

The Mechanics of Kamishibai Through the Art of Eigoro Futamata

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I first encountered kamishibai as a teacher at a Japanese Language School in New Jersey. The instruction at the school was entirely in Japanese for Japanese nationals or children of Japanese heritage living in America, and, as far as possible, an attempt was made to recreate the Japanese school experience. Though trained as a K-8 teacher and fluent in Japanese, I had not been educated in the Japanese school system so I had much to learn from the teachers around me. The Japanese teachers there used kamishibai essentially as they might large picture books. They did not use a stage but would hold the cards up in front of them, as they read the text off the backs. The main advantage seemed to be that the children seated on the floor could focus uninterrupted on the large pictures without the teacher having to turn the pages of the book or flip the book this way or that while reading.

It was not until I trained as a professional storyteller and began to tell Japanese folktales in programs introducing Japanese culture to American audiences that I began to see kamishibai as a form of storytelling in its own right. My initiation into kamishibai as a form of storytelling began at the Japan Society in New York where I met Margaret Eisenstadt, co-founder of Kamishibai for Kids, and her friend Futamata Eigoro, an acclaimed picture-book author and illustrator, as well the kamishibai artist of many of the folktales in the catalogue of Kamishibai for Kids and the creator of the images on the catalogue and web site.

The kamishibai storytellers who accompanied Mr. Futamata on his New York visit told the stories orally, without reading the backs of the cards, and I soon realized that this was an art in and of itself. As a visual artist, I had for many years created visual props and backdrops to enable my audiences to relate to or envision the unfamiliar cultural images in the stories, and kamishibai offered the perfect combination of visual and oral storytelling modes.

Curious to learn more, I went to Japan to study with Futamata-sensei, as I came to call him (sensei, being an honorific meaning “teacher”), and this opportunity, combined with all the experiences and encounters I had while in Japan, constituted a series of revelations that opened my eyes to the greater possibilities of kamishibai. It made me realize that kamishibai is much more than just a series of cards in a box—there is truly an art to kamishibai, and not every illustrator or storyteller understands or fully utilizes the potential of the form.

I was particularly lucky to study with Futamata Eigoro, whose work as a picture-book illustrator I had long admired, and who is at the same time unusually attuned to kamishibai’s unique characteristics. When I first tried to make my own kamishibai illustrations, I knew little about the history of kamishibai and how it had developed out of a combination of traditional picture storytelling forms and a national infatuation with silent film. I mistakenly assumed, as many people do, that it was a large-scale picture book. Under Futamata-sensei’s guidance, however, I soon learned the basics of how kamishibai cards function, and I began to think less in terms of creating a large picture book and more in terms of directing a small-scale theatre production or film.

Originally a form of street-performance art, Kamishibai evolved out of a mix of various popular storytelling forms and the introduction of silent film into Japan in the early 1900s. Silent film in Japan was never “silent” because of the practice of having storytellers (*benshi*) create personalized and spontaneous oral sound tracks for audiences in movie theatres, alongside the films. Many of these storytellers came to be more popular even than the movie stars (for an in-depth history of silent film narration, see Jeffrey Dym’s *Benshi, Japanese Silent Film Narrators and Their Forgotten Art of Setsumei*, 2003). Kamishibai storytellers would manipulate a series of cards inside a wooden stage, while emulating the vocal style of popular *benshi*, and this became a form of picture-storytelling in its own right. The early illustrations, too, had more in common with popular films and cinematic techniques than with picture-book illustration.

When I returned to the US, I tried to recreate my own process of discovery in workshops I have called “The Mechanics of Kamishibai.” Especially when teaching American children, who have little or no prior knowledge of kamishibai, I have found that before I could ask my students to choose or even write stories to illustrate, it was necessary to acquaint them first with how kamishibai pictures work. The most basic step in guiding students toward an understanding of the mechanics of kamishibai is to make explicit for them the differences between kamishibai and the form of picture-storytelling with which they are probably most familiar: the picture book. Futamata Eigoro’s work is particularly useful in making this distinction because he consciously develops his stories differently in both media, but other picture books that contrast well with kamishibai are readily available. The “Where’s Waldo?” series, for instance, is a perfect example of a picture book that would never work as a kamishibai.

I usually begin my first session with students by having them find the contrasting elements between Futamata-sensei’s “The Three Magic Charms,” available in kamishibai form and his picture book “The Seven Times Fox” (*Shichido Gitsune*). As soon as I have told the kamishibai story, I look at the pictures again with the children and find similar scenes in the picture book. The children very quickly perceive, for instance, that Futamata-sensei uses much more detail in the scenes of his picture books.



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In the opening pages, there are ladybugs on the trees and ants on the ground, engaged in their own little

dramas. When I ask the children to think about why it is important to eliminate these kinds of details in a kamishibai story, one or more of them has usually already realized that the kamishibai cards are visible only for a few minutes at the most, while a picture book allows the reader time to focus and linger on small details, even if they have only an indirect bearing on the story.

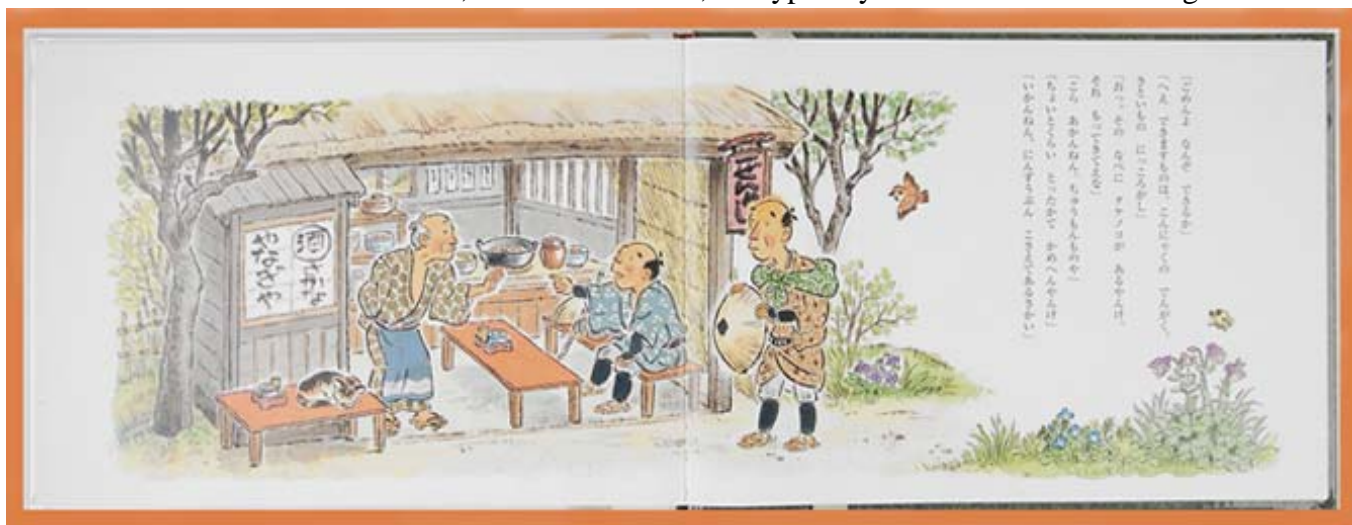
At this point, I like to show them card #4 of the kamishibai story, “The Three Magic Charms,” where the boy sits up in bed and listens to the rain on the roof.

Of course, there would be many other things—objects and furniture—inside the house, but the audience at that moment is only concerned with the actions of the little boy.



Futamata-sensei has chosen to depict the boy and nothing else inside the abstract shape of the house, and this immediately draws our eyes to the boy and also emphasizes for us how utterly alone he is. This picture, when contrasted with that of the picture book, for example, where you see the interior of the restaurant, allows the students to see that important characters or

objects in the picture are further accentuated with bold outlines and usually placed in the middle of the card. Picture book illustrations, on the other hand, are typically more refined and are organized in



various formations around text on a double-page spread, where the artist's challenge is to avoid placing anything important at the centre or gutter of the book.

If a stage is available, I usually show the students the cards in the stage and then hold the picture book up alongside. Then I have the students stand back as far as they can from the stage to see which illustrating style is more effective when viewed from a distance. Kamishibai illustrations are much larger than picture-book illustrations, often filling the available space on the cards, and the bold, dramatic outlines and centrally placed action of a kamishibai illustration is meant to be more effective when viewed from the back of the room.



Finally, I show the scene of the *yamanba* (mountain witch), chasing after the boy (card #9). This clearly demonstrates the horizontal movement in one direction from right-to-left (from the audiences' viewpoint).

What happens if I take the card out of the stage and pull the cards the opposite way?

Suddenly, it looks as though the boy and the *yamanba* are running backwards, quite literally like a film being rewound. This idea of movement within the stage cannot be stressed enough because altering the direction of movement within a given scene can determine the awkwardness or effectiveness of the story when it is performed.

“The Three Magic Charms” can also be used to demonstrate various ways of pulling the cards out of the stage. Most notably with Cards 4 & 5, Futamata-sensei effectively uses the technique of partially revealing the card, as the boy creeps up to the door to peek in at the old woman

Card #4 is pulled “yukkuri”
(slowly) up to the line of the door....



....and then “satto” (swiftly)
drawn out the rest of the way to
reveal the *yamanba* at the spinning
wheel. (Card #5)



How the cards are pulled is integral to the pacing of the story, and children enjoy trying out various ways of pulling the cards as they develop their own style of performing their stories.

I always encourage students to try out their cards as they create them, in the stage if at all possible, to make sure that the objects in their scenes are moving in the way they envision them. When

using a pre-written story or folk tale, I would recommend beginning by locating ideas of movement in the story and thinking about how to depict these, before having the students simply divide the story up into a series of scenes. That way, they will develop a sense of how the cards work with their story, instead of treating the story as independent of the movement of the cards.

Most importantly, kamishibai is about creating stories in community with others, and the responses of a live audience as the stories are developed are probably the best indication of whether a story is successful or not. Giving students ample opportunities in small groups or larger settings to perform their stories for a variety of audiences builds confidence and allows them to discover what works best for them.

ABOUT TARA: Tara McGowan has lived and studied in Japan for many years. She is a professional artist and storyteller, specializing in presenting aspects of Japanese culture through visual art, songs, and stories. She is also an affiliated storyteller with the nonprofit organization Storytelling Arts, Inc. Tara is currently a doctoral student in the Reading, Writing, and Literacy division of the Education Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

