

Selections from NDL collections

A History of Japanese Picture Books

—From picture scrolls to contemporary picture books—



Poster of the exhibition

1. Introduction

The history of picture books in Japan is a fascinating one. This exhibition, held from November 1 to 30, 2017, depicted the thousand-year-long development of picture books and described the changes in form, publishing technologies, and expression that took place throughout that time. Starting with rare books and historical materials, it covered a wide range of styles and forms, from ancient picture scrolls to digital pictures, including high-definition prints of original works from the Chihiro Art Museum. This article introduces a part of the exhibit, through which we will elucidate the history of Japanese picture books.

2. Origin of Japanese picture books



Japan's national treasure: *Eingakyo*. The image above is of a replicated copy created by Nihon Bijutsu Gakuin, owned by the Chihiro Art Museum. The original copy is owned by Tokyo University of the Arts. *Any reproduction, modification, or secondary use of this image is strictly prohibited. (Copyright © Chihiro Art Museum)

The first picture books in Japan were scrolls known as *emaki*. A unique characteristic of *emaki* is that the pictures and text were meant to be viewed sequentially as the scroll was unwound.

The *Eingakyo* was created during the 8th-century Nara period and is believed to be the oldest picture scroll extant in Japan. The lower half of the scroll has the text of Buddhist sutras, and the upper half has pictures illustrating the meaning of the sutra. It is thought that scrolls like this one were used to introduce Buddhism in Japan.

During the Heian period, from the 8th to the 12th centuries, stories like *Taketori monogatari* (Tale of the Bamboo Cutter) and *Genji monogatari* (Tale of Genji) were depicted on *emaki*, which were luxury items known only to the imperial court and powerful aristocrats. As time passed, however, and more *emaki* were created during the Kamakura period, from the 12th to 14th centuries, the audience for these works grew to include feudal lords and wealthy merchants.



Dojoji emaki. vol. 2, NDL Call No. ㏃-8, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

Dojoji emaki is a picture scroll depicting the story *Hidaka-gawa-soshi* (also known as *Kengaku-soshi*), which is a variant of the legend of Anchin and Kiyohime that is also depicted in *kabuki* and *ningyo-joruri* (bunraku). The story tells of a Buddhist monk at the Mitsui temple, named Kengaku, who falls in love at first sight with a princess from a wealthy family in the Hashimoto region of Enshu (present day Shizuoka Prefecture). After corresponding for a time, the two eventually betrothed. Kengaku, however, eventually realizes that the princess is the girl he thought he had killed in the past, and this realization causes him to suddenly abandon her. The princess chases Kengaku, but her grief transforms her into a giant snake. Finally, after discovering Kengaku hidden in a temple bell, she drags him out and together they sink to the bottom of the Hidaka River. This emaki was quite popular during the Edo period, and many copies appear to have been produced.



Taketori monogatari. NDL Call No. 本別 12-3, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

This scene from *Taketori monogatari* depicts Prince Ishizukuri visiting Princess Kaguya to propose marriage. Ishizukuri is told by Kaguya to bring her the stone begging bowl of the Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni, from India. Unable to find the actual bowl, the Ishizukuri presents her with a substitute, but Kaguya sees through his ruse and rejects his proposal.

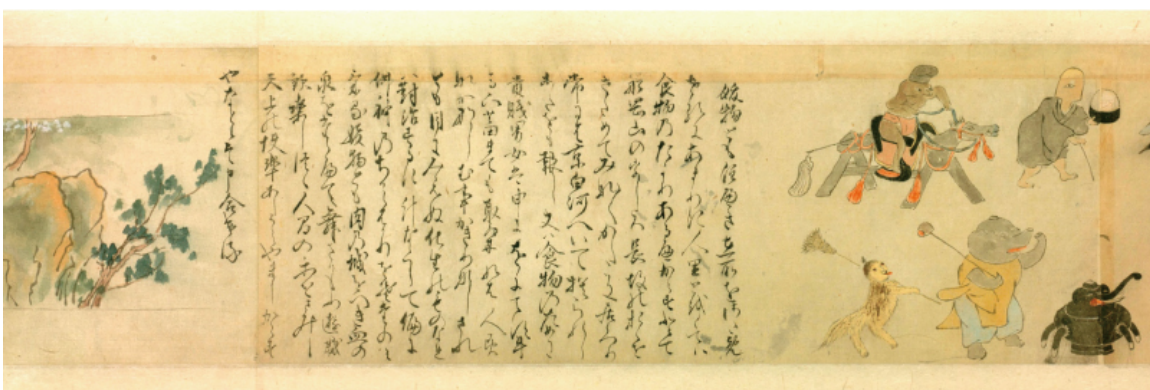


Ibuki doji. NDL Call No. 寄別 10-48, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

Ibuki doji is a story about the childhood of *Shuten doji*, which is a well-known folk tale in Japan. Doji was the orphan of Ibuki Yasaburo, who was a man of prodigious strength that lived near Mt. Ibuki in Umi (present day Shiga Prefecture). Even as a child, Doji loved alcohol and grew up to be a heavy drinker and a scoundrel. He was so ferocious that he was abandoned on a mountaintop and raised by animals. This picture depicts a scene in which Doji is playing with animals.

3. History



Tsukumogami. NDL Call No. 本別 7-562, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

In Japan, it was said that gods and spirits would come to dwell in even ordinary things that were used for 100 years or longer. Such things were known as *Tsukumogami*. The above picture shows *Tsukumogami* plotting their revenge against humans who disposed of the old things that they lived in.

During the late Muromachi period in the 16th century, significant changes in formatting took place, as scrolls

were replaced by books and hand-written text was replaced by printed text. *Nara-ehon* (Nara picture book)¹

¹ Although the name *Nara-ehon* gained currency during the Meiji period, the origin of this name is unknown and it does not appear to have any direct connection to either the Nara region or the Nara period.

Miryoku no nara ehon emaki. Edited by Tooru Ishikawa, Miyai Shoten, 2006, NDL Call No. UM24-H11.

are bound books with vividly colored pictures that were produced during the period from the late Muromachi to

the early Edo period. Both *Nara-ehon* and *emaki* were written and drawn entirely by hand.



Kosode sogu. NDL Call No. WA32-18, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

Kosode sogu is a *Nara-ehon* in rectangular form. It tells the story of the Soga brothers, who visit their mother in the village of Soga before they go to take revenge on the men who killed their father. Shown above is a scene in which they say farewell to their mother. As an early example of *Nara-ehon*, it does use *emaki* techniques, such as placing pictures on several two-sided pages in a row, this material shows a distinct awareness of layout in accordance with binding and uses formats better suited to books than scrolls.

At the same time, books containing folktales with printed illustrations that were then colored by hand with pigments of red lead, malachite green, and yellow were called *tanrokubon*, and resembled *Nara-ehon* in content and subject matter.



Gikeiki. vol. 3. NDL Call No. WA7-266, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

Kusazoshi is a format that appeared in the middle of Edo period and were published until around 1885, using folktales as subject matter. They were known by a variety of names, related to their cover colors or binding, including red books, black books, blue books, yellow

books, and even serial books. Since these books were mass-produced by block-printing with monochrome text, they were inexpensive, affordable to even ordinary people, and popular with children.



Bunbuku chagama. NDL Call No. 寄別 5-3-2-12, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

Starting in the middle of the Meiji period, *chirimen-bon*,² or crepe-paper books were published. These books had Japanese-style bindings and were illustrated with pictures printed on Japanese paper using a multi-color printing process, text that was printed using a European process, and a creasing process that gave the pages a crepe-like appearance. Many of these books had texts that were

² Related article from the National Diet Library Newsletter: [Chirimen-bon: books made of Chirimen Paper](#) (crepe paper) (No. 135, February 2004)

written or translated from Japanese by foreign missionaries and pictures drawn by Japanese artists. These books were produced not only in English, but in French, German, Dutch, and Spanish. They were popular reading materials for foreign residents of Japan and textbooks for Japanese interested in learning foreign languages, and were often exported. They also appear to have been popular as souvenirs for foreigners visiting Japan.

4. Japanese picture books and picture magazines from the Meiji to the prewar period

The emergence of picture books and picture magazines occurred from around the Meiji period to the mid-20th century.

As Japan began to modernize during the early Meiji period, the publishers began to produce books having both text and illustrations. The latter half of the Meiji period also saw the introduction of new technology from Europe, and multicolor printing quickly became mainstream. Moreover, as western ideas about childhood became well known, some communities in Japan began to implement early childhood education for children of preschool ages.³ As the economy boomed during the Sino- and Russo-Japanese Wars, publishers began to produce picture books and picture magazines written expressly for children.

The year 1938 saw not only the passing of the National Mobilization Law but also the issuing of Guidelines Regarding Improvement of Children's Reading Materials. It is also worth noting that as World War II went on, the Japanese government began to place increasingly strict controls on publications, both in terms of physical characteristics and content.

(1) Picture books

One of the first modern picture books issued in Japan was *Eiri chienowa* (The Illustrated Ring of Wisdom), which was published in 1870. Featuring illustrations of common things described in everyday language and designed to appeal to children, this pioneering work led to the development of today's knowledge picture books for children.



Furukawa, Masao. *Eiri chienowa*. 1872, NDL Call No. 特 38-640, owned at the Kansai-kan of the NDL.

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

Near the end of the Meiji period, publishers began to issue picture books called *gacho* and illustrated storybooks called *ebanashi*. Although both these kinds of books were commonly called *ehon* by the start of the Showa period, the names *gacho* and *ebanashi* were more common during the Meiji and Taisho periods. One of the first masterworks of modern Japanese picture books was the 35-volume *Nihon'ichi no ebanashi* (Japan's Best Illustrated Children's Stories) series, which was published between 1911 and 1915. These well designed, compact books featured stories by Iwaya Sazanami with illustrations drawn alternately by three of the preeminent illustrators of the time. It was around this time that the modern concept of the picture book, in which text was illustrated with pictures showing scenes from the story, became mainstream.

³ *Hajimete manabu nihon no ehonshi 1*. Edited by Shin Torigoe, Minerva shobo, 2001, NDL Call No. KC511-G98.



Iwaya, Sazanami. *Nakanishiya nihon'ichi no ebanashi*. Illustrated by Hisui Sugjura et al. Nakanishiya, 1911, NDL Call No. 特 64-813, owned at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL.
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

In 1936, Dainihon Yubenkai Kodansha began to publish the *Kodansha no ehon* (Kodansha's Picture Books) series, in which each volume of the series was devoted to a single subject. It was published continuously until 1942, after which it was republished under the title *Kodomo ebanashi* (Children's Illustrated Storybooks) until 1944. These books were designed to be as attractive to look at as they were interesting to read and featured both Japanese- and European-style illustrations commissioned from some of the most prestigious artists working in Japan at the time. These beautifully printed color books played a significant role in gaining popular acceptance of picture books among the general public. The content touches on a wide range of subjects, including folktales, cartoons, fairytales, and scientific illustrations as well as stories related to the progress of the war and espousing patriotic sentiment.

(2) Picture magazines

Multicolored picture magazines emerged in the early 1900s and were characterized by a reversal of the approach in which "stories are accompanied by pictures" in favor of making the illustrations the dominant feature. The first picture magazine published in color was *Otogi etoki kodomo* (Picture Fairy Tales for Children),⁴ issued in Osaka in 1904. The stories were largely European fairy tales, and the illustrations are noticeably western in style as well.

During the Taisho period, magazines like *Akai tori* (Red Bird), edited by Suzuki Miekichi, featured stories that were influenced by the notion that children are born pure of heart and unblemished. It broadened its target readership from boys only to both boys and girls as well

as including material that appealed to an even broader age group than previously. Another trend seen at this time was the emergence of picture magazines that targeted preschoolers and primarily featured illustrations. Among these were *Yonen Gaho* (Young Children's Pictorial), which was first published in 1906, *Kodomo no Tomo* (Children's Companion) in 1914, and *Kodomo no Kuni* (Children's Land) in 1922.



Yonen Gaho vol.3, 14th issue. Hakubunkan, NDL Call No. Z32-B291.



Kodomo no tomo vol. 1, 6th issue. NDL Call No. Z32-B156.

⁴ Ibid.



Kodomo-no-kuni vol. 3, 1st issue.
NDL Call No. Z32-B158.

These magazines were heavily affected by government control during the war, resulting in closure and consolidation of several magazines as well as directives to change the titles of others. The magazine *Kinda bukku* (Child's Reader) was changed to *Mikuni no kodomo* (Children of the Country) and *Yochien* (Kindergarten) was changed to *Tsuyoiko yoiko* (Strong Child, Good Child).

5. Japanese picture books of today

Although left in a shambles at the end of World War II, by 1946 the publishing industry was reinvigorated by new values such as liberty and democracy. Nevertheless, Allied General Headquarters (GHQ) exercised censorship until 1949, and for some time after the war, the only paper available for printing was an inferior grade called *senka-shi*. Yet despite these circumstances, editors, researchers, and translators endeavored to create new Japanese picture books.

In the 1950s, the appearance of artists such as Akaba Suekichi and Iwasaki Chihiro, who created both their own text and their own illustrations, resulted in the creation of a new style of picture books.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the postwar baby boom and a growing economy resulted in annual increases in publication of picture books during what is now called the golden age of Japanese picture books. Increased economic stability was accompanied by increased freedom for writers and illustrators of picture books to express their individuality and explore new genres.

"Picture books without text," in which storytelling was achieved without resorting to words, became popular, and artists like Cho Shinta and Inoue Yosuke pioneered another uniquely humorous genre, known as the nonsense book. Taboos on certain subject matter gradually disappeared, and picture books that addressed death or other social issues were created.

In the 1980s, as subject matter continued to diversify, nonfiction picture books that dealt with subjects like war, bullying, and environmental pollution were published. The technical mastery of some illustrators led more and more readers to view picture books as art.

Later, with families having fewer children as well as video games, animation, and manga competing for children's attention, the Japanese government began efforts to promote reading and the year 2000 was designated as National Year of Reading for Children. This developed into another activity, called the Bookstart program, in which municipal governments made gifts of picture books to families with newborn babies, which helped produce a boom in the production of picture books for babies.

The Great East Japan Earthquake, which occurred on March 11, 2011, and subsequent disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant had a major impact on the picture book industry, which can be seen in the diversity of picture books that are now available, from those that confront children with reality to those that encourage them or depict the importance of our ordinary everyday activities.

(Translated by Aiko Umeno)

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