

# Guardian of Aesthetic Manga

Taniguchi Jirō ponders the rave reviews his manga have received in Europe, especially France. The French government has made him a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters, Louis Vuitton and Cartier asked him to do artwork to enhance their luxury brand images, and most recently, the Louvre commissioned him to create a tribute manga to the world's largest museum.

"It's hard to imagine why the French love my work so much," Taniguchi says bashfully. "Unlike Japanese, who tend to skim through a comic magazine and throw it in the trash, they read my manga carefully and repeatedly."

Typical Japanese manga are full of colorful characters and engaging storylines, but Taniguchi's recent works display the qualities of tranquil poetry. They take up low-key activities of everyday life and depict them in a highly detailed drawing style commonly associated with French graphic novels, known as *bande dessinée* (BD).

"Those who grew up with BD are accustomed to savoring each scene in a manga and examining its deeper meaning," says Taniguchi. While visiting a suburb of Lyon during the shooting of a French live-action film adapted from his award-winning manga, *Haruka na machi e* [trans. *A Distant Neighborhood*], Taniguchi was caught off guard by an admirer. "I was surprised when a young boy came up to me and started asking me questions—very astute ones—about my work," he says.

The two-volume manga, which won the Alph-Art award for best scenario at the 2003 Angoulême International Comics Festival in France, is not something that teenagers can easily appreciate. It is about a 48-year-old Japanese businessman returning to the town where he grew up and being transported back in time to his youth.

Slipping back in time is Taniguchi's favorite theme. In the Louvre project entitled *Sennen no tsubasa, hyakunen no yume* [Guardians of the Louvre], a Japanese manga artist, reminiscent of Taniguchi himself, visits the museum and meets works of art and artists from various periods. Oscillating between dream and reality, the protagonist finds himself in the midst of the painful history of the museum and those associated with it.

"I like to look back across time, taking readers to places where they can console the spirits of the deceased and find the rays of hope in life," says Taniguchi. "The time-slip manga is nothing new, but I used more than 10 pages to make the time lapse look real, a luxury a manga book can rarely afford," he adds.

Taniguchi devised a protagonist who is sick in bed in a Paris hotel, exhausted from a long promotional tour in Spain. Though feeling dizzy, he bestirs himself to visit the Louvre as he wants to make the most of his five-day stay in Paris. But, suffering from a lingering fever and the absolute solitude resulting from his ignorance of the language, the man slips into a trance in which he meets the Greek goddess Nike, one of the guardians of the museum.

"The Louvre revealed everything to me, from basement to roof, providing guidance and inspiration," says Taniguchi, who was given lodgings at a Paris apartment for a



A compelling scene from Taniguchi Jirō's 136-page full-color, hard-cover graphic novel, *Sennen no tsubasa, hyakunen no yume* [Guardians of the Louvre] (Shōgakukan, 2015). The English version is slated for publication in April 2016.

month and a permit to walk around the museum even on Tuesdays, when the museum is closed to the public.

From March 2016, the city of Versailles will join the Taniguchi fanfare, showing some three hundred originals at its museum, Espace Richaud, which is situated very close to the Palace of Versailles. The works to be shown at the former chapel of the royal hospital include *Aruku hito* [trans. *Walking Man*], which was nominated for the Eisner award for best U.S. edition of international material in Japan; *Kamigami no itadaki* [trans. *The Summit of the Gods*], a mountain-climbing adventure; *Kodoku no gurume* [trans. *Solitary Gourmet*]; and an unfinished manga series, *Icare* based on texts by his European idol and sometime colleague, Jean Giraud Mœbius.

In Japan, a deluxe art book carrying sketches and paintings of Taniguchi from his earliest days to the present is slated for publication in the upcoming months. With a global audience in mind, the text of the 250-page-long album will be in English, French and Japanese.

No other living manga artist in Japan has captured the heart of the European public as completely as Taniguchi. And, like the guardians that watch over Taniguchi's Louvre, he himself may well be a guardian of the world of aesthetic manga.

(Kawakatsu Miki, freelance writer)



## Taniguchi Jirō

Born in 1947. Received the Tezuka Osamu Cultural Grand Prize for the trilogy *Botchan no jidai* [trans. *Botchan and Its Times*]. His *Haruka na machi e* was awarded the Alph-Art Award for Best Scenario at the 2003 Angoulême International Comics Festival in France. *Kamigami no itadaki* took awards at the 2002 and 2005 festival. He has won prestigious comic awards in Italy and Spain. Taniguchi's work is available in more than 10 languages.