

Jennifer Furr
Globalization & Me Research Paper
4.16.2016
ART 6933

What is Kawaii and how did it start?

Kawaii is the embodiment of “cute”, “supercute”, or even “loveable”. Several sources also mentioned that Kawaii art has an aspect of vulnerability, and sometimes imperfection, too, creating a feeling of the subject needing protection. The Kawaii explosion began in Japan and has rapidly spread to the United States, and the rest of the world. It all started with Hello Kitty in 1974, according to (2011) Shearin, in an interview with DiNitto, co-director of the Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at William & Mary. DiNitto explains how Japanese culture has become a pop phenomenon, “influencing markets, entrepreneurs, and other cultures” (para.5).

However, another source, (2014) Kincaid, said that Kawaii originated as far back as 1914, with the woodblock artist and illustrator Yumeji Takehisa, and his use of round eyes in illustrations. Large, round eyes have come to be known as one of the trademarks of Kawaii art. At that time, though, round eyes were considered vulgar, and Takehisa originally used the word kawaii to describe his block print illustrations, which were used for paper prints and origami. Next, Shojo was created by artist Katsuji Matsumoto (Kincaid, 2014), which was the ancestor of modern Manga. The first Shojo character was created to encourage Japanese troops during World War II. Fast forward to the 1970’s, when many women artists began creating more Manga characters than ever before, and you have the real beginnings of Kawaii.

Macoto Takahashi was one of the male Manga artists who had a huge influence on the Kawaii movement (Universotokyo, 2016). He became popular during the 1950’s, with his big-eyed Manga girls and use of pastel colors. He was influenced by the artist Junichi Yakahara, who also drew big-eyed girls, illustrated for fashion, and was considered a forerunner of Manga art.

Manga was responsible for the birth of Hello Kitty, which in turn, was responsible for the Kawaii craze.

Kawaii Infiltrates America

Ten years or so before Hello Kitty was born, Speed Racer was introduced to America as the first popular Japanese Anime (Tiffany, 2008). It was another 10-15 years after the introduction of Hello Kitty that all the other Japanime started flooding the American market. We were introduced to Pokemon, Dragonball Z, and Sailor Moon. The Powerpuff Girls, which may look like and are often mistaken for Japanimation, were actually created by an American artist, Craig McCracken (Wikipedia, 2016), who was inspired by the large-eyed paintings of American artist, Margaret Keane. However, Japan did produce a crossover cartoon, Powerpuff Girls Z, in 2006. This was one of the rare instances of American cartoons influencing Japan.

There are many other aspects of American culture that have been infiltrated by Kawaii, besides just the cartoon arena. Emoji, for one, has changed the way we text, worldwide. Emoji was created by Shigetaka Kurita in 1999 in Japan (Nakano, 2016). Kurita's creation of Emoji was influenced by two things: pictograms and manpu, which is a type of symbolic representation in Manga.

Around the same time, in the early 2000's, pop singer Gwen Stefani introduced the Harajuku Girls to America. According to (2008) Wade, Stefani got rich off of promoting Asian culture. The general public, however, took up an interest in cute Asian fashions, and heard the word Kawaii used by Stefani. Her Harajuku lovers line of clothing and perfume uses the faces that you generally see in Kawaii art, with big eyes and round faces, and of course, cute, colorful clothes.

Popular Kawaii (fine) Artists (aka: not Cartoonists) and Consumerism

One of the biggest reasons for the popularity of Kawaii is its mass market appeal. Takashi Murakami is a Japanese artist that is described as “high art, low culture, a one-man mass-market machine” (Howe, 2003). Murakami has been compared to American pop artists Warhol and Lichtenstein, because he works in a factory, and uses cartoon characters in his work. Many of his paintings and sculptures look like an amalgamation of every popular Emoji ever invented. His works definitely have the Kawaii factor with their bright, cheerful colors and smiling, round characters.

Simone Legno is an Italian designer and artist, but you would never know that from looking at his creations, which scream Japanese Kawaii. Legno created the Tokidoki brand (Legno, 2016) as his online portfolio, and was scouted out and convinced to move to L.A. to manufacture his art there. He says that Tokidoki means “sometimes” in Japanese, and that he has a fascination with world cultures and a deep love for Japan. His Tokidoki line sells everything from makeup and diaper bags to shoes and dolls, all with his adorable Kawaii characters on them. Barbie and Hello Kitty have also employed Legno as a designer, so that has definitely helped in spreading his popularity and Kawaii style.

Why does Kawaii matter to me?

I grew up loving all things Kawaii, not even knowing there was a name or a style for those things I loved. One of my most vivid and fondest memories from childhood is going to the pencil stand in the hallway in the mornings before school started. I loved looking at all the bright and pastel-colored pencils, erasers, and other accessories. I had no way of knowing they were from Japan or they were part of an art movement, I just knew I liked them. Just like I liked Hello Kitty and Lisa Frank.

I think kids today aren't much different. They like what they like without questioning why. In 2014, when I first started teaching Art, I had several students interested in learning how to draw in the Manga style, so I started looking on Amazon for some drawing books to buy to help them out. That was when I discovered there were these subcategories of Manga, known as Chibi and Kawaii, and that kids (and adults) absolutely love them. I bought several books for my students to practice with, and I have used them almost as often as they do. Then in the past several months, I have discovered contemporary artists, like So Youn Lee (that I wish I had more room to write about) and others, that are brilliant Kawaii artists. Something about the colors and shapes just resonates with me, the same as it did in my childhood. And maybe that's one reason why I like the Kawaii style so much, because it does remind me of childhood, and everything bright, beautiful, sweet, and innocent. Sometimes adulthood makes us forget all of those pleasant things and we need a nice reminder.

References

- Howe, J. (2003, October/November). The Two Faces of Takashi Murakami. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <http://www.wired.com/2003/11/artist/>
- Kincaid, C. (2014, September/October). What is Kawaii? Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <http://www.japanpowered.com/japan-culture/what-is-kawaii>
- Legno, S. (2016). Simone Legno. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <https://www.tokidoki.it/simone-legno/>
- Nakano, M. (2016). Why and How I Created Emoji - IGNITION. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <http://ignition.co/105>
- Shearin, M. (2011, October/November). Ideation. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <http://www.wm.edu/research/ideation/issues/2011-fall/triumph-of-kawaii4862.php>
- The Powerpuff Girls. (2016, April 16). Retrieved April 16, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Powerpuff_Girls

Tiffany, L. (2008, May/June). Embracing Japanese pop culture. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from http://www.nbcnews.com/id/24546355/ns/business-us_business/t/embracing-japanese-pop-culture/#.VxJ754-cHIV

Universotokyo. (2013, March/April). Junichi Nakahara from Shōjo Manga to Fashion (中原淳一). Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <https://universotokyo.com/2013/03/12/531/>

Universotokyo. (2016, February/March). Macoto Takahashi: An Invitation into his Fairytale World 「高橋マコトの世界」. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <https://universotokyo.com/2016/02/19/macoto-takahashi-an-invitation-into-his-fairytale-world-「高橋マコトの世界」/>

Wade, L., Dr. (2008, November 19). Gwen Stefani's Harajuku Girls - Sociological Images. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2008/11/19/gwen-stefanis-harajuku-girls/>