

Kawaii Pedagogy: An Exhibit Curated with Students

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In Fall semester 2022 I taught a course entitled “Visual and Material Culture of Japan.” One aspect of the course was learning about different aesthetic concepts and how they are reflected in everyday artifacts. The aesthetic of kawaii (cute)¹ is everywhere, extending beyond consumer commodities. It surfaces in political campaign posters, regional mascots, history textbooks, and good luck charms from shrines and temples (Miller and Stevens 2021). Kawaii serves legitimate and important social functions, from information delivery to admonishment. Because of the critical role of the cute aesthetic, I thought it might be productive to co-curate a small collection of kawaii objects together with students.² I drew inspiration from academic friends who had been successful in sharing material culture through similar ethnographic object exhibits (Yano 2013). Although most of my undergraduate students were aware of the term kawaii, they had not considered its aesthetic variations nor the functions it might serve. Working on the exhibit brought them face-to-face with both of these issues.

One aim of the kawaii exhibit was intended to get everyone--students and visitors- to think beyond Hello Kitty and pink cuteness. Kawaii evolved from its saccharine meanings into hybrid types. People outside Japan usually fixate on the simple dictionary meaning of kawaii and therefore miss the full range of connotations and usage. Examples of the hybridity of the concept are:

グロかわいい	<i>guro kawaii</i>	grotesque cute
きもかわいい	<i>kimo kawaii</i>	creepy cute
病みかわいい	<i>yami kawaii</i>	sickly cute
エロかわいい	<i>ero kawaii</i>	erotic cute
渋かわいい	<i>shibu kawaii</i>	subdued cute
ブスカawaii	<i>busu kawaii</i>	homely cute

Kawaii might combine the adorable and the dark gothic or disturbing, producing *guro kawaii* (sometimes clipped to *gurokawa*), which is one of most popular of its iterations. We find *gurokawa* in fashion, stationary goods, mascots, and other objects such as the Hangry & Angry cat mascots designed for the h. NAOTO brand. An Akita dog named Wasao became an internet sensation and mascot for JR Ajigasawa Station for being *busu kawaii* (homely cute) (Hayashi 2021). *Shibu kawaii* (subdued cute) is popular for recent kimono designs in an effort to attract younger wearers.

Another goal of the exhibit was to focus attention on the social functions of kawaii for all age cohorts and genders. An obvious example is the Tokyo Metro series of etiquette posters that often incorporate kawaii imagery. Using kawaii in public service posters softens and mitigates their admonishments. We also find many cute anthropomorphized cats, dogs, bears, and other animals. Animal characters that stand in for humans allow for broader identification, and when they portray or perform sensitive topics or actions, it is easier to digest (Miller 2010).

Let me share some of the steps taken to set up the exhibit and the activities and preparation students needed to do. I began by scheduling and providing financial compensation for the use of some gallery space in my university's art and design department. Students were then asked to do two things for the exhibit:

- 1) Select a mascot and write a short explanatory text label about it
- 2) Locate a physical kawaii object of any type and prepare an exhibit label for it

In preparation for selecting and writing a label for their mascots, the students listened to a lecture and read required readings (such as Occhi 2020). The World of Kawaii exhibit included one wall on "Mascot Characters" with a large color poster of thirteen mascots who represent a locality, a government agency, or an institution.



Figure 1. Mascot poster.

The mascots we displayed incorporated imagery from local landmarks, historical figures, and food items in their design. Students wrote labels for these mascots seen on the poster:

- Ikube, mascot of the Aomori Tourism Federation
- Hikonyan, mascot for Hikone city, Shiga Prefecture
- Gunma-chan, mascot of the Gunma Prefecture Government
- Sanomaru, mascot for Sano city, Tochigi Prefecture
- Domo-kun, mascot for Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK)
- Shimanekko, mascot for Shimane Prefecture
- Nyango star, mascot for Kuroishi city, Aomori Prefecture
- Barrii-san, mascot for Imabari city, Ehime Prefecture
- Buffalo Bull or Bull-kun, mascot for the Orix Buffaloes Osaka Prefecture
- Takata no Yume-chan, mascot for Rikuzentakata city and Aid Takata Iwate Prefecture
- Tsurugon, mascot for Tsurugashima city Saitama Prefecture
- Waka-pi, mascot for the Wakayama Women's Prison Wakayama Prefecture
- Mercy-kun, mascot for the town of Mashike Rumoi Subprefecture, Hokkaido

Each student gave an oral presentation on their selected mascot to the class. The class voted on their favorite mascot, and the winner was Sanomaru (Figure 2), whose label (Figure 3) provides an example of the layout and information students were asked to provide for their selections.³



Figure 2. Sanomaru

Sanomaru
さのまる
Mascot for Sano city
Tochigi Prefecture
A popular and mascot who won the Yuru Kyara Grand Prix in 2013, Sanomaru is a samurai dog who wears a hakama skirt and a *rāmen* noodle bowl hat. He was created to represent local foods from his town. One local delicacy is *imo furai*, steamed potatoes dipped in a batter and panko bread crumbs and then deep fried. The skewers are served with *tonkatsu* sauce, a type of Worcestershire sauce that is sweeter and spicier. Sano *rāmen* is special due to the local water and the technique used to make the noodles. Sanomaru has a YouTube channel and a Twitter account.

Figure 3. Sanomaru mascot label

Prior to locating a physical kawaii ethnographic object for the exhibit, students read articles and listened to a lecture on cute aesthetics.⁴ They were given links to guides for preparation of their gallery labels (i.e. Smithsonian Institution 2017, Gaylord Archival 2022). Students were also required to complete a Loan Form for insurance purposes. Although none of the objects had a value over \$40, filling out the forms with exact measurements, value estimates, and provenance was good training in the clerical duties associated with this type of activity. Students had a deadline for getting approval for their object, and had some initial rules to follow: They could use any kawaii artifact, but no Hello Kitty or manga. I also asked them to make an attempt to locate an object that originated in Japan, and to avoid American and Korean appropriations of kawaii things. They were given a strict deadline for submitting the label to me, and on a scheduled day they assembled at the art space to help set up.

A few students found retro Shōwa era objects, such as a Fueki-kun animal shaped glue container, and a charming 1950s magazine for toddlers and their parents. The majority of the objects, however, related to food and the kitchen. From miniature food cooked on tiny stoves, to cat-shaped rice served in curry shops, the things adults and children eat are also crafted with kawaii aesthetics. Prepared *bentō* lunch boxes, foamed coffee at cafes, and dishes served at restaurants all offer opportunities for a spectrum of kawaii innovations (including *guro kawaii!*). The desire for kawaii food generated an audience for how-to accessories and books in addition to cute dishware. Because St. Louis has several Asian markets, students easily found cute objects related to cooking and eating. Some of these were:

- Meow Nico Kitchen rice mold (Figure 4)
- Deco Curry Rirakkuma rice mold
- Mini Cups Panda and Bunny condiment container
- King Pika Regular Melamine sponge
- Mr. Bunny soap dish
- Two Rabbits Gazing at the Moon rice bowls
- Beckoning Cat rice bowl
- Frog and Tadpole teapot
- Sanrio Gudetama cookie mold



Figure 4. Rice Ball Meow Nico Kitchen rice mold
ねこむすびニャン nicoキッチン. Made by Ānesuto Co.

Students needed to do research to find required information, and were given this format for the object labels:

- Object name (in Japanese and in English).
- Type or class of object (household item, religious artifact, tool, etc.)
- Creator, designer, company, or manufacturer
- Year date or era name
- Material or media
- Notes: Give short history, information, description

Here is an example of one student object label:⁵

King Pika Regular Melamine Sponge
ピカ王 レギュラーメラミンスポンジ
Cleaning sponge
Wako Group
Heisei Era (1989-2019)
Melamine foam
Flexing, scowling, and often depicted wielding a scepter, King Pika is the mascot for a line of melamine sponges and scouring pads made by a manufacturer of cleaning products. The name Pika is derived from *pika-pika*, meaning “shiny” or “sparkling.” King Pika’s expression and aggressive body language play into the “tough on stains” trope so common in cleaning-supply marketing, but are humorously subverted by the character’s blushing cheeks and glassy eyes. While American product mascots such as The Brawny Man or Mr. Clean are depicted as muscular types drawn in a realistic style, King Pika is an anthropomorphized piece of soft melamine foam drawn with utmost simplicity. In this it embodies several aesthetic principles that are essential to the commercial power of kawaii.

Figure 5. Object label for sponge

I prepared some thematic text panels around different themes or categories with the idea of grouping appropriate objects with these. However, the art and design faculty overseeing the final organization of the space decided not to follow my plan. Even so, the objects were delightfully presented and we had a few distinct sections in the exhibit. One was a section reserved for *maneki neko* (Beckoning Cat, Image 6).



Image 6. Beckoning Cat figurines.

The Beckoning Cat is a beloved symbol of prosperity and good luck, but it is not very old. One of the earliest representations is found in Utagawa Hiroshige’s (1797–1858) woodblock print from the 1852 series entitled “Flourishing Business in Balladtown” (*Jōruri-machi hanka no zu*). In the upper left-hand corner of the print, we see Imado-yaki potters selling miniature pottery cats as popular souvenirs (Image 7). A copy of this print was posted near the *maneki neko*

figurines in the exhibit. For this section we massed together twelve or so different types and sizes of the Beckoning Cat.



Image 7. A section of the woodblock print, Utagawa Hiroshige, from the Flourishing Business in Balladtown series, 1852. William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.⁶

We decided to set up three different monitors in the exhibit that continuously ran videos. Monitor 1 was placed near the main text panel at the entrance to the exhibit and had two continuously playing videos. One was a music video of the seven-member boy band named Naniwa Danshi, who illustrated the sweet pink kawaii aesthetic (Naniwa Danshi 2021). The other continuously playing video was of The Idol Formerly Known As LADYBABY, who represented the hybrid *ero kawaii* (erotic cute) aesthetic (LADYBABY 2016). Monitor 2, which was placed next to the wall with the mascot poster and labels, were videos about mascots. One was a short guide to some of the many regional mascots, called *yuru-kyaru* (WAO RYU! ONLY IN JAPAN 2015). The other was a music video of the mascot voted as the class favorite, Sanomaru, dancing in the festival *ondo* style (Sanomaru 2014). On the playlist for Monitor 3, which was set up near the collection of Beckoning Cat figurines, were two short videos about the competing origin stories at a shrine and a temple in Tokyo. One was about Imado Jinja (SuesKawaiiCollection 2020),⁷ the other about Gōtokuji (Showcase 2018). Because of the Utagawa print in Image 7, my support goes to Imado Jinja's claim.

I created posters, postcards, and announcements inviting people to “Come learn about the spectrum of Japanese cute, including *gurokawa* (grotesque cute), and see how it is embedded in everyday artifacts” (example in Figure 8). I also presented a public lecture on kawaii to inaugurate the exhibit. The opening reception with food and refreshments was exciting and drew a large crowd. Some of the students brought their parents or friends to it.



Figure 8: Event poster and photo from the exhibit.

A few aspects of the exhibit were not very successful. If I decide to do something similar in the future, I will choose a more suitable exhibit space, and will insist that my vision of the sections and objects in the exhibit are not changed without my agreement. Overall, however, because one of the primary goals of this exhibit was to engage students and visitors in thinking about visual and material culture, I believe that it exceeded those intentions.

Notes

¹Kawaii has the status of being a recognized loanword in English so will not be italicized.

² The exhibit was sponsored by the Ei'ichi Shibusawa-Seigo Arai Professorship in Japanese Studies, UMSL Global, and the Department of Art & Design. The students were: Diana Bell, Shane Devine, Benji Francis, Tyler Gotsis, Clare Greenley, Finn Kennett, John Kenyon, Rob Kneller, Hoang Nguyen, Autum Ryan, Nick Swaringam, Charlotte Thissen, and Jon Velier.

³ Mascot label by Hoang Nguyen.

⁴ Suggested readings on kawaii for planning an exhibit include: Miller and Stevens (2021), Nittono (2016), Ohkura (2019), Plourde (2020), Yano (2014).

⁵ Object label by Shane Devine.

⁶ Image from Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Characters_from_Plays_as_Merchants_and_Customers_from_the_series_Flourishing_Business_in_Balladtown_02.jpg

⁷ The Imado Jinga video I used vanished, so I gave a citation to another one so that you can see what it looks like.

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