

Chapter 4

The History of Japanese Picture Books: 1,300 Years from E-ingakyo to the Family of Fourteen

by Yuko Takesako



When you hear the term “picture book,” what comes to mind?

In narrow terms, of course, a picture book is a book for children who cannot yet read text. But in a wider sense, a picture book may be any story with pictures. The Chihiro Art Museum considers picture books to be both the first literature and art available to children, and a form of cultural heritage—which can be enjoyed by people of all ages, from babies to adults as old as one hundred.

In this chapter, I will summarize 1,300 years of Japanese picture book history. This history may be divided into three parts: handmade manuscripts, woodblock printed books, and modern printed books. After this history, I will introduce several postwar picture book artists.

Handmade Manuscripts

The ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead has been said to be the world’s oldest picture book. It was a kind of guide for those who believed in life after death.

The oldest Japanese picture book is this picture scroll, *E-ingakyo* from the eighth century. The name means, *The Illustrated Sutra of Cause and Effect*. The *E-ingakyo* contains Buddhist scripture covering the biography of Gautama Buddha (Shakyamuni Buddha), including his life before birth, his birth, his training, and his attainment of Buddhahood. In this scroll, the pictures at the top explain the text of the sutra at the bottom. It is a copy of a similar picture scroll from China, where the format was created.



E-ingakyo 繪因果經

Many picture scrolls from China were brought to Japan in the eighth and ninth centuries. By the end of the ninth century, Japan was beginning to develop its own original picture scrolls. In the twelfth century, these picture scrolls, or *emaki*, flourished. Some representative works from this era are *Ban Dainagon Ekotoba emaki*, *Choju Jinbutsu Giga emaki*, *Shigisan Engi emaki*, and *Genji Monogatari emaki*.

An *emaki* is a form of art that presents a story in text and pictures. One reads it by unrolling it, so it moves within time and space. This characteristic is like today's picture books, and historically, Japanese picture book artists have taken ideas from *emaki*.

The *Ban Dainagon Ekotoba emaki* tells about the burning of the Otenmon gate by Major Counselor Ban in the ninth century. There are three scrolls, each eight meters long. The artist seems quite adept at portraying human expressions and dynamic movement. There are some scenes where children are cared for and loved by their parents and families; these images give readers a warm feeling.

The *Choju Jinbutsu Giga emaki*, or *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Humans*, is a set of four scrolls. In one scroll, animals play like human beings. The artist expresses the limbs of anthropomorphized animals wonderfully.

Later, from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, many short stories called *otogizoshi* were created. These were imaginary, educational fairy tales and included some stories that are still read today.



Tawara no Tota emaki 俵藤太絵巻

Here is a picture scroll from the seventeenth century with one of the *otogizoshi* fairy tales: *Tawara no Tota*. The original scroll is in the Chihiro Art Museum collection. This scroll tells a story about a brave and strong warrior called Tawara no Tota, who performs heroic acts and becomes famous. Here, he steps over a large serpent on a bridge, while the people around him are so afraid that they cannot cross. Because of Tawara no Tota's brave act, the dragon god—who first appeared as the serpent—comes before him and tells him she was waiting for someone brave like him.

It is possible to read and understand this story from the pictures, without reading the text. The enjoyment of illustration can be found here, as one reads the story from the pictures.

These scrolls, as you may guess, were quite precious and were made to order for aristocrats, feudal lords, or rich merchants. Some were painted in gold and shown off to guests or on special occasions. These scrolls were not easy to handle, and the inconvenience led to the development of bound books.

At the end of the fourteenth century and in the early fifteenth century, *naraehon* were produced. *Naraehon* were colored and hand copied picture books, mostly bound, which were often settings of *otogizoshi* tales. Here is a page from a *naraehon* entitled *Taishokan*, which is a narrative dance.



Naraehon: Taishokan 奈良絵本・大職冠

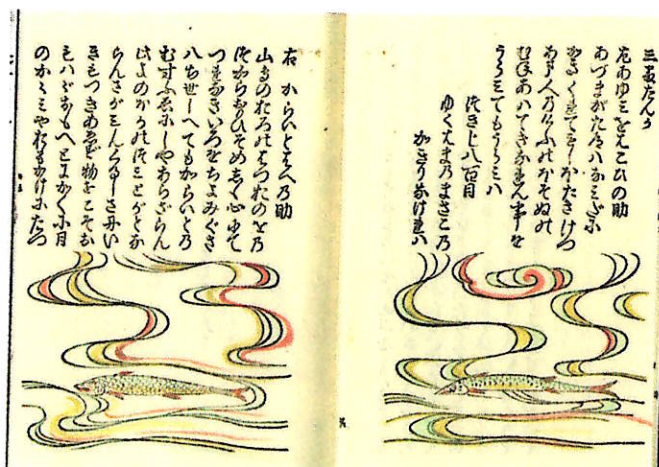
These rare illustrated books could be enjoyed by all ages and led to the emergence of picture books.

Woodblock Printed Books

After the era of handmade manuscripts came the era of woodblock printed books.

In the Edo period (1603–1868), beginning in the seventeenth century, the society and economy of Japan developed dramatically. Books were no longer only for aristocrats and rich merchants, but also for regular people. With more consumers wishing to read books, woodblock printing technology developed and became mainstream. In the Edo period, there were more than six thousand printing houses (or publishers), and many different kinds of books were produced.

Here are examples from the early stages of printed books.



Tanrokubon: *Uo no uta-awase* (Poetry Contest with Fish Theme) 丹緑本・魚の歌あわせ

In this work, illustrations were printed in black, and after printing, they were colored by hand in red, green and yellow. This style was called *tanrokubon*. *Tan* means red and *roku* means green.

Before color woodblock printing technology became available, colored books were colored by hand. The *tanrokubon* is an

interesting example showing the transition to printed books. We can perceive that people wanted to read and look at more such colorful books.



Ehon: *Mushi-erami* (Picture Book of Selected Insects) 画本虫撰

Here is an eighteenth-century book by Utamaro Kitagawa (1753-1806), which includes poems about insects. Such books were ordered and created by poetry lovers as gifts for the New Year. This book was woodblock-printed in color. The new technology had been developed by those who wanted colored books.



Akahon: *Saru-kani gassen* 赤本・さるかに合戦

Then, also in the eighteenth century, the first printed picture books for children appeared. These were called *akahon* (red books) because of their red covers.

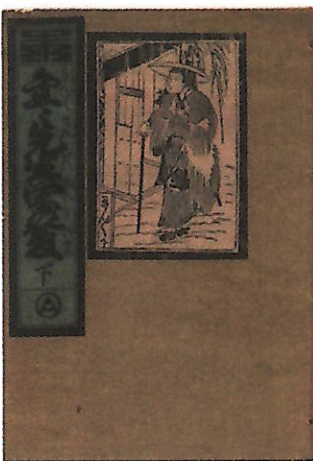
This *akahon* is entitled *The Battle Between the Crab and the Monkey*. The characters of the story are shown as headpieces on human men. The story describes how the crab takes revenge on the monkey. Here, surrounding the sick crab in its bed, are other characters such as a bumblebee, a snake, a knife, and an egg.

Akahon were just one type of *kusazoshi*, which means illustrated popular fiction book. In the Edo period, different *kusazoshi* were called different names according to their covers. Besides *akahon*, there were also *aohon* (blue books), *kurohon* (black books), and *kibyoshi* (yellow books).



Aohon and *kurohon* were developed forms of the *akahon*. They had more pages than the *akahon*, and they were published in a set of several booklets. The subjects included ghost stories and plots adopted from Kabuki plays, which were loved by many people.

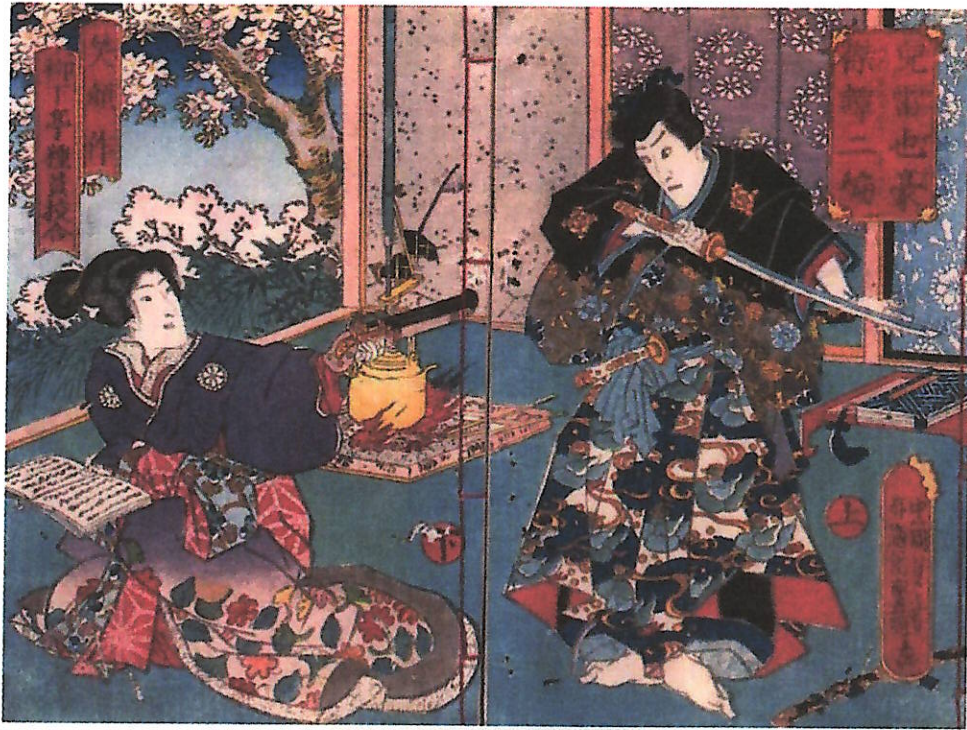
Aohon and *kurohon* 青本と黒本



Kibyoshi were the yellow books and targeted adult readers. Their themes were sometimes love stories with a sense of humor and satire.

With the increase in the number of booklets published as a set, several booklets would be sewn together and bound, so that a cover didn't need to be attached to each one.

Kibyoshi 黄表紙



Gokan: *Jiraiya goketsu monogatari* 合巻・児雷也豪傑譚

Gokan is a type of book put together so that when two volumes are laid side by side, their covers form a picture. The illustrator of this one was Kunisada Utagawa (1786–1865), known for his woodblock prints, *ukiyo-e*. Other woodblock print artists were also involved in the illustration of these books.

The books of these times were not strictly intended for adult readers or children and it was said that the children enjoyed *aohon*, *kurohon*, and *kibyoshi* along with *akahon*.

Modern Printed Books

From the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, many unique picture books were produced worldwide. Japan was no exception.

From 1894 to 1896, the Japanese children's writer Sazanami Iwaya (1870–1933) published a series of books for children entitled *Old Tales of Japan*. These books were made using the *otogizoshi* stories from the fourteenth century, including the classic tale *Urashima Taro*. *Old Tales of Japan* became the first collection of stories for children published by an individual.

In the Taisho period (1912–1926), during the 1920s, new educational and artistic trends were imported, as were children’s books. A unique form of picture book, *ezasshi* (picture magazines) appeared, leading to a golden age of children’s content.

Here are some of the children’s magazines and picture magazines that began at this time.



Akai tori (1918–1936) 赤い鳥



Otogi no sekai (1919–1922) おとぎの世界



Kin no fune/later Kin no hoshi (1919–1929) 金の船/金の星



These magazines carried many stories and songs for children; the covers were printed in color, while the inside pages were black and white.



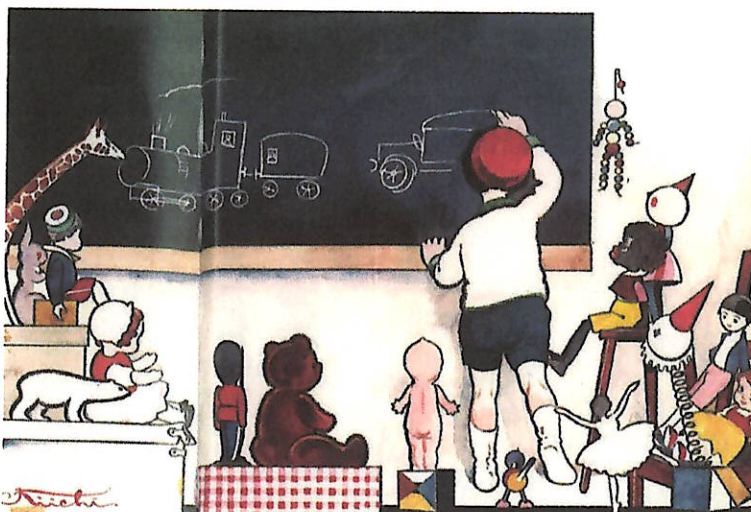
Kodomo no kuni (1922-1944) コドモノクニ

These picture magazines or *ezasshi* were larger in size, printed in full color, and quite beautiful. They had a different story and a picture on each page. Many artists created their children's work for these magazines and became recognized as specialists in children's literature.

This made it possible for children's literature to be considered a new genre and to be separate from literature for adults. Children's books soon became part of the market and became available to a greater number of people, who now were able to spend money on such books.

The children's magazines and picture magazines had great influence on the later generations, and they were the basis of modern picture book culture in Japan.

Here are some of the artists who created for children's magazines.



Art by Kiichi Okamoto

Kiichi Okamoto (1888-1930, 岡本帰一) introduced modern European culture to Japanese children through his art. For example, he illustrated European fashions, trains, airplanes and toys.

Takeo Takei (1894–1983, 武井武雄) created very unique and conceptual pictures with his original stories for Japanese children.

Shigeru Hatsuyama (1897–1973, 初山滋) created beautiful and fantastic pictures using a technique that involved watercolors, which he learned from Japanese traditional art and kimono art design.

Japanese Picture Book Artists and Representative Works Since 1945

Having finished a quick history of Japanese picture books from the eighth century through the early twentieth, let me introduce some major picture books and picture book artists since 1945.

After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, many people involved in children's books felt strongly that such a horror should not be repeated. They strove to create a new children's literature. During this time, Japan generated high demand for new talent in the field of picture books.

Takeshi Motai (1908–1956, 茂田井武) was an artist who traveled around the world while young. He favored drawing his childhood memories in his pictures with a nostalgic slant.

Sero hiki no goshu (Gorsh the Cellist; published by Fukuinkan, 1956) 『セロひきのゴッシュ』

Gorsh the Cellist is a story that Motai illustrated, which was written by a famous author for children and adults, Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933). In the story, Gorsh is a member of an orchestra in the countryside. The orchestra is preparing for an upcoming concert, and Gorsh constantly gets scolded by the conductor for his poor technique. At home, as he practices, different animals appear telling him just how to play. He gets irritated, but he plays as they instruct. Then, on the day of the performance, Gorsh plays perfectly and gets praised by the conductor. He is asked to perform a solo and plays a piece entitled, "The Hunting of Tigers in India." Motai, the illustrator of this edition, was sick and weak when an editor commissioned him. Motai answered, "If I can draw this work, I will not mind dying." And it became Motai's final work.

Yasuo Segawa (1932–2010, 瀬川康夫) was an artist who knew the different styles of visual representation in Eastern and Western art quite well. He constantly changed his techniques, book by book, and surprised readers. In the title *Inai inai baa* (Peek-a-boo; Doshinsha, 1967) 『いないいないばあ』, he draws different animals simply using acrylic paint. The text is simple. The repetition of similar scenes, which change with a page turn, gives very young readers a nice rhythm. This helps children's understanding and makes them feel involved in the story. The book has all the qualities a picture book should have: superb pictures, good text, nice rhythm, themes that children can sympathize with, and the harmony and fusion of these elements. *Inai inai baa* was one of Japan's first baby books; it is also one of the all-time bestselling picture books in Japan; since its publication in 1967, it has sold about 5 million copies.

Suekichi Akaba (1910–1990, 赤羽末吉) worked in different fields before becoming a picture book artist, and his first picture book was published when he was fifty years old. It is said that one of the reasons he decided to draw picture books was that he saw Motai's *Gorsh the Cellist*. Akaba went on to receive the international Hans Christian Andersen Award for Illustration in 1980. He learned from Japanese art and picture books from other countries. He often said that a picture book is like a stage.

Daiku to oniroku (*Oniroku and the Carpenter*; Fukuinkan, 1967) 『だいくとおにろく』 is based on an old Japanese folktale. Once upon a time, there was a swiftly flowing river. No matter how many times the villagers built a bridge, it got swept away. So, the villagers asked the best carpenter to build a new bridge. He agreed, but he became worried. As he was considering how to proceed, a demon (Japanese: oni) appeared from the river. He told the carpenter that if he would give him both his eyes, the demon would build the bridge for him. The carpenter agreed without thinking, and the next day, there was half a bridge. The day after that, there was a whole bridge. The demon appeared and again asked for the carpenter's eyes. The carpenter pleaded with the demon to wait, and the demon agreed—on the condition that the carpenter guess the demon's name. To create this book, Akaba studied *emaki* to see how picture scroll stories developed laterally and gained movement, and where the different elements in each scene were placed.

Sora, nigero (Quick, Fly Away; Kaiseisha, 1978) 『そら、にげろ』 is another unique picture book by Akaba. According to him, “This picture book is a nonsense picture book where an animated manga story evolves over a Kabuki-theater style background.” On the first page we read that long, long ago, there was a traveler walking briskly. As the story progresses, we see the birds fly out of the pattern on the traveler’s kimono. (The bird pattern is a typical, traditional fabric pattern.) In this picture book with almost no words, the background depicts Japanese landscapes as the seasons change, while the traveler chases the birds. This book was displayed at the National Library Building in Singapore, during the exhibit “The History of Japanese Picture Books,” 24 May–10 July 2016.

Shinta Cho (1927–2005, 長新太) was called the king of nonsense picture books. He began his career as a comic strip writer. In Gomu atama Pontaro (Rubber Head Pontaro; Doshinsha, 1998) 『ゴムあたまポンたろう』, the main character Pontaro has a bouncy rubber head, and he goes on a journey bouncing here, there and everywhere. In the end, he finds a rubber tree and falls asleep there. This absurd and humorous story combined with vivid colors entrances readers, not only children but also adults.

Kazuo Iwamura (b. 1939, いわむらかずお) was a Japan: Country of Focus speaker at AFCC 2016. He created many of his picture books while also cultivating fields, growing vegetables, and keeping bantams for years with his family of seven in the countryside. His rural lifestyle underscores his belief in connecting art with nature. His books, such as The Family of Fourteen series, grew from this belief. Modern society has seen a decline in human relationships, along with destruction of natural habitat in exchange for economic development. Families have grown smaller, with fewer generations living together. For readers, Iwamura’s books have been hugely attractive, because they show situations like a meal scene where a large family eats together joyfully.

So far I have introduced five master picture book artists from the years since 1945. Their books are still read and beloved in Japan today, even after twenty, forty, or fifty years of publication. Though their styles differ, all of these artists took picture books seriously and continued to challenge themselves all their lives.

Last but not least, I wish to introduce the picture book artist Chihiro Iwasaki (1918–1974, いわさきちひろ).



Madogiwa no Totto-chan (The Little Girl at the Window; Kodansha, Ltd., 1981)
『窓ぎわのトットちゃん』

Even if readers overseas don't know her name, many people know Totto-chan. Totto-chan's image was created by Chihiro, and the book *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window* by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi has been published in some thirty-five languages. It has been published in Singapore and is loved by many people.

Who was Chihiro Iwasaki?

Chihiro was born in 1918 as the eldest of three sisters and grew up in a loving family in Tokyo. Her mother was a teacher and her father an architect for the Japanese military. As a child, she was already good at drawing. She took private oil painting and sketching lessons from a renowned professor at the age of thirteen, but her parents did not approve of her going to art school. So, she began taking Japanese calligraphy lessons from the age of eighteen, and went on to teach. During the Second World War, she went to the northeastern part of China which was then under the colonial rule of Japan. She had planned to become a calligraphy teacher there but stayed only a few months. After returning to Japan, in the last year of war, her house in Tokyo burned down in an air raid. The experience of the defeat changed Chihiro's life completely.

It was only after the defeat, that she first learned what Japan had done, and that her parents had actively supported the war. Chihiro decided to be independent from her parents and began to study art again and to create pictures for common people. She dedicated her life to drawing for regular people, and she mainly created picture books. Most of all she depicted children, and she wished for the happiness and peace of children everywhere.

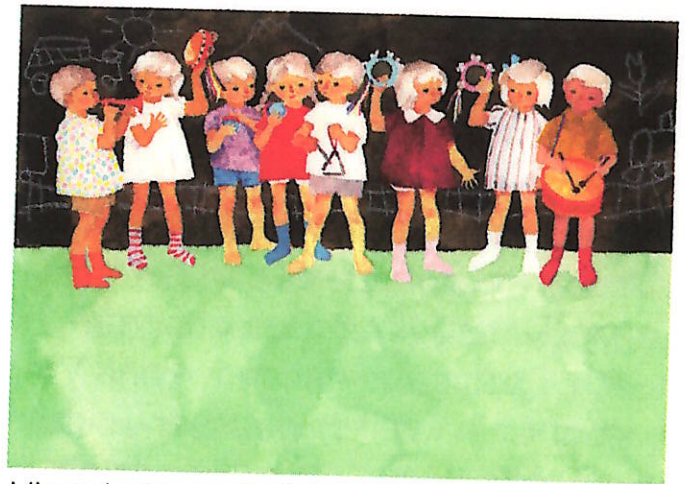
Chihiro began her new career as a journalist and illustrator, and she went on to create pictures for picture magazines, paper theater, and so on. She especially loved children; she got married and had one son, whom she supposedly never scolded.



Hitori de Dekiru yo (I Can Do It By Myself; Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, Inc., 1956) 『ひとりのできるよ』

Chihiro's first picture book debuted in 1956. This picture book, entitled *I Can Do It By Myself*, was about a child's everyday life. She drew her son in this book; he was almost the same age as the protagonist.

This image is from Chihiro's second picture book, entitled *Let's Do It Together*. Here also, her son appears among the children, together with his cousin and friends. The children are all dressed differently and colorfully; this is to make the pictures look colorful and enhance the color contrast. In reality, children at that time were not so fashionable.



Minna de Shiyo yo (Let's Do It Together; Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, Inc., 1957) 『みんなでしようよ』

Throughout Chihiro's lifetime she made nearly forty picture books. Some were settings of Japanese fairy tales, and others were settings of European fairy tales, by authors such as Hans Christian Andersen. Still others were picture books Chihiro wrote herself.

In addition, Chihiro created three picture books on the theme of war. The first was entitled *When I was a Child*, and is a collection of texts written by children who experienced the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

Chihiro illustrated the children's writings, saying it was her job to tell people about the beautiful children caught up in the tragedy of war. Her second picture book about war was *Mother is Not at Home*. This story by Vietnamese author Nguyen Thi (1920–1968) is about the life of a family whose mother goes to the battlefield daily during the Vietnam War.

Finally, Chihiro's third picture book about war, which became her final book, is entitled *Children in the Flames of War*. For this title, Chihiro created brief, poem-like text along with mostly monochrome pictures of children in times of war. She wrote in the epilogue, "Although I do not go to the battlefields, I know only too well what children who are caught in the flames of war are doing and what happens to them. I know this because all over the world, children, with their innocent eyes, lips and hearts, are the same."

Chihiro drew and painted only children in this picture book, except on one page which she decided to add at the last moment. An editor said that when she saw this picture, she could not help thinking that this mother was Chihiro herself:



Senka no naka no kodomotachi (Children in the Flames of War; Iwasaki Publishing Co., Ltd., 1973)
『戦火のなかの子どもたち』

Chihiro may be telling us through this picture what we as adults must do for children's future.

In Closing

I ask us all to consider the relationship between picture books and peace. I think the most interesting periods in the history of Japanese picture books have been the Edo period and the postwar period. There was no war during the 265 years of the Edo period. And, after the Second World War, for seventy years, Japan did not fight against other countries, because we had promised not to engage in war in our new constitution.

History shows that picture book culture has been created during peaceful times. During such times in Japan, many beautiful and graceful picture books were published, and picture book culture bloomed.

I think it is important that we learn from history. All of the artists I have introduced, including Chihiro Iwasaki, wished for peace when they created their picture books for children.

I believe AFCC 2016 became an occasion to share enjoyment of all children's culture, including reading picture books—and a place where everyone left with a better understanding of one another's cultures.



Editor's Note: Yuko Takesako is vice director and curator at the Chihiro Art Museum in Japan, one of the world's first museums dedicated to picture book art. Established in 1977, it has a collection of over 26,000 original art works by 204 artists from 33 countries and regions, as well as extensive historical materials. It includes both a museum in Tokyo and a museum in Nagano Prefecture, near the Japanese Alps. The addresses are: Chihiro Art Museum Tokyo, 4-7-2 Shimo-Shakuji, Nerima-ku, Tokyo 177-0042; and Chihiro Art Museum Azumino, 3358-24 Nishihara, Matsukawa-mura, Kita-Azumi-gun, Nagano, 399-8501. The museum website is <http://www.chihiro.jp/global/>

