

## The Art of Manga

Here is an interesting example of composition from *Card Captor Sakura*, by the popular, all-woman group Clamp. The series is about Sakura, a magical girl who gathers the powerful Cards of a great magician. The woman in the illustration is Sonomi, cousin of Nadeshiko, Sakura's late mother. The man in frame 2 is Fujitaka, Sakura's father. Sonomi adores Sakura, but detests Fujitaka, whom she blames for the early death of her beloved cousin. Note that the numbered frames are presented in the traditional right-to-left Japanese pattern, and should be read in sequence from 1-4.

The construction of the page shows Clamp's skill in twisting the format of the comic to fit their artistic vision. Having asked Sonomi to meet him late at night, Fujitaka faces the woman's anger in the 2nd frame. Her ire is made visible with a number of manga conventions: a flaming glow, tic-tac-toe symbols that symbolize anger, exasperation conveyed by wide-eyed surprise, and stand-offish body language. This confrontation is actually set up in the narrow first frame, where the two figures are tightly framed by the forms of Sonomi's bodyguards and the dark night sky. The effect of putting two such antithetical characters so closely together is explosive, and Fujitaka's imperturbable smile only worsens her fury. Yet almost unnoticed, something seeps into the second frame from below. The third frame shows Fujitaka's reason for summoning Sonomi: his daughter's gift of flowers and chocolates to her estranged great-grandfather.

As her expression shows, Sonomi quickly grasps the subtleties of the present. The flowers are wild carnations, called "nadeshiko" flowers in Japan. The gift is reminiscent of the loving little presents made by Sakura's mother. In Japan, girls traditionally give chocolates to boys on Valentine's Day, especially the ones they love. The bottom frame reveals a changed Sonomi, touched by Sakura's charming gift, lost in memory of her beloved cousin. The emotions of love and hate that swirl throughout the confrontation are too powerful to be bound by the borders of the comic. Notice how Sonomi's hate in the form of her angry words in frame 2 pushes into the first frame. Her emotions strain the social fabric of Japanese etiquette that requires a polite demeanor even in the face of an enemy. But in the middle frame, it is Sakura's innocent love, in the form of the nadeshiko flowers, which penetrates the rigid border, playfully enticing Sonomi to reconsider her wrath. The effect of the middle panel is magical, literally drawing Sonomi out of the bottom frame, liberating her from the hurt and anger of the past.

Though small and delicately rendered, the middle frame is the central point of the entire composition, and also the emotional center of this part of the story. The bouquet is very much like Sakura herself, for the magical girl is tiny and delicate, yet wields astonishing power. So, too, her simple gift, which transforms and transfigures Sonomi, and washes away the years of grief and rancor.

Manga and anime reflect the Japanese aesthetic that ordinary things can be extraordinary and miraculous. In American comics, remarkable superheroes often struggle to live ordinary lives, but manga reveals a world where the extraordinary infuses the commonplace things of everyday life. Frederick Schodt called the realm of manga "Dreamland Japan," an illuminating window into the Japanese mind and soul. In the hands of a masterful group like Clamp, manga is a vivid expression of this miraculous world, and achieves the level of art.

