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Hino Hideshi: Cartoonist of the Grotesque Gains Global Following

by Sayaka Yakushiji

"You hold the sword to face yourself, not to cut others," says Hino Hideshi in his office in Tokorozawa, Saitama Prefecture. 'My characters are ugly, but I wanted readers to understand that even these ugly characters have lives of their own.'

Tokorozawa, Saitama Prefecture-Horror cartoonist Hino Hideshi is perplexed. Having long resigned himself to being an outcast in Japanese society for his works depicting the grotesque, the 58-year-old innovator suddenly finds himself very much in demand.

"I really don't know what's going on," says Hino of a surge of international calls from as far away as England and Mexico, feverishly inquiring about his eerie manga comic books and future work plans.

The sudden interest was stirred by publication last year of 16 of his manga in the United States. Two books have already been marketed in France, and Spanish editions are scheduled. His storytelling has also been translated in South Korea, Taiwan and China. For Hino, the international acclaim is a far cry from what he is used to.

Hino himself is anything but scary. Instead, one encounters a man who cultivates an artisan image by wearing a two-piece indigo kimono called samue. He ties his gray hair in the back like a samurai warrior.

His workshop is the first-floor studio of a modest home here. The room contains a fearsome mask of tengu, the long-nosed Japanese goblin said to lurk in mountain areas. The bookshelf is lined with bizarre monster figures.

Hino painstakingly blazed a trail that few others showed much interest in. And now, many years later, his work has become part of a cultural trademark of today's Japan, much in the vein of the Asimo robot developed by Honda Motor Co. or game software produced by Nintendo.

Contemporary Japanese manga culture sprang from the ashes of World War II and blossomed to the point of artisanship.

Due to the recent rise of the otaku phenomenon, in which people go to almost any lengths to collect their favorite gadgets, manga, too, have come to portray today's Japan, rather than traditional art forms like ikebana, tea ceremony and the like.

And this endless pursuit of peculiar fields, like computer games and anime, reflects a form of "soft power" that can exert a strong influence on other cultures.

In November, an anime-inspired work by contemporary artist Takashi Murakami was auctioned for \$550,000 (57.75 million yen) at Christie's.

Also last year, otaku was adopted as the theme for the Japanese pavilion at the International Architecture Exhibition of Venice Biennale, Italy's renowned cultural arts festival

Hollywood also has taken a fancy to Japanese horror films, remaking versions of the "Ring" and "Juon" to frighten mostly Western audiences.

It is that wave of interest that hurled Hino, author of 400 scary manga titles, into the spotlight.

The paradox is that Hino's grotesque works have been long overlooked, if not studiously ignored, by mainstream Japan. But just like otaku culture, his rebellious streak struck a chord that transcended national borders and gave him cult status overseas.

Deformity is the key to Hino's view of the world. He draws monstrous children whose eyes don't match or with maimed limbs to illustrate bullying by classmates or society.

"I tried to draw beauty out of deformity. I wanted to show how cruel and vulgar humans could be. My characters are ugly, but I wanted readers to understand that even these ugly characters have lives of their own," Hino says.

Perhaps most representative of the cartoonist's works is "Zoroku no Kibyō" (Disease of Zoroku). It tells the story of Zoroku, a warm-hearted villager who is struck with an incurable disease. Grossly disfigured by facial swellings, Zoroku is ostracized from the community and forced to live in a remote shack. There, squeezing pus from his body that squirts in seven colors, Zoroku frantically draws day and night, re-creating a fantasy world filled with golden bees, scarlet flowers and little animals.

The story line, which projects the author's solitude and pain, was carried in Shonen Gaho, a bimonthly magazine for small children.

"Because I started out as a comedy cartoonist, I had to deconstruct my drawings to make them scary. As a result, I made one eye bigger than the other or the thumb longer than index finger," Hino says of the characters he draws.

Hino's creativity was borne out of his failure to "make it" as a comedy manga artist. It meant living on the edge of poverty.

The idea for "Zoroku no Kibyō" came to him when he was living in a sparse room comprising just four-and-a-half tatami mats. Hino got by using any means he could and at the time worked as a tout for cabaret shows in Shimokitazawa.

Hoping to garner the attention he craved, Hino set his mind on trying to produce a masterpiece. He did that by confining himself to the tiny room, plotting ideas throughout the night and falling asleep only after dawn. After a year of that, he dreamed up the world of Zoroku. He was just 23 years old-but he felt he had the masterpiece he was looking for.

But Hino soon found out that being hailed as the flag-bearer of counterculture was not an easy cross to bear.

Each time gruesome crimes occurred-like those of Tsutomu Miyazaki, a serial murderer in the late 1980s-opponents of scary manga were quick to single

them out as the cause of the general decline in law and order, especially among young people.

Hino barely got by even in his 30s. Without his wife's income from a part-time job he doesn't know what he would have done. When he turned 40, he began learning Bushido-the chivalric code of samurai-to relieve stress.

While his shocking drawings captured the collective imagination of young readers, parents were less than impressed. Editors frequently demanded the cartoonist tone down the expressions of his characters and leave out brutal details and other depictions of mortality.

But as manga culture spread overseas and the word "otaku" gained international coinage from the late 1990s, there was no stopping the bandwagon.

From artful drawings churned out by fanciful minds, horror stories finally gained world recognition by winning the approval of connoisseurs outside Japan.

Hino is now basking in the spotlight, a strange situation for a man who considered himself not only a misfit in Japanese society but in the cartoon community as a whole.

Last year, six short films were made based upon Hino's stories. Two of these films are scheduled to be shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to introduce contemporary alternative Japanese culture-in effect, the world of otaku.

Hino has been invited to the World Comic Summit held in South Korea and Taiwan where Japanese manga has influenced local cartoonists. Hino also attended Comic-Con International last year in San Diego. It is the largest comics and popular arts convention in the United States.

Those familiar with Hino's work say it is not only his grotesque figures that have caught the attention of hard-core fans.

"He digs down into the existence of human beings in their search of the darkness, and then presents it in the style of a cartoon" wrote Masashi Shimizu, professor at Nihon University College of Art, in a recent review of Hino's works.

Hino, who regards horror as just another form of entertainment, has gradually come to terms with his unexpected success abroad. "I have been treated as an outcast in Japan," he says. "To this day, I thought I was the only person who saw hell.

"Then I began to realize that this feeling is shared across boundaries, regardless of race or nationality. Everyone, more or less, has some sort of burden in their lives."

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