

# ROCKET MAN

*Tezuka's works of the 1940s: A growing focus on science fiction*

A Japanese professor leads a party of researchers into unexplored territory on a treasure hunt. It sounds like the opening of a Tezuka comic, but it wasn't quite the swashbuckling, action-packed adventure that springs to mind. It involved five years of digging through the vast archives of an American university library to produce a database of magazines. The result is a real find for comics fans around the world—a group of Tezuka strips from the early years of his career in Osaka. Some were known, but believed to be lost forever, and some were previously unrecorded.

The magazines were part of a treasure trove of material produced in Japan during the American Occupation, from 1945 to 1952. A huge collection of Japanese publications and official papers was brought back to America by Dr. Gordon W. Prange, the Occupation force's official historian. In 2006, Dr. Takeshi Tanikawa used the new database to trawl through the Prange Collection for known Tezuka rarities. Armed only with a fistful of bibliographies, he found not just the "lost" comics, but five previously unknown titles. His major find was five Tezuka strips from 1947–1948, unlisted in any bibliographies. Issue 6 of *Kodomo no Oka (Children's Hill)* magazine, dated November–December 1947, contains a short twelvepanel strip called *What Happened to the Persimmons*, in which a greedy crow finds himself in trouble when he raids a fruit tree. In January 1948, Tokyo magazine *Shonen Shojo Manga to Yomimono (Comics and Reading for Boys and Girls)* ran a three-panel gag strip called *Boiled Goldfish*. Two children want to give their goldfish less cramped quarters, but unfortunately the tub they choose is being heated for a bath. The characters are instantly recognizable, the boy recalling Ton-chan from *Ma-chan's Diary*, and the man who didn't expect to find lunch in his bath resembling Higeoyaji. This may have been Tezuka's first Tokyo sale; it predates the previously known one by two months.

In March 1948, a four-panel Tezuka gag strip signaled his first foray into adult comics. *Shinsekai (New Century)* magazine, with its cover painting of a sultry Western beauty, was aimed at a much older market, and Tezuka's strip, while very mild by today's standards, was quite provocative at the time. *I Can't Stand It Any More* is the story of a pretty store dummy so embarrassed by clients staring up her Westernstyle skirt that she steals the frilly panties displayed alongside her on the counter—even though she has only a pole supporting her upper body. *Shonen Shojo Manga to Yomimono* ran another Tezuka threepanel gag strip in April 1948. *Magic Words* sketched an idea he was to develop further in *Gut-chan* in 1956. A boy who has bumped his head feels better after mother's "magic words," and as a result of her effectiveness she finds herself besieged by other children with broken toys, and even limbs. The May issue of the same magazine featured a fascinating development; the first published Tezuka historical piece. *Trial* is the story of

a lord who flies off the handle at criticism of a new sword, only to have it shatter when he tests it on a straw hat.

## Shared Experience

The newly discovered domestic gag strips resemble the work of another artist who made her debut in the same year as Tezuka. Machiko Hasegawa's *Sazae-san* was first published in newspaper form in 1946 and ran until 1974. The animated version has been showing since 1969, making it the longest-running TV cartoon in the world, and it is consistently one of the top-rated animated shows on Japanese TV. It's all about family life, full of gentle humor and subtle observation.

The *Sazae-san* strips started out in Hasegawa's local paper on the island of Kyushu. It's unlikely that Tezuka saw them before 1949, when they commenced publication in Tokyo's *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper, but the similarities of subject matter and approach are striking. Hasegawa's stories of family life in occupied Japan present the same kind of domestic vignettes that Tezuka exploits in his gag strips, though the twenty-six-year-old Hasegawa approached her stories from the adult viewpoint, while the teenage author of *Ma-chan's Diary* presented them through a child's eyes. In one *Sazae-san* strip, grandfather gets out of bed first and gleefully uses all the "hot water" on the stove for his wash, only to be asked, "Who threw away the soup stock?"—*Boiled Goldfish* with a twist. Interestingly, while Tezuka soon branched out from domestic gag strips into the long-form science fiction and fantasy that made his name, Hasegawa stuck to the short gag format and contemporary Japanese themes throughout her career.

These gag strips reveal Tezuka working to establish himself for a general audience and learning how to adapt his work to suit different types of editors and readers. The titles of the amateur or privately published works of his early years reflect his interests and experiences as a teenager in war-ravaged Japan. Between 1941 and 1945 his work focuses on the realities of war and the escape offered by fantasy and adventure. With *New Treasure Island* in 1947 he began to establish the long-form "cinematic" comics he wanted to create, but he realized that *Ma-chan's Diary* was filling a gap in the lives of its young audience.

Like mischievous preschooler Ma-chan and his friend Ton-chan, Japan's children were growing up in a society that had lost many of its male role models, surrounded by big American GIs, wondering whether they might not be better off learning ABCs than Japanese. The strips gave them something to laugh about and offered light relief amid the huge changes in their lives and families. Comics for adults could fill the same function. For several more years, Tezuka continued to turn out fast, light-hearted gag strips aimed at building and widening his audience. He learned how to differentiate character, set up a situation, give it a twist, and resolve it in just a few panels.

Meanwhile, he was developing the themes that would lead his work for years to come. In wartime Osaka, Tezuka had seen human corpses piled in ditches after the firebombings of 1945. As he tramped through the streets of occupied Tokyo, he saw starving and homeless orphans. Science fiction and fantasy adventure fascinated him, and science and technology were just as exciting, but they also provided a framework for exploring the impact of invasion, loss, and death. In a society full of aliens and changes, the dark and selfish side of humanity surfaced in profiteering and political chicanery. Stories of aliens, changes, ambiguous characters, and dark endings flowed from Tezuka.

## Censorship in Action

Tezuka's work, like all other Japanese civilian communications and media, was subject to American censorship. The Press Code for Japan, issued on September 19, 1945, was the basis of a process designed to eradicate Japanese militarism and encourage democracy based on the US model. All mass media, personal mail, telephone, and telegraphic communications were censored prior to publication or transmission, and material not approved was blocked. "Inappropriate" content listed in the official guidelines for the censors included any critical views of Allied Forces or Allied countries, including China; sexual relations between occupying soldiers and Japanese women; discussion of the black market or of starvation, and approval of Japanese nationalism, militarism, or war criminals. Any mention of the censorship process was also blocked: The general Japanese public was unaware that its communications, and therefore its perceptions, were being strictly controlled. The occupying authority also banned Japanese history, geography, and ethics classes in elementary schools, and censored American films entering the country to remove all references to problems in American society, such as racism, poverty, prejudice, or political corruption. America was presented as an ideal society, entitled to hold the moral high ground.

Magazines and children's literature were censored far less strictly than other media, and most comics were only censored after publication. Samurai dramas and martial arts stories that might encourage thoughts of military prowess or revenge were sometimes suppressed, but for the most part comics escaped unscathed. Science fiction, viewed as harmless fantasy, flourished, and built the foundation for a post-war critique of military and social policy in the form of mass entertainment.