

A Few Stolen Moments with **MONKEY**

A FEW STOLEN MOMENTS WITH MONKEY PUNCH

[Manga artist Kazuhiko Katô, better known to most as Monkey Punch, is most famous among anime/manga fans as the creator of Lupin III, the grandson of author Maurice LeBlanc's gentleman thief. The following interview with Mr. Katô took place at AnimEast in East Brunswick, New Jersey this past November. Sharing the interview with this reporter were Derek Quintinar of R. Talsorian and Helen McCarthy of Anime U.K. Translation services were graciously provided by Miyako Graham.]

Q: First off, how about some background information?

A: I was born on May 26, 1936. I am a Gemini. My blood type is AB. [laughs] I was born and raised in Hokkaidô [the northernmost island of Japan]. After I graduated high school, I went to Tokyo to look for work. After going there, I went to technical school to study electronics so I could become a technician. Actually, I did it so I could get work at a TV station. At the time, I just liked to draw. I kept up on that and eventually had a chance to have my stuff published.

Q: How did that come about?

A: Originally, I was working in with a group of other unknown artists—I think there were five of us all together—to make *dôjinshi* [fanzines]. A publisher happened to see the *dôjinshi* and thought, "Oh, gee, this looks nice!" At the time, I was mostly drawing caricatures that of people like James Bond, caricatures influenced by things like *Mad Magazine*. The publisher was a small company called Futabasha.

[Brief interruption to relate to Mr. Katô that Futabasha also happens to publish Yûzô Takada's *Super Catgirl Nuku-Nuku* (see *Mangazine* #32).]

I started out with what we call in Japan "nonsense comics," just one, two, three, four panels with some funny stuff in them...

Q: Four-panel gag strips.

A: Yes, yes. That's what I started out doing for Futabasha. I was discovered by the editor-in-chief. I think it was exactly



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30 years ago when this happened. When I started, I was just doing caricature-type figures. I had no skill to go through the long-story, graphic-novel format manga we call gekiga, so I really had to practice and train myself to do the job. Also, at the time, Futabasha had decided to come out with a weekly magazine called Manga Action. They asked me to come up with a series for it, and that's how I started the Lupin series. I also did the cover for the first issue of Manga Action—not a Lupin cover; it was a pretty lady or some such. I was drawing those pin-up girl type drawings for Manga Action covers for a long time.

Q: Rather like Vargas?

A: Ah, yes! As a matter of fact, I copied his style. It was because I was influenced by a lot of Western artists and American comics that I got into this industry.

My editor-in-chief came up with the name "Monkey Punch."

Q: Why?

A: I don't know. If I see him, I'd like to ask him!

A lot of artists really have to go through channels. When they finish drawing something, the artists themselves are the ones who literally have to go to publisher after publisher, asking, "Can you publish this for me?" or whatever. Fortunately, I didn't have to go through this; I was discovered. I feel very lucky.

Q: Who are or were your influences?

A: Who drew Popeye?

Q: Uh, E.C. Segar...

A: E.C. Segar, yes. When I was in elementary school, I grew up with Popeye cartoons. As a matter of fact, they were translated and circulated in Japanese. I wasn't sure who the author really was, but I really liked them; I kept looking at them and sketching them.

[Brief pause to consider that it might have been Bud Sagendorf's work he grew up with.]

From junior high on, I was really influenced by the Blondie strip. Who drew Blondie?

Q: Chic Young.

A: Chic Young, yes, yes! Does he still do it?

Q: No, now it's drawn by his son.

A: Ah, I see. Eventually, I was influenced by Mad Magazine artists such as Mort Drucker. I really liked the way he drew caricatures of movie actors & actresses and such, and my inking style is very much influenced by him.

[Another pause as Mr. Katô muses on the Japanese use of the words "pen touch" to mean "inking style."]

Q: Many people have asked us how the Thousand and One Nights is going.

A: I'm pushing the project along little by little. My publishers are really reluctant to let me go out to places like here and New York. I was just saying a while ago how they felt...

Q: So when you go back they'll hole you up somewhere to get your work done?

A: I was being chased by deadlines at one point, so I kind of hid in a summer resort for a while. I was literally like a prisoner; I had to draw and draw.... I couldn't stand it, so I just ran away!

[Another brief pause to explain Japanese term for such lock-ups, kanzume, meaning "canned," as the editor will bring the "imprisoned" artist canned food so the artist need not leave his hotel room or whatever until the work is done.]

Q: Obviously Lupin is influenced by James Bond. Were there any other influences on Lupin from that era, from movies and such of the '60's and '70's?

A: Well, obviously movies. I was very much influenced by the movie media, particularly Alfred Hitchcock. You may find some of the stories or episodes in Lupin are influenced by Hitchcock's storytelling and so forth.

Q: Jigen seems to be at least partly based on gunmen out of Chinese or Hong Kong movies. Do you know of anyone who does those movies, like A Better Tomorrow's director, John Woo?

A: No, I'm afraid I don't know John Woo.

Q: Two of your Lupin movies, Plot of the Fuma Clan and Gold of Babylon are going to be released in England in February next year, and they have a lot of influences drawn from Indiana Jones, don't they?

A: I myself am a comic book artist; I writes and draws things for comic books. I'm not very much in touch with the movies or OVAs. I think maybe the writer or director or some of those people were perhaps influenced by Indiana Jones. I love Indiana Jones myself! When was Indiana Jones released? I can't remember.... Well, anyway, when it came out, I flew from Tokyo to the U.S. just to see the premiere! I think it was about 10 years ago...

Q: Yeah, about 1984...

A: Yes, I flew all the way here. I couldn't stand waiting!

Q: Lupin has been animated for TV, movies and video so much. Which of these anime do you feel has most accurately portrayed your vision of Lupin?

A: In my opinion—do you know the very first Lupin TV series? I think that's the best so far. I think the more time passed, the more directors or writers started to interpret it in their own way.

Q: Changing it...

A: Yes. So I think the first series is very much faithful to the original comic. I myself wrote and drew for adult audiences. I personally like the very early ones, but as most of the TV audience ranged from elementary to high-school age, it didn't appeal to them; it had too much of an adult taste for them. As a result, the ratings were actually terrible, so it was cancelled when it was first released. Right afterwards, the project came back, but there were terms. We had to tone down everything, everything was made for younger audiences. It wasn't like the first essence of Lupin any more, but that's how that happened.

Q: The thing is, now those kids have grown up and they're in college, and they're still looking at Lupin, so you've got your adult audience.

A: Right, those people were very young when the series started, but time went by and they grew up, so maybe their tastes have changed and they can accept more adult themes. My series has kept going, so some of them have started buying more adult things—videos and so on.

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Q: Some people have started watching Lupin on TV or on film, then moved on to the manga and such. So you're right, that is happening.

A: I want to make my comics in such a way that when someone picks one up and starts reading, they can forget everything else, just totally drown in their illusions, forget reality, just enjoy. I want everyone to just have fun reading.

Q: You've succeeded.

A: [laughs]

Q: What are you working on now?

A: Aside from Lupin and Arabian Nights, I am also working on a newspaper project. It's a series, like the newspaper strips in this country, only it's just two panels a day.

Q: So it's a two-panel manga tucked into the newspaper?

A: Yes. Have you ever heard of the Japanese children's story called Peach Boy—Momotarô? In my story, Momotarô's a girl.

Q: For over twenty years, Zenigata's been chasing Lupin and Lupin's been escaping. Will it end? Will Zenigata ever capture Lupin?

A: As far as the manga goes, I could go on forever. When it comes to animation, they have hired the same voice actors for so long, the Japanese audiences have been familiar with them for all this time, particularly with the man who plays Lupin, Mr. Yamada. But he is 60, so he can't maintain his voice like he used to twenty-some years ago, so I don't know how long he can go on or what will happen to the character's voice.

Q: Well, if you carry on creating manga, then you can go on to Lupin IV, Lupin's son, so a new character voice can come along.

A: Well my opinion is I'd like to be nice about it and not fire anyone as long as the voice actors say they can still go on. I want to wait until the voice actors quit on their own. After that, I'll think about what will happen later on with the characters.

Q: Because if Lupin and Fujiko marry, and they have a son, there could be a Lupin IV!

A: Well, actually, I don't want Lupin doing anything practical like getting married or raising a son! I don't want to put those things in there. He should be a cool gang member or a thief. To become a husband

or a father...

Q: Or even worse, be captured by Zenigata! You can have both, though. Have you ever read the Stainless Steel Rat series Harry Harrison, about the galaxy's greatest thief? He eventually gets married and raises kids, but they're all thieves like him.

A: How did the series do? Is it successful?

Q: It's not on TV, it's a series of science fiction novels, and it's pretty successful.

A: Ah, I see. If you know the series Sazae-san [an extremely long-running slice-of-life manga & animated series, first begun right after WWII], Lupin's like that. The character designs are so solid that change is very difficult for me. I'd like to keep it going as long as I can.

Q: If you could do any project you wanted to, what would you do?

A: My main project right now is Arabian Nights—and Lupin, of course. Arabian Nights takes me a long time to research, write and draw. I don't know how long it will take to finish.

Q: No, I'm just saying, as a sort of a fantasy, as a hypothetical situation: if you had the time to do whatever you wanted to do...

A: There this biggest legend among Chinese stories...

Q: Saiyûki. [aka Journey to the West or Legend of the Monkey King, among other names. It's main character is Son Gokû.]

A: Monkey King!

Q: Son Gokû.

A: Yes, Son Gokû. If I could interpret whatever I wanted to in my own way, that's what I'd do. I've talked to many Japanese manga artists, and a lot of them said they'd love to make this story into a manga series, because the character designs, the story, everything is top-rate. That's what I think, anyway, and a lot of artists feel that way. There is a full version of Monkey King translated from Chinese into Japanese. The story itself is very well-known, so I'd like to interpret it if I have time and put my own characters in it. [laughs] We're the same species. [laughs again]

Q: Some other artist have said they're working more with computers these days. I've noticed this illustration [pointing to color print on table]. Did you do this on computer?

A: Yes. I've been using my Apple computer on this. It's been probably eleven or twelve years since I started using computers. I used

a 3-D rendering program, Strata Pro, here. [points to tower] This part here is pretty much Strata Pro, too. [points to ground] Everyone of the characters were penciled. I then scanned them into the computer and colorized them. I then drew the guns and sword and such separately and assembled everything on computer. In fact, I really wanted to emphasize the shadows. The viewer's eyes are kind of drawn all over the place in the picture, so the shadows are essential. In fact, if you look closely, you can see I only scanned this part [points to pattern unit in ground], then reproduced it, blurred it and pasted it all together.

Q: You cloned it and slightly deformed it.

A: Blurred, made it bigger and bigger. This part is the original design. As you can see, this is all the same, the same, the same...just blurred and put all together. Actually, Lupin was originally turned the other way, but I felt the balance wasn't good for the drawing, so I put it in backwards.

Q: Yeah, you flipped the drawing.

A: So, I was mentioning to Toshi [of Viz] that Lupin is...

Q&A: Left-handed!

A: [laughs] Yes, he's left-handed! And all the signature marks on this gun are reversed!

Q: Well, maybe he's ambidextrous.

A: I can pull all kinds of tricks and have fun, too. For instance, I put my logo up here. [points to tower window, laughs] Maybe nobody will notice, but I can do playful things like that. The biggest pleasure for me in working with a computer is that I can do anything imaginable to put in a drawing. It can take some time, but it's really rewarding.

Q: You said earlier, when we weren't recording, that you are redrawing your early work with a computer?

A: No, what I meant was, if I could, I would love to redo the same stories with my improved art style. I prefer not to look at my early work.

Q: My boss is a comic artist, too, and he feels the same way.

[Brief pause to elaborate on Ben's dissatisfaction with his early art, eliciting a laugh from Mr. Katô.]

A: For fans, looking at any artist's early or debut work is like history.

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Q: We don't want it to change.

A: Yes, they want to keep it, but for me, it's really embarrassing! I don't want to look at it!

Q: What's the most unusual thing that's happened to you in your career?

A: As a cartoonist, I feel very fortunate, very lucky that my publisher has been very kind to me, the fans are nice to me...things are going pretty much smoothly, whereas other artists go through hell sometimes and things don't go well for them. I feel I'm really lucky.

There is one incident I can think of that wasn't so pretty, though. What happened was that when *Lupin the Third* made its debut, everything was published through *Manga Action*, which was published by *Futabasha*. There was another publishing company, *Chûô Kôronsha*. These two companies wanted to print all the volumes of *Lupin the Third*, from beginning to end, and neither wanted to back down. This made me and everyone involved unhappy, so we basically said, "*Futabasha*, you publish one half and *Chûô Kôronsha*, you publish the other," and that was the end of it.

Q: That's fair.

A: The spirit of the whole affair was really ugly, though, until we came up with this idea. I was covering my ears, thinking, "I don't want to hear it!" [demonstrates]

Q: Like one of the three monkeys!

A: Yes, yes! [laughs]

Q: What are your opinions of the direction the manga field is taking?

A: It's kind of overflowing. A lot of publishers and even readers are digging up so-called "classics." These have started to be remade, reworked, updated with new studios & actors. Some of the actors have grown up with these classics, so they feel more familiar with them. This is the trend right now in the 1990's. More and more characters people have seen or read about in the 1960's or 1970's are coming back again; reworked, but they are there. These classics are very strong still today. A lot of collected volume formats are very popular. The publishers feel there are many, many good so-called classics manga that the younger generation—those under, say, eighteen—don't know about. The publishers therefore feel it's a good idea to bring those classics back today so these younger people will know about them, know what they were like. I think it's a good idea.

Right now, we have media such as comic books and video tapes. I think the industry might yet grow through certain media such as CD-ROM type format, which would still present the same type of storytelling.

In fact, Mr. Buichi Terasawa [creator of, among other works, *Takeru*, which makes much use of computer coloring techniques and special effects] and I are very good friends. We don't know for sure, but we think the industry may grow through CD-ROMs. You could even have virtual reality comics. It's not like video tapes, but in terms of computers it's coming back to you.

Q: CD-ROMs are also beginning to develop towards interactive, so you can take part in it.

A: I think that will probably very much researched in Japan. I'm not sure what will happen with inter-reactive...what was the term you used?

Q: Interactive. What you were saying about people being able to lose themselves and forget about reality.

A: Ah, yes. I think the final products of this kind, may lead to interactive CD-ROM commerce in the future. I may be a part of that; I'm not sure. There are computer games taking things like *Project A-Ko* and so forth, and in these interactive computer games, you can do whatever you want. As a matter of fact, this will take a lot of research for both myself and others. It'll be a lot of work. Actually, writing and drawing is simple work. Creating this type of interactive medium on computer takes more time.

Q: Oh yes, much more time to do it on computer than to draw it. What work are you most proud of?

A: Well, *Lupin*, as you might guess...

Q: Any particular part of *Lupin*?

A: The very beginning. The very first *Lupin*.

Q: OK, my next question would've been, "What are your plans for the immediate future, but I think we've covered that—you're still going to be working on *Lupin* and the *Arabian Nights*. So, that winds up most of it... Do you have any final comments for the readers?"

A: The thing that makes me the happiest is to see readers forget reality for a while and just enjoy themselves when they read my comics. Thank you very much.