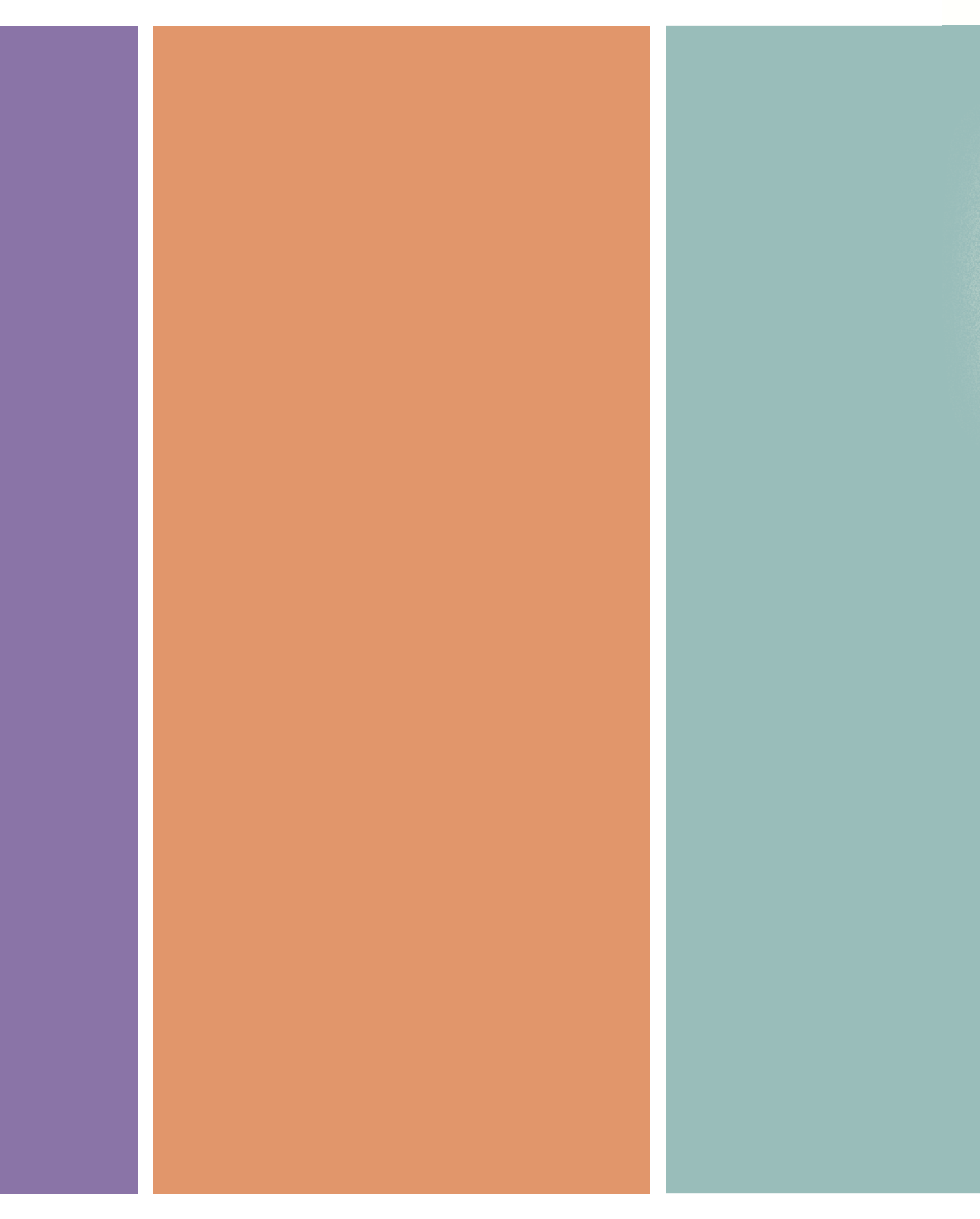


# kawaii!

japan's  
culture of cute



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## japan's culture of cute

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PRESTEL

Munich • London • New York

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Arcade games are often where cute characters gain their popularity.



# introduction

If there is a word used by Japanese girls more frequently than any other – several times a day, at least – it is *kawaii*. Roughly translating as ‘cute’, *kawaii* describes the adorable physical features that kids and baby animals have, and anything that breeds feelings of love and the motherly instinct to care and protect. In Japan, this has become an all-encompassing ideal. The word ‘*kawaii*’ can be used to describe the atmosphere or perceived qualities of something as well as its appearance.

Nowadays, ‘*kawaii*’ is a complimentary adjective applied in mind-bogglingly varied ways: it is synonymous with beautiful, lovable, suitable, addictive, cool, funny, ugly but endearing, quirky and gross. You are just as likely to hear a table, car, building, doughnut or plane being referred to as *kawaii* as a newborn puppy – and in Japan, quite often, the most banal things *are* cute. In the past, *kawaii* things were always immature and small, whereas now you will hear the word used to describe the elderly, and even the royal family. This is reflective of changes in the hierarchical nature of Japanese society – nowadays, so long as it softens the heart, it will be called *kawaii*.

The word itself has gone through several iterations. It is thought to have derived from *kahohayushi*, which is shortened to *kahayushi*. In common parlance it was used as *kawayui*, which was then changed to *kawaii*. In the Tohoku and Hokkaido dialects, it is still more common to use the word *menkoi*.

The rise of cute idols in the 1980s meant that girls not only wanted adorable things, but to *be* *kawaii* as well. Popular girls’ manga of the time portrayed a female ideal that was saccharine-sweet and endearing, but with a strong fighting spirit and a drive never to give up. Fashion labels sprung up in Harajuku, a neighbourhood that came to embrace *kawaii* as an aesthetic quality to be constructed through fashion

and make-up. Because of this, many girls in Japan would much rather be called cute than glamorous, sexy or pretty.

Product design, aided by the rise of letter-writing, manga, anime and characters like Hello Kitty, has also helped to create a huge kawaii culture. Designers have realized that the Japanese love of kawaii trumps all – where else in the world can you find cute public buses, frying pans, golf balls, fans, motorcycle helmets, cars, planes and AC adaptors with dopey-looking bears emblazoned on them? Kawaii is also commonly used to make communication smoother between girls. All girls can empathize with what kawaii is, and saying ‘You are kawaii’ simply suggests ‘I’ve noticed you’, or ‘I am interested in you.’

What makes something kawaii? Aside from pastel colours, a compositional roundness, the size of the eyes, a large head and the short distance from nose to forehead, quite often it is things or people that are not trying to be cute. Girls who try too hard to be cute are referred to as *burriko*, which has connotations of fakeness. Conversely, since the 1990s, kawaii has commonly been teamed with words that connote precisely the opposite of cute, creating a bevy of increasingly ubiquitous spin-offs such as *guro-kawaii* (grotesque cute), *kimo-kawaii* (creepy cute), *busu-kawaii* (ugly cute), *ero-kawaii* (sexy cute) and *shibu-kawaii* (subdued cute), which deviate from standard notions of what cute entails.

This book looks at kawaii in its multiple guises. Kawaii does, of course, have a lot to do with aesthetics, but it also reflects changes in social structures and the role of women, the rise and fall of the economy and a sense of national identity. This book contains interviews with many of the cultural luminaries who have helped create the Japanese love of cuteness, bringing you on a holistic tour of the world of kawaii, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Enjoy!

Manami Okazaki





Gloomy is a homicidal pink bear designed by Mori Chack. Though he retains characteristics that are typical of many kawaii characters, Gloomy also has violent tendencies, making him part of the popular *guro-kawaii* (grotesque cute) trend.





kawaii



The Japanese notion of *kawaii* has been cultivated over decades, and was developed through the passion and talent of some of Japan's most important artists and designers. However, the factors that contributed most to the development of *kawaii* were girls' illustrations, *shojo* manga and the merchandising of fancy goods.

Fashionable illustrations have been popular in Japan since the Edo era (1603–1868), when *bijinga* ('beautiful person picture') woodblock prints depicted lovely women wearing gorgeous kimonos. This culture of *bijinga* continued through the Meiji and Taisho eras (1868–1926), though they were made using increasingly sophisticated printmaking technology and featured progressively more Westernized dresses.

Yumeji Takehisa is considered the first *kawaii shojo* (girl) illustrator, and his distinct style, which fuses Japanese traditional painting with European influences, is phenomenally popular with women in Japan today. He is also credited as being the first *kawaii* goods proprietor, with his shop Minatoya Ezoshiten opening in 1914; it sold various items for well-to-do girls such as letter sets and small bags.

Under Japanese militarism and World War II, cute things were not seen as favourable. It was really after the war that *kawaii* boomed, aided by the proliferation of *akahon* (cheap manga) and *kashihon* (manga to rent) culture. Kiichi Tsutaya's paper dress-up dolls flourished in popularity, as did girls' illustrations, which were often created by artists who were fascinated with the foreign culture they witnessed during the American occupation.

In 1946, Junichi Nakahara, another seminal illustrator, created *Soleil* magazine, which is still highly influential on fashion designers. However, *Soleil* was hardly the first magazine of its kind – *Shojo Kai*, which Nakahara contributed to, started in 1902. Illustrators also made their own children's picture books as well as working on literary publications and novels. By the mid-1950s, the *shojo* manga industry had developed to such an extent that magazines which exclusively published it, like *RIBON* and *Margaret*, had been established.

Gradually, women *shojo* illustrators and manga artists came to the fore, particularly in the 1970s. Titles such as *Rose of Versailles* by Riyoko Ikeda, based on the French Revolution and Rococo high society, and *Candy Candy* by Yumiko Igarashi became, and still are, staples for most Japanese girls. As the *shojo* manga and girls' illustration industry became more female-dominated, the importance of *kawaii* fashion within manga grew. Illustrators like Macoto Takahashi and Eico Hanamura portrayed the most exquisite fashion in their work. The clothing they depicted in their manga wouldn't look out of place on the streets of Harajuku today.

As Japan entered the economic bubble of the mid-1980s, companies such as Sanrio went all-out in creating *kawaii* products that featured characters like Hello Kitty. This trend hasn't waned since the bubble burst, and there is no end in sight for the proliferation of cute goods in Japan.

This chapter features some of the most influential figures in the creation of *kawaii* culture as we know it today. Their timeless work bridges generations, showing that the love of all things adorable transcends age.

*Top:* Rune Naito was one of the first artists to popularize the term 'kawaii'. His girls usually sport huge eyes and proportions similar to babies.

*Bottom left:* Manga artist Eico Hanamura is famous for her stylish illustrations of girls and is still considered influential in the fashion industry because of her funky designs.

*Bottom right:* Yumeji Takehisa is the pioneer of what are known as 'fancy goods' – which roughly correspond to *kawaii* character products today.

# Yayoi-Yumeji Museum

In Japan, there are kawaii items everywhere you look. Any product you can think of has a kawaii equivalent waiting coquettishly in its box at the shops, and cute-obsessed consumers buy them by the bucketload. Where does this culture come from? The Yayoi-Yumeji Museum, which is made up of two spaces, the Yayoi Museum and the Takehisa Yumeji Museum, is dedicated to girls' magazine illustrators. It hosts many exhibitions each year with the goal of promoting knowledge about kawaii's rich history.

*Keiko Nakamura, Curator, Yayoi-Yumeji Museum*



Playing cards  
by manga artist  
Katsuji Matsumoto.





Said to be the godfather of cute culture, Yumeji Takehisa blends Japanese and Western artistic sensibilities using motifs that had never previously appeared in Japanese design, such as umbrellas and mushrooms, like these prints from 1913–15.

### What does 'kawaii' mean, exactly?

It is the appeal of adolescence, when one is not yet an adult. Kawaii things are usually soft, bright, round and small. They aren't aggressive or belligerent: they give you peace of mind and a sense of security. Originally, the word was used to describe people who were beneath you. It was acceptable to use it when referring to objects, but you wouldn't use it for your superiors or fellow schoolmates. But since the mid-1980s, girls have generally preferred to be called kawaii rather than simply pretty.

### What are the historical roots of kawaii culture?

I consider 1914 the birth year of kawaii in Japan. That's when the illustrator Yumeji Takehisa opened a shop in Nihonbashi which sold numerous goods aimed at schoolgirls – what we now refer to as 'fancy goods'. Items that were desirable at the time included woodblock prints, embroidery, cards, illustrated books, umbrellas, dolls and kimono collars. Up until then, there hadn't really been any shops that were aimed at a



particular clientele based on age or gender, but the customers of this shop were mostly young women. At the time, of course, they weren't using the term 'fancy goods', but *komamono*.

Takehisa was influenced by foreign cultures, and his goods show an aesthetic meeting of East and West. He designed coloured paper with poisonous mushrooms, for example. At the time, in Japan, this wasn't done, but in the West in the early 1900s poisonous mushrooms appeared on cards and in illustrated books.

He also designed *chiyogami* paper with motifs like umbrellas and matchsticks. At the time, *chiyogami* was usually printed with traditional *yuzen* patterns, so his thinking was very innovative and a lot of people came to copy him. Takehisa placed importance on the cuteness of his designs and referred to them as kawaii. However, this is a rare example of the word being used at the time, as it wasn't a commonly used word, as it is now.

### How have Japanese notions of beauty changed over time?

If you compare the work of Takehisa and the painter Ryushi Kawabata, their notions of what constitutes beauty are very different. Takehisa's illustrations look cute in comparison to Kawabata's work because there is a roundness to them – especially the eyes. Kawabata paints eyes in the shape that is common in Japanese classical painting; having small eyes and a slender physique was considered to be the ideal. Round eyes were traditionally seen as vulgar, although the ideal changed with foreign contact. Artists began to follow Takehisa's style. One of these was Junichi Nakahara, who drew eyes very large. He introduced the notion that girls on paper didn't have to replicate reality.

The Great Kanto earthquake happened in 1923, and Tokyo was obliterated. From that time, Takehisa's popularity declined and various designers became prominent, although at the time they weren't called designers – they were called *zuanka* and were all influenced by Takehisa.

Kaichi Kobayashi from Kyoto, who draws quite mature-looking images, was one of these designers. He made envelopes and letter paper for schoolgirls.

### What were these letter sets used for?

They were becoming increasingly important items for schoolgirls. Before the Taisho era [1912–26], girls went to elementary school and then got married or went to work, but during this period more girls continued their education. They were generally from upper-middle-class families and had a lot of spare time, which they spent writing letters. Meeting up with boys was strictly forbidden at girls' schools, so they would play games where they would write love letters to their classmates instead, or to girls that they looked up to or thought were cute – almost every day! At the time, of course, there was no Internet, so letter sets became very important and were the huge hit item of the era.

People that followed directly from Takehisa's trend were artists like Nakahara, who opened a goods shop called Himawariya [sunflower],

and Katsuji Matsumoto, who was active from the beginning of the Showa era [1926–89]. Matsumoto is thought to be the originator of *shojo* manga in Japan, and *Kurukuru Kurumi-chan* the first example of it. The protagonist, Kurumi-chan, is considered the first character icon: there were Kurumi-chan *kisekai* dolls [dress-up paper dolls] and stickers, as well as postcards that were meant to encourage troops during the war. The story itself is really quite simple: Kurumi is a five-year-old who is always merry, and hence lovable. It is uncomplicated, and audiences today might wonder what is so good about it.

In the 1950s and 1960s a lot of fancy goods came on the market as Japan's economy improved. There were improvements in raw materials and technological advances. Directly after the war there was a baby boom and, as these babies grew up to be teenagers, the market for goods aimed at this age group increased.



### Rune Naito's name comes up a lot in reference to kawaii culture. How influential is his work?

He popularized the word 'kawaii'. When you look at his drawings, the ratio of total body length to the size of the head suggests the proportions of a very little girl. The facial features are those of a newborn baby, with a large, round head. The distance from the hairline to the eyebrows is really long, giving the face a large forehead, and the nose and mouth are really small. His work was initially seen as a bit weird, but became very popular.

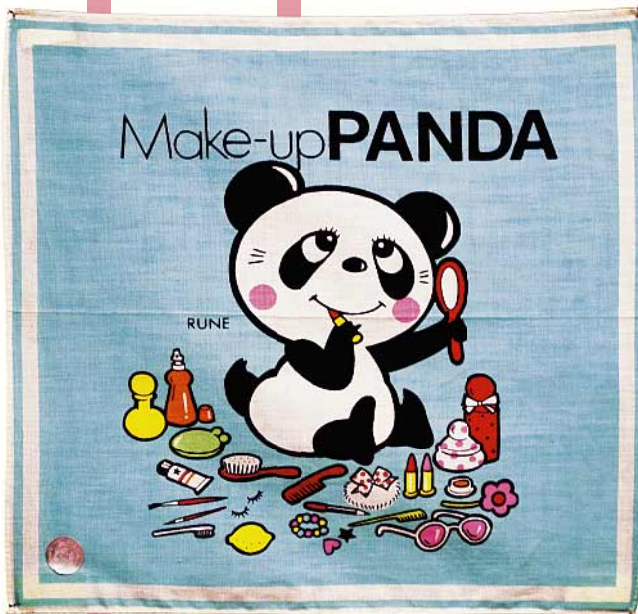
Prior to this era, Japanese women had to mature and become adults quickly because poverty was rampant, and people were encouraged to have a lot of children to provide a labour force and recruits for the Army. In fact, it was common for families to have between seven and ten kids. When the men went to war, the women had to work. In the mid-1950s the guys went back to work and the girls didn't have to grow up as fast.

Kiichi Tsutaya was known for his colouring books and paper dress-up dolls, like these from 1945–55.



Setsuko Tamura used food motifs on handkerchiefs like these in her early work, even as soon as 10 years after the war. These signified the rapid economic recovery and gradual affluence which later led to the economic bubble.





Handkerchiefs by  
Rune Naito.

### When did seminal shojo manga artists come into the picture?

Artists like Masako Watanabe and Macoto Takahashi, who drew gorgeous and opulent images, became the most influential people in terms of manufacturing goods. Ado Mizumori was also hugely influential. Something she did that was new was to put a touch of eroticism into the cuteness. For example, her characters

had large, round bottoms, and appeared in kissing scenes. You could say this was the beginning of *ero-kawaii* [erotic cute]. From there, the notion of *kawaii* branched off in different directions.

### How did Sanrio goods become explosively popular?

From the mid-1960s to the 1970s, manga like *Candy Candy* were very important, as were dolls such as

Licca-chan. In the 1980s, when Tokyo Disneyland opened, they sold many goods and it became common for everyone to have at least one Disney item in their house. The birth of Hello Kitty in 1974 was a landmark event too. Though Sanrio had been around previously, selling strawberry-themed goods or Ado Mizumori products, nothing came close to the Hello Kitty boom.





Ado Mizumori was one of the first artists to add a sexy touch to her kawaii illustrations, which is commonly called *ero-kawaii* today.

### Why were so many goods produced at this time?

This was connected to the oil and dollar crisis [due to the 1973 Arab oil embargo]. Up until then, the general goods industry had been aimed at exports to America, but because of the economic climate of the time they had to focus on the domestic market instead. The success of Hello Kitty led to the realization that if you made something cute, it

would sell. As a result, various companies jumped on the goods-manufacturing bandwagon.

When the economic bubble burst, Japanese people became a bit poorer and wanted to buy inexpensive things, so 100-yen shops started up. A lot of fancy goods came to be manufactured just for this market and, because of this, they came to be seen as

kitsch and cheap. Before this generation, it was upper-class girls who had bought kawaii. But now everyone could have inexpensive fancy goods. At one point the industry wanted to call them 'variety goods' instead! Unsurprisingly, that wasn't a successful idea. Since then, there has been a stream of hit characters, like Tarepanda from San-X, and similar companies have made more and more kawaii items.



The popularity of kawaii objects can be traced back to stationery and letter sets. This memo pad decorated with Masako Watanabe illustrations is an example of early kawaii goods.



Masako Watanabe's classic kawaii girls in 'Venus', 1955–65.

# Eico

Eico Hanamura is an artist who has been drawing *shojo* manga, such as the celebrated *Some Girl in the Fog*, since 1959. She is known for her colourful illustrations of doe-eyed girls with long eyelashes in gorgeous psychedelic apparel. Hanamura is one of the most influential, pioneering manga artists in the world. Her fashionable drawings look so fresh today that it is hard to believe they are decades old.

# Hanamura

## Where are you from?

Kawagoe in Saitama Prefecture: maybe that is the reason why I like old things. It is a historic Edo-era castle town, and still has that atmosphere. The house I grew up in was an old warehouse-style abode from the Genroku era [1688–1704], and had the kind of things you see in TV period dramas, like old paper lamps, ashtrays and braziers.

## When did you become an artist and how did you get your start in the industry?

I went to Osaka. The apartment building where I was staying had a library on the first floor, and the owner was a manga illustrator. I really loved to draw and I was going to Joshibi University of Art and Design and studying theatre at Keio University. There are big similarities between directing and drawing manga: like manga artists, film directors build a story with camera work using close-ups, long shots and landscapes, and decide where props should come into play.

When I showed the owner of the library my work, he told me to start drawing manga. I didn't know anything about manga, so I just drew 30 or so illustrations with a narrative and took them to a publisher – who bought them straight away. I had no desire to be a manga artist, but I was



Manga artist Eico Hanamura at her studio in Ajiro.





Paper doll, 1973.







Hanamura has created cover illustrations for many children's notebooks; these are from the 1970s.

so happy! After that I became a regular. I was doing monthlies, and then eventually a longer serial that ran for a year, which was quite popular. At the time, I had a husband, and we went to Tokyo together. The publishing house Kodansha had a magazine called *Nakayoshi* and they sent me a letter asking if I wanted to work for them.

The publisher Shogakukan ran a monthly magazine for young girls called *Jogakusei no tomo*, which had a lot of spreads with cute illustrations of girls, and I really wanted to draw like that. I had no desire to be a manga writer, but I was told by *Nakayoshi* that I was going against the tide of the times and that the future would be the era of manga. They told me that if I drew manga, I would eventually be able to do those spreads too, but I needed to do the manga first. Basically, I was talked into it by the editor!

After that, *Shojo Friend* gave me commissions for regular *shojo* manga jobs, and then Shueisha Publishing came along with an offer. Even then, I still wasn't thinking I would be a manga artist, but I really got caught up in it.

#### When did you develop your style?

I didn't have a style per se, but when I was a child I liked the illustrator Junichi Nakahara,

so I copied his work. I liked the manga-like look and the large eyes. Unlike now, most homes did not have a TV set, only books and magazines, and after the war there weren't many beautiful books like the ones you see now. Nakahara is one era before me. A friend showed me his work, and I was really astounded that such a beautiful thing even existed.

#### Did starting out during Japan's post-war era affect your work?

Yes, and not only me. If you look at the heroines of *shojo* manga of the time, they are always poor. They are good, lovely girls but poor, and the girls that tease them are usually rich.

#### When foreigners look at Japanese *shojo* manga they think the eyes are huge. Where does this look come from?

I think it's a Japanese insecurity. In the beginning, we would draw foreigners and call the work 'no-nationality manga', as it wasn't clear which country they were from, although they had huge eyes, large noses and fluffy hair. It was a kind of ideal. We had seen foreign films in which they had lace curtains and things like that, and we were fascinated by overseas things! But when foreigners look at my work they say it looks totally Japanese. I have been told that

