

Introduction to Kamishibai

Kamishibai (Japanese: 紙芝居, "paper theater") is a form of Japanese street theatre and entertainment that flourished from the 1930s and into the post-war period. One type of *kamishibai* (*Gaitō Kamishibai*, or "street *kamishibai*") featured a *kamishibaiya* ("kamishibai narrator") who travelled to street corners with sets of illustrated boards in a miniature stage and engaged in popular storytelling. Another type of *kamishibai* (*Kyōiku kamishibai*, or "educational *kamishibai*") with a similar lifespan was created for educational purposes and was often used within Japanese schools.

Gaitō kamishibai became hugely popular: for example, in 1933 there were 2,500 performers in Tokyo, who regularly performed for audiences, typically averaging about thirty children. The performer would park his or her bicycle at a familiar intersection and banged *hyōshigi* ("clapping sticks") together to announce the start of a performance. When the audience gathered, the performer would sell sweets to the children and then unfold a portable theater, holding the illustrated boards. The boards were changed during the narration of the story, a process that was often accompanied by sound effects and adlib comments.

Kamishibai kashimoto ("kamishibai dealers") commissioned *kamishibai* sets from artists and rented them to performers. The *kamishibai* sets were created as a collaboration between several artists, each in charge of a separate step. Initial sketches were made in pencil and then retraced in permanent ink. Then watercolors were added to distinguish the main figures from the background and highlights were brushed with tempera paints. As a final step, the board was covered with clear lacquer, in order to give the surface protection from the elements. The images of *kamishibai* were a mixture of 'pop culture' and older visual traditions, a mixture between the traditional Japanese linear painting style and new Western elements, resulting in dynamic figures and strong contrasts between light and dark.

Gaitō kamishibai gave birth to a wide range of popular stories and themes that later emerged in manga and anime, including one of the first superheroes, the Ōgon Bat ("Golden Bat"). Famous manga artists, such as Shigeru Mizuki, started their careers *kamishibai* artists before the medium became less popular during the 1950s.

Kyōiku kamishibai, or educational *kamishibai* had its origin in the *gaitō kamishibai*. had a history parallel to it, and also played a significant role in Japanese culture. In the 1930s, kindergarten teachers became aware of the great enthusiasm that were shown by children toward *gaitō kamishibai* and began creating their own type of *kamishibai* for educational purposes. Such stories typically had moral contents and centered on correct behavior and religious narratives.

These two types of *kamishibai*, both with their origin in Japan, have supported education, popular entertainment, and communication for nearly one hundred years. The history of *kamishibai* endured the dual crises of wartime propaganda, as well as post-war censorship by the US GHQ. Furthermore, *kamishibai* has now been firmly established as a tool for education, not only in Japan, but in the wider world.

