

Background on *Kamishibai*

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

History

The Japanese tradition of storytelling with pictures dates back to 12th 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 11th-12th 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 20th century.

20th 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.