show encompasses the past 50 years, including childlike characters reminiscent of mid-20th century American cartoons. One blond sweetie was surely inspired by child-star Shirley Temple, and there's a Harry

Do find events in a more recent illustration. Cherry-blossom wallpaper backgrounds reflect traditional Japanese imagery in some scenes, while modern boy-band high jinks occupy others.

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"Manga is a model for the trans-nationalism that we're all going through, but the Japanese have been doing for a really long time," Lunning said.

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Geekiness doesn't have to mean an absence of style, as we learned at this year's Geek Prom at the Science Museum.

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