

# Background on *Kamishibai*

From *kami* ("paper") *shibai* ("drama")

## History

The Japanese tradition of storytelling with pictures dates back to 12<sup>th</sup> century Japan. During the Heian period, Buddhist monks used pictures to teach about the history of their temples and deities, probably to illiterate audiences.



The earliest predecessor to *kamishibai* is *emaki*, or "scroll picture." A scroll was pulled across a screen, viewed by nobility as a form of entertainment in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The most famous was an *emaki* adaptation of the long work of fiction, *The Tale of Genji*.

*Kamishibai* disappeared after the Heian period, returning eight centuries later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century *Kamishibai*

The *Gaitō Kamishibaiya*, "*kamishibai* storyteller," rode into a neighborhood with a stage hooked onto the back of his bicycle. Built into the stage was a chest of drawers to hold sweets—the *kamishibai* man was really a candy vendor.

After parking his bike, the storyteller pulled out his *hyōshigi*, wooden clappers he used to announce his presence, much like ice cream trucks today play music to alert customers. At the sound of the *hyōshigi*, children came running. The *kamishibai* man proceeded to sell candy to the children. Those who purchased the most were permitted to stand closest to the stage for the best view.

The *kamishibai* man would present his stories in installments, ending each day with a cliff-hanger so that his customers would keep coming back and buy more candy. Early *kamishibai* cards were hand-drawn by the storyteller, with just the suggestion of a storyline on the back. The *kamishibai* man was a storyteller more in the oral than the literary tradition. In time, the storyteller could purchase published series of *kamishibai* stories. Some included text; others were simply images, so the storyteller had to improvise.

*Kamishibai* was hugely popular in Japan during the Showa era, what we know as post-depression Japan. There were some 25,000 *gaitō kamishibaiya* in the country—3,000 in Tokyo alone. But with the advent of television in 1953, *kamishibai* lost its audience.

*Kamishibai* did not altogether disappear—it took on new forms. One of the Japanese legendary superheroes, Golden Bat (*Ōgon Bat*), got his start as a *kamishibai* character. Installments of this popular series went on for 10 years! When the Golden Bat left the *kamishibai* stage, he leaped into the pages of graphic novels, having influenced Japanese *manga* comic book artists, and later, Japanese *anime*.

Today, *kamishibai* is enjoying a renaissance in Japan, and also in the U.S., where it has been introduced as a storytelling art. In fact, *kamishibai* has made it to the Internet, and now intergenerational *kamishibai* communities are popping up online. The storytellers are no longer candy men, but children and adults who create their own story boards and perform throughout Japan.