ZOE TAYLOR tells the extraordinary story of a group of pioneering young Japanese women who reshaped the comics industry and the wider culture, challenged inherited ideas of gender and revolutionised visual storytelling. Taylor also interviews MATT THORN, whose English translations became a vehicle for popularising the work.

**Fushi no Hana (An Immortal Flower)**, Yukiko Kai, 1979
One of the most graphically adventurous schools of cartooning you'll find anywhere in the world.
Whereas boys' comics addressed the problems of post-war Japan more directly, girls' comics tended to create idealised, alternative realities, with a visual style that evoked wonder. The innovations of the Year 24 Group were spurred by the late 1960s counterculture and the spirit of experimentation in Japanese comics at the time, but they were also building on pre-existing conventions. Shamoon argues that we can only understand the shōjo manga revolution in the context of a discrete girls' culture that had been emerging and developing since the early 20th century, when the education system became gender-divided and girls' magazines emerged to encourage literacy.

In pre-war Japan, entertainment for girls was centred around literary publications and the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female musical theatre troupe (based on the original model of kabuki before 1629, when women were banned). Shamoon suggests that the interest in gender-shifting masquerade still present in girls' culture has its roots here, while the same-sex love themes originated in the 'S relationship' – 'spiritual' or platonic love between an older and a younger girl at school – which was a popular focus of the stories in pre-war literary magazines.

Inspired by this idea of spiritual love (an idea imported by Christian missionaries who set up schools in the early Meiji period), S relationships were encouraged as a way of diverting young girls' romantic attentions from boys – depictions of romance between boys and girls were taboo within girls' literature (the term shōjo carries connotations of cloistered maidenhood). According to Shamoon, Year 24 Group artists such as Hagio drew on this tradition by switching the gender; she convincingly interprets The Heart of Thomas as, "a girl's novel about S relationships, with boys substituted for girls." Takemiya's The Song of the Wind and Trees – also set in a European boys' boarding school – takes a similar approach but introduces much more sexually explicit imagery, while exploring themes such as racism and drug abuse.

**VISUAL LYRICISM**

The decorative illustrations and dreamy jojoga (lyrical pictures) that had been developing in girls' magazines since the 1920s also influenced manga. The art nouveau and art deco-inspired fashion drawings of Jun’ichi Nakahara, with their elongated limbs and big, long-lashed, doll-like eyes, were popular with teenage girls (Nakahara was also an amateur doll-maker). According to Thorn, when Yoshiko Nishitani wrote some of the first boy-girl school romances in the mid-1960s, she drew her characters in this style, which quickly became the convention. The manga historian Yukari Fujimoto writes that the exaggerated twinkling eye (which expresses emotion and encourages reader identification) was popularised by Mako Takahashi in the early shōjo mangas of the 1950s. Also inspired by Nakahara’s lyrical illustrations, he drew his characters with huge eyes and filled them with glittering stars. Others have attributed the exaggerated eye to Tezuka, who produced the first long shōjo manga, Princess Knight in 1953. Many Western writers assume that he was influenced by Disney, but Tezuka himself said that he was inspired by the eye make-up of the Takarazuka Revue performers, who were based in his hometown.

Before writing manga for girls' magazines in the mid-1950s, Takahashi was an illustrator for the highly decorative picture-story genre. He brought this style of narration – using atmospheric images that conveyed the protagonist’s unspoken thoughts – to make emotive manga, such as Cherry Row (1957), that manipulated layouts to emphasise beauty, mood and fashion over plot. The Year 24 Group took Takahashi’s approach and transformed it into what Fujimoto describes as a form that is ‘ideally suited to the portrayal of character psychology and of an unconscious that cannot be expressed in words.’

Shōjo manga became popular in the West in the 1990s after the arrival of the anime series Sailor Moon, based on Naoko Takeuchi's manga Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon. It sparked the American interest in anime, as well as inspiring a generation of girls to start reading Japanese comics. Deppey writes: "With its whimsical stories of fashion, thrilling adventures and complex backstories, Sailor Moon was like little else young girls had ever seen before on television. Although the English-translated shōjo manga market is still saturated, popular contemporary works have found a readership in the US.”

*What the Year 24 Group achieved was universal and not exclusively gendered*
However, very little is known in the West about the Year 24 Group and other early pioneers of the genre. Matt Thorn’s 21st-century translations of some of Hagio’s shōjo manga for Fantagraphics are changing that, and a touring exhibition, ‘Shōjo Manga: the World of Japanese Girls’ Comics’, is celebrating some of the innovators.

The condensed version of the exhibition, at the House of Illustration in London until 12 June, shows the work of Katsuo Takahashi, a Year 24 Group member who trained as an assistant to Moto Hagio, Yukiko Kai, a later 1970s artist, and her younger sister, Shōko Kai, a self-publisher who worked as an assistant to Hagio and together with Takahashi created the term ‘manga’ — a more socially explicit form of the boys’ love genre. Although the show is limited to a light on context and prioritises lavish colour illustrations over the comics themselves, the fact that it being held at all suggests a gradual increase in awareness of the movement.

Shōjo manga has been a cultural force in Japan since the 1970s and is a major export, whether in the form of comics (and to some extent cultural) boundaries, and that, ‘girls are eager for narratives that reflect their point of view’.

Shōjo manga has been a cultural force in Japan since the 1970s. It was reading Moto Hagio’s The Heart of Thomas in the US in the late 1990s that inspired Zoe Taylor to become a translator and you were finally able to release an English edition of that work with Fantagraphics in 2012. Why did it take so long for it to appear in English?


‘Shōjo has been a cultural force in Japan since the 1970s. I was trying to convert adults; they simply created a new generation that was open to the idea of comics and animation for girls. I had been trying a top-down approach, translat- ing titles that were sophisticated and geared more at women. I was pushing ultra-cute, strictly non-violent entertainment and that they were wary of translating “classic” that may or may not appeal to wide audiences in the English-speaking world. There’s still a long way to go even getting boys to read translated manga those women produced in the original Japanese or in sketchy unauthorised translations. Sadly, there have been few authorised translations. Publishers are justifiably wary of translating “classics” that may or may not appeal to wide audiences in the English-speaking world. There’s still a long way to go even getting boys to read

MT: Before Sailor Moon came to the US (and finally succeeded after an initial false start), the conventional wisdom among the people in the toy and entertain- ment industry was that little girls wanted only fluffy, ultra-cute, strictly non-violent entertainment and that the entertainment industry was that little girls wanted only fluffy, ultra-cute, strictly non-violent entertainment and that they were wary of translating “classic” that may or may not appeal to wide audiences in the English-speaking world. There’s still a long way to go even getting boys to read

ZT: Since then, has the work of the Year 24 Group become better known in the West?

MT: More fans are aware of the existence of the Year 24 Group than when I started evangelising back around 1993, but it remains the case that you can only read most of the manga those women produced in the original Japanese or translated unofficially in the US in the late 1990s that inspired you to become a translator and you were finally able to release an edition of that work with Fantagraphics in 2012. Why did it take so long for it to appear in English?

ZT: It was reading Moto Hagio’s The Heart of Thomas in the US in the late 1990s that inspired you to become a translator and you were finally able to release an edition of that work with Fantagraphics in 2012. Why did it take so long for it to appear in English?

MT: When I applied to Viz for translating work back in 1998, I sent them my translations of a short story from Moto Hagio’s teen vampire series The Poe Clan. I was pushing to manage from them at the start but they were having a hard enough time even getting boys to read translated manga, and female readers were believed to be almost non-existent. And when I started my work with Fantagraphics, it just took a really, really long time to get it up to production to execution.

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Shōjo manga has been a cultural force in Japan since the 1970s.
What do you feel is the most significant achievement of the Year 24 Group?

The biggest achievement by far, in my opinion, is proving that you could have a popular entertainment form geared at girls and women that was actually created almost entirely by women. Even Europeans and Americans are not there yet, with the sole exception of young adult novels. It was a genuine flood of women artists into a field that had been utterly dominated by men. Before 1969, you could count on the fingers of two hands the number of women cartoonists working in commercial magazines. There were more women artists in the much funkier field of 'rental manga', but that's another story. Today, a girl who wants to become a cartoonist doesn't even have to think about the possibility of being rejected because of her gender.

How would you explain the interest in gender and sexuality that pervaded their work?

The Year 24 Group artists reflected the interests of then-young women of their generation. They were Baby Boomers, and had an interest in political and social issues that later generations have not. 'Women's Lib' was something they thought about and discussed seriously. They were frustrated and angry with a society that provided women with only a handful of acceptable life courses to choose from. They wanted to shake that up, or better yet smash it, and I think you could argue that they succeeded in some ways. They opened Pandora's Box, and while Japanese patriarchy has fought against progress tooth and nail, Japanese women today have seen an alternative reality and cannot forget it. It was the Year 24 Group that showed them that alternative reality.

Science fiction was also a popular theme within their work. Were they pioneers of this genre?

They were pioneers, yes. I suppose the alternative reality they wanted to portray was so far from daily reality that it could only be set in the distant future or another dimension, or brought into being through magic or alien intervention.

And were the Year 24 Group artists consciously collaborating to revolutionise shojo manga? Were they influencing each other?

Oh, yes, they influenced each enormously. Moto Hagio and Keiko Takemiya were actually roommates for a couple of years, and several other shojo manga artists regularly visited them at what came to be known (tongue-in-cheek) as the O-izumi Salon. They helped each other meet their deadlines. And they were very consciously trying to revolutionise shojo manga. They used that word, 'revolution' (kakumei). They continue to influence young artists today. In fact, women in their early twenties are even more influenced by the Year 24 Group than are women cartoonists in their thirties, because of the influence of their mothers. Many of my cartooning students who are women are very familiar with the Year 24 Group, because they have seen their work on their mothers’ bookshelves since they were babies.

Moto Hagio’s Otherworld Barbara, translated by Matt Thorn, will be released by Fantagraphics Books this September.

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