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Toba Sojo: Father of Japanese Manga Artist of Human Consciousness

Centuries before Peter Parker morphed into Spider Man, storytelling through panels of consecutive images was a rock bed of Japanese art. Over centuries, visual narrative evolved to cartoons, graphic novels (manga) and Japanese animé, all of which adapt styles from Japanese traditions, including kabuki theater, Japanese mythology, architecture and Zen art.

The beginnings of pre-manga artwork can be traced to a late 11th and early 12th century abbot named Toba Sojo, whose minimalist monochrome ink scrolls, *Frolic of the Animals*, parodied and derided Buddhist clergy by drawing them as anthropomorphized monkeys, foxes, frogs, rats, cats and hares cavorting in a natural setting. Most art historians agree that these brush drawings are satires of monastery life.

Frolic of the Animals belongs to a genre called “narrative picture scrolls,” (*emaki-mono*), which flourished during the Kamkura period (1192-1333). These picture scrolls don’t have a text. However, the sequence of events is seamless. Scrolls unfold from left to right—a bit like a slow-motion flip book, making it easy to imagine the animals moving forward in space and time. Animals are passionately involved in absurd pastimes, such as farting contests—as well as ordinary pastimes like archery, wrestling matches, chases, and feasts. The animals have access to human accoutrements, including archery equipment, cooking pots and musical instruments. And their extraordinary animation makes them seem eerily alive.

At times there’s a dangerous edge to their antics: A monkey challenges a frog to a wrestling match, the frog appears to be fatally injured and the monkey is indifferent. In the next panel, the frog rallies to cheers from other frogs and hares; but the monkey has disappeared. In a later panel, a hare and a frog have a wrestling match. The frog wins and poses as an intimidating Buddha. In the next panel, monkeys and other frogs race to give him gifts.

When preparing feasts or holding ceremonies the animals work cooperatively. But whenever they

act as a species, they become ill-mannered, wildly competitive and chauvinistic. A fox farts while a frog tries to concentrate during an archery contest. Hares look dangerously out of control when they chase monkeys with sticks. A single panel might not convey this sense of turmoil. But the deliberate linear sequences, combined with the passions of the animals, depict a cavalier freedom that is buoyant and slightly unsettling. Their world is clearly an adult world. But it's also reminiscent of the anarchic games of childhood.

By the 18th century Toba Sojo's influence on manga (which means "lackadaisical art") was so well established a book was designed called *Toba-e* (*e* means "pictures"), in which humorous illustrations unfold like an accordion from left to right, imitating his scrolls. Text was added, and this addition of language signaled the beginning of modern Japanese cartoons. *Toba-e* morphed to more sophisticated cartoons and cartoons morphed to Japanese manga—both as cartoons and graphic novels.¹

In *Frolic of the Animals* Toba Sojo was employing three artistic traditions that existed long before he became a brush painter:

The first was the tradition of using animals in Japanese art. These were often mythological animals that had powers of speech and could marry humans. (It's notable that Toba Sojo never used mythical animals).

The second was a Buddhist tradition of using monochrome ink to depict Buddhist deities--- although these animals are hardly deities.

Third, and most importantly, Japanese art had a long tradition of caricature in the form of *zare-ge* (play pictures). The earliest *zare-ge* are graffiti from the 7th century discovered in ceiling planks of the Horyuji Temple in Nara when it was reconstructed in 1935. These cartoons in the Horyuji Temple are pictures of humans: Toba Sojo is the first known Japanese artist to draw caricatures of animals.

Yet for all the traditions he relied upon, and for all the traditions that followed him, Toba Sojo has become so inextricably linked with caricature, he is known as the father of Japanese manga.

Frolic of the Animals is one of Japan's National Treasures, and art historians have written about it extensively. Much of this writing involves speculation about the identity of the artist, since there are four sets of scrolls; but most scholars agree that the two most popular animal scrolls (those reproduced most often) were painted by Toba Sojo. There are also disputes about whether the brush paintings are satires

¹ Westerners also have admired *Toba-e* art: After Admiral Perry forced Japan to open its doors in the 19th Century, George Bigot, a Frenchman, founded a satirical magazine called *Toba-e*. Some Japanese believe Western cartoons and even Walt Disney owe a debt to *Toba-e*. This may interest some readers, but is beyond the scope of this article.

of Buddhist monks or just animals having a good time: Again, most art historians conclude that they are indeed satires.

No literature that this reader has found, however, explains the persistence of Toba Sojo's influence over eight centuries of art or the striking appeal of the animals. I want to propose that a large part of his genius was his ability to create a singular world as well as to portray a singular level of consciousness. By "world" I mean an autonomous and unique realm that can hypnotize the viewer into believing that--for this moment---reality can be no other way. And by "consciousness" I mean a level of awareness--hard to define in words, but easy to grasp in direct experience.

Without question scholars acknowledge the extreme originality of Toba Sojo's brush paintings and his novel use of "play pictures." But they dismiss the notion that Toba Sojo created a unique world. Instead, they believe the animals inhabit a realm in Buddhist cosmology called "the animal realm." I'll address these complexities of Buddhist thought: But first I want to address the art itself—namely what one can see *in* the brush paintings without knowing anything about Buddhism.

All the animals are drawn with fluid, minimalist brush strokes. This fluidity and economy make them seem to leap off the page as though they are eluding Toba Sojo's brush and he had to paint them in an instant to capture them. This minimalist style accounts for part of their extraordinary animation: Like the Western artist Frances Bacon, Toba Sojo captures the essence of motion.

The animal's animation is enhanced by their human dexterity. They can cook, shoot arrows, play instruments, and prepare feasts. But what gives them the unmistakable aura of being human is their facial expressions—most notably their mouths and eyes. These expressions are extremely changeable: The animals can look wicked, sad, ecstatic, crafty, frightened, imperious, dim-witted, lost in illusion, startlingly conscious, or mournful. Sometimes they even look guilty—as though they would rather not know what they're doing. But even in profile they project levels of consciousness that are distinctly human. To be "lost in illusion" one must have access to awareness without illusion. Most importantly, however, their expressions convey a quality of self-awareness, potential accountability, even if there is a wish never to be accountable.

Except for the human objects at their disposal, Toba Sojo uses no artistic devices other than the animals' actions and expressions to imbue them with human qualities. The river and hills are drawn minimalistically. And the vegetation, although classically artful, is so sparse the animals appear on a



Chouju_Jinbutsu_Giga (Part) : Frog and rabbit play Sumo.

鳥獣人物戯画部分カエルとウサギが相撲を取っている、と言われる場面

relatively blank canvas.

There is also no attempt to translate the human world to an animal scale: There are no cozy fox dens, nothing reminiscent of *Wind in the Willows*. And the clothes the animals wear have a slapdash quality: Some don't bother to wear clothes at all. Others wear only hats—tall floppy black hats, ridiculously large straw hats, hats made from lotus blossoms. A few animals wear rumpled cloaks, and in one panel, a fox wears shoes on his forepaws. Whatever the animals are wearing looks like a careless afterthought—something grabbed at the last minute, perhaps as they raced outside. This is Beatrix Potter for grownups, a world far more sophisticated than Walt Disney.

When scholars talk about this world, they appeal to the fact that Buddhists believe there are six realms, or levels, of existence: (1) the bodhisattva realm where enlightened beings live (2) the realm of the jealous gods where impassioned deities live (3) the human realm (4) the animal realm (5) the hungry ghost realm (a realm for beings with insatiable desires) and (6) the hell realm, reserved for devils and creatures tormented by demonic illusions.

Each realm represents a leap to a more advanced level of consciousness. And unless an inhabitant of these realms makes a very bad mistake, it's possible, through merit, to reincarnate to the next realm and attain a higher level of awareness--or, in Buddhism, enlightenment. When scholars talk about *Frolic of the Animals* they appeal to this belief system and assume that Toba Sojo placed all these creatures in the fourth, or animal, realm. If the animals act like human beings, it's only because they have a glimmer of human life, to which they aspire, and which is next on the ladder of reincarnation.

Aside from contradicting the general agreement that the scrolls are genuine satires of monastic life, this interpretation ignores one of the most important elements in Toba Sojo's art: For in addition to hares, foxes, cats, frogs, rats and monkeys who stand on *two feet*, wear clothes, and have human dexterity, the scrolls also include boars, deer, and donkeys who stand on *four feet*, never wear clothes, have no human capacities, and are used by the two-footed animals just as humans would---for transportation.

Without question this device has layers of resonance: Toba Sojo may be making an observation about the way monks exploited lay people and/or animals. He may also have been drawing attention to the monks' hypocrisy, since one of the Buddhist precepts is that all sentient beings should be treated with respect.

Clearly these layers are important. But even though accurate, they're based on historical

information, and not present in the art itself. However, there are a few elements in Toba Sojo's work that reveal something singular about the world he creates. These are elements one can't ignore if one spends time just *looking* at the scrolls: The eyes and expressions and gestures of the two-footed animals are imbued with exceptional dynamism, vibrancy and awareness. The eyes and expressions of the four-footed animals have no awareness or apparent feeling. The four-footed animals do what most four-footed animals do when subject to human will: They wait submissively in their harnesses until they are used.

This striking difference in the way the animals are depicted means that some animals in Toba Sojo's world are familiar—namely, they are animals--while other animals are creatures we've never seen--a combination of what is animal and human. This dissonant juxtaposition creates a surreal realm in which some animals are *only* animals, while other animals *are and aren't* animals. This is an imaginary, tilted world, where one thing can be two things at the same time—a world rendered with such authority and economy it becomes believable. This world breaks loose of Buddhist cosmology, because in Buddhism creatures with vastly different levels of awareness have different embodiments, ranging from spiders to human beings.

I would propose, then, that Toba Sojo was drawing more than caricatures of animals performing human activities. He was also drawing a level of consciousness that is associated with being human--a level of consciousness not associated with animals. In doing this he was creating a realm that didn't exist in Buddhism and a phenomena that doesn't exist in this world. In this realm non-human forms inhabit human awareness and, by implication, allow the viewer to embrace the paradox that human beings *are and aren't* animals.

Seen through these lenses the animals' antics--their malevolent chases, ridiculous clothes, absurd farting contests--are mirrors of our own absurdities, our own irreverence, our own ecstasies. And the conclusion is obvious: If animals can act like animals and people at the same time, so can human beings.

In Japan the original scrolls are at the Konzanji temple in the mountains of Toganoo. In this secluded setting, known for its dazzling autumn leaves, *Frolic of the Animals* might seem far away from manga. They might seem like the brushwork of a whimsical 12th century monk with a pitiless eye and a wicked sense of humor.² But even in this austere atmosphere the animals leap out with crafty and

² Toba Sojo also made erotic art, for which he's less known. One four-panel piece starts with an raucous competition about penis size—an arena where commoners and nobleman have the same clout because they are naked. This proceeds to an orgy. After a vigorous beginning, the participants become exhausted and faint, except for one woman. In the last panel, we see her in the emperor's court, beautifully clothed, receiving an award for her stamina.

imperious authority. They seem to be looking *at* you and demand attention.

The Japanese must concur, because for several centuries the two-footed inhabitants of *Frolic of the Animals* have made numerous appearances in the mundane world. As early as the 18th century they appeared on parasols, fans and kimonos during festivals. And today, in modern Japan, you can see them on objects as ordinary as tea cups, fans and store signs. Foxes stare at you from sake bowls. Hares chase monkeys in calendars. Even in these reproductions—even as kitsch--the animals have a highly animated quality.

Mythological figures have persisted in art over centuries. But no other non-mythologically based art has morphed and transformed and adapted to the contemporary milieu like Toba Sojo's sensibility or the animals that are his vehicle. These animals inhabit human consciousness with a veracity that remains compelling, humorous and unsettling. They live in a world that contradicts natural laws, and this contradiction is startling. Perhaps these animals will leap forward to later centuries, and Toba Sojo's influence will continue to transform art in ways we can't possibly imagine.

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