Maureen Donovan and the Manga Collection at The Ohio State University Library: An Interview with Maureen Donovan

Caitlin McGurk
Ohio State University

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Maureen Donovan and the Manga Collection
at The Ohio State University Library

An interview by Caitlin McGurk,
Associate Curator for Outreach & Engagement,
The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum*

Maureen Donovan was one of the very first librarians to focus on collecting manga in the United States, and in her time at The Ohio State University Library created an unparalleled manga collection of over 20,000 items held at The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum and Thompson Library. After nearly forty years at OSUL, Maureen retired on May 29, 2015. As the day of her retirement neared, Caitlin McGurk interviewed Maureen about her career.

Caitlin McGurk: Ok, let’s get started! First of all, how long have you worked at OSUL, and how does it feel to be nearing the end of your time here?

Maureen Donovan: Well, I started at OSUL on August 1, 1978, so it has been just about 37 years. Before that, I worked for four years at Princeton University’s Gest Oriental Library and East Asian Collections as EA Reference Librarian. As for how it feels, it is a bit scary. I’m entering a mysterious period called “retirement” and I have no idea what it will be like. People are talking about all that I have done, but I just feel like there is so much more to do, that I am leaving a job that is only half done (at best). As I mentioned, even preparing for this interview I discovered a lot of books that I should have ordered before, but haven’t done so yet — only three weeks to go. I can’t finish!

* Caitlin McGurk is the Associate Curator for Outreach & Engagement as well as an Assistant Professor at The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, one of the largest collections of comic and cartoon art in the world. Caitlin met Maureen Donovan during her first day on the Ohio State campus, for her interview in 2012, and had the opportunity to absorb a whirlwind of manga history from her during their time as colleagues. Since Maureen’s retirement, Caitlin has continued to cultivate the inclusion of manga in classes across the OSU curriculum. Learn more about the The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at cartoons.osu.edu
August, 1978- the Cataloging Department threw a welcoming party for Maureen when she first joined OSUL as a half-time Japanese cataloger, right before her wedding.

CM: Well, that’s why we’re here to help continue on the legacy after you leave! Let’s go back to the beginning then. What is the root of your interest in Japanese studies? Either from childhood, or your time in school?

MD: I was a Russian major in college, and went to Russia as one of the first American exchange students, then got interested in Asia. This was during the Vietnam War. I studied Chinese starting in Junior year of college and wanted to continue, so I went on and got an MA in East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia U, majoring in modern Chinese literature. We had a requirement to learn “reading knowledge” of Japanese, so I took a bit of Japanese and did a field in modern Japanese history. I was working in the library and got interested in that as something to “do.” So I went to library school also at Columbia. Then I got the job at Princeton. Since it was for all of East Asia, after the adjustment period I started auditing Japanese courses, exchanging language with visiting students from Japan, and then the faculty offered a “proseminar” in Japanese bibliography and research methods, so I took that and learned the basics. I met my husband at Princeton where he was on a research grant. He already had tenure at Ohio State, so I came out here with him. The library here needed some Japanese books cataloged, so I was hired in August 1, 1978 as a half-time Japanese cataloger. The first thing I realized was that we did not have any reference books that I needed for cataloging (pre-Internet days...). So I got a grant from the Japan Foundation to buy reference books. People said, “Wow it seems you know what you are doing,” so my half-time was advanced to full time and bibliographer duties were added in 1981. I still had
never been to Asia. In 1987, the Japanese Institute (OSU) sent me to Japan for two and a half weeks. That was my first time there. I still felt I was doing all this temporarily though until after I got a Japan Foundation fellowship for the 1995-96 academic year, which I spent in Tokyo with my husband (on a Fulbright) and son. That was when I encountered manga intensively! After that year, I was fascinated!

**CM:** Wow! I didn’t know about half of that – one of the first American exchange students? That’s fascinating in itself! Can you tell me a little more about why Asia in particular ended up catching your interest?

**MD:** Well, the reason I wanted to study Russian in the first place was that during the Cold War we had no information about Russian people, culture, food, humor, etc. There was no information flow! When I studied the language, I got access to this world of information that no one else seemed to have. In the summer after my sophomore year in college I went to a Russian summer school at Middlebury College where we had to speak Russian all the time. The other students were mainly grad students talking about their exams, theses, job hunting, etc. I had no interest. Two guys, though, were always talking about interesting things — one was an interpreter at the UN who wanted to add Russian to his portfolio and the other was from the Japanese Foreign Ministry. I always joined their table at meals. They mainly talked about Asia! And I realized how little I knew. So at the end of the summer school I asked their opinion about what language I should take next—and they both recommended Chinese! So that’s the origin of my interest in Asia—out of ignorance! In a way, this follows through to my development of a course that I teach in International Studies on “Understanding the Global Information Society.” I’m still interested in global flows of information. This also added to my interest in manga. I became fascinated with which manga reached into global space and which are just popular within Japan, etc.
One of the shipments to the Cartoon Library of over 3,500 manga serials, from the Kyoto International Manga Museum in Japan, which Maureen arranged.

**CM:** That is so interesting. It’s amazing to think about what you just said... living in the internet world as we do today, with so much access.

**MD:** When I started working at Princeton I remember how people would hear that a delivery of newspapers had arrived at the library, papers that had been collected for months in Tokyo and then been in transit for more months, and they would come from all over campus to find out who had won a kendo tournament 6 months earlier or the latest about pop culture or whatever. It is amazing how many changes I’ve seen in my career. Just think about your future — how many changes will still be coming in the years ahead?

**CM:** It’s kind of terrifying! Ha ha. Here are a few questions that tie together – when did you first encounter manga (and do you remember what it was you saw), and what were you drawn to about it? Generally, “why manga?”

**MD:** Manga. My very first encounter with manga was actually here in Thompson Library in the early or mid-1980s. There was a guy who used to drive in to Columbus for help in translating manga that he got from someone in Japan. He needed help with slang and dialect words. As you can imagine from what I wrote earlier about my background in Japanese, this was quite a challenge for me! Still, he kept coming back, so I guess whatever help I gave him was worth something. There was another guy around the same time who needed similar help with vocabulary about Okinawan karate. These two people helped me to realize that there were information flows from Japan that were happening outside of academic publishing flows, and that they really mattered. Anyway, that guy with the manga helped me realize that manga were important in Japan and I started buying a few titles each year from around the mid-1980s. Lucy Caswell (the founding Curator of The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum) moved those into the Cartoon Library collections.

**CM:** Would you say that you were particularly drawn to manga? Is there something about it, or the role it plays in Japanese culture, that made it especially worth collecting to you?
Maureen’s notes on Hagio Moto, one of the artists in the current BICLM Shojo Manga exhibit.

**MD:** When I lived in Tokyo in 95-96, that just happened to be at the height of manga publishing, which I have heard was in 1994. Manga were everywhere! It was unbelievable. Also, I went to an exhibit at the Kawasaki-shi Shimin Museum about the history of manga. This helped me to realize that we could build a manga collection that would “match” the main Cartoon Library collections. When I came back I talked about this idea with Lucy Caswell, and we agreed to set aside some money from each of our funds for purchasing manga. Also, we wrote a grant application to the Japan Foundation to fund some key foundational purchases to establish the collection. After that I became more “serious” about putting together a “broadly representative” collection of manga to support research and teaching. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about manga is how mainstream it is in Japan, how basic it is for their culture. Furthermore, since everyone reads manga, it is a great way to connect with Japanese people. I have met so many fascinating people through manga. I cannot say the same about the literature, history, and philosophy books that comprise the main parts of the Japanese collections! One time I was taking a trip on the bullet
train on my way back from Sendai where I had visited the Ishinomori Shotaro museums and had several bags full of manga. The Japanese lady sitting next to me on the train, a middle aged/senior citizen, asked me about the books. I told her about the collection I was building and we had a wonderful conversation. It turned out that she was a Catholic nun. Anyway, she also asked if we had some specific titles and I said that I was familiar with them, but that they were hard to get, so we did not have them yet. Well, the next day a parcel arrived at my hotel with those titles! Her name was Kazuko Sato and one of the books was Asaki Yume Mishi, a manga version of The Tale of Genji. Her donor name is entered in our catalog. There have been a lot of instances like that. When I have been at conferences in Japan, people bring bags of manga to give me. Just recently when Masami Toku was here for the symposium she made a point of saying “thank you” to me for building the manga collection. This activity has been a way to connect with people!

**CM:** That’s incredible! And it certainly does prove what you were saying about how embedded manga is in the culture if a Catholic nun was reading them, ha ha!

I’m curious to know how OSUL reacted your desire to collect manga, if it was supported or not back then.
Notebook page showing different editions of Tetsuwan Atomu, which Maureen has been collecting.

**MD:** The support at Ohio State has been great! On the one hand, Lucy Caswell—who had her hands full to overflowing with the Bill Blackbeard collections and other materials—embraced the idea of collecting manga. Jenny Robb has also been enthusiastic. The library administration has supported the effort, including recently by hiring someone for two years to oversee the move of some manga into the circulating collections. The Japanese studies faculty has also been behind me, despite the fact that none of them are researching manga. They all realize that eventually the next generation will be using these as research materials.

**CM:** That is such great news, and we are so lucky to have that kind of support. Many institutions don’t. On that same note, how did you initially start working with Lucy Caswell? Any stories there, or was it just a given that you would work with her since the Cartoon Library was already formed?
MD: She was hired a bit before me, but around the same time. So I knew her as a colleague. I started buying manga and books about manga that went into the East Asian stacks. She discovered them because of the call numbers and asked me if she could move them to her collection, once she moved over to the Wexner Center location. Then I started buying for the Cartoon Library location and we started having conversations about manga. She had begun to hear about manga from cartoonists, including Art Spiegelman, as I remember. So she wanted to do more about collecting them. Lucy and I worked together well. We are both strategic thinkers! We both enjoy collecting! Also, I liked the challenge of connecting manga with American cartoons and comics. The general discourse was that they were different, but I found similarities. For example, I collected newspaper manga — which many people did not even realize existed.

Maureen’s notebook from June, 2000- shows purchases she made in Tokyo of Mizuki Shigeru.
CM: You guys are quite the pair – you both really revolutionized the collecting of cartoon art in American libraries. I hope you realize that! Could you tell me about some of the classes you have taught using manga/about manga, or how you’ve worked to integrate manga into the curriculum over the years?

MD: Well, collecting manga has just been a side job for me — only a tiny part of my work. I wish I could have devoted more time to it.

So an interesting thing was that I was collecting all these manga that were connected to the Cartoon Library materials in some way, or famous mangaka such as Tezuka Osamu. However around 2000 when manga started being translated in great numbers I noticed that those manga were different from the ones I had collected. Around that time we had a new library director and soon an emphasis developed around teaching. We were encouraged to propose to teach freshman seminars. I proposed one on “Analyzing the Appeal of Manga.” I thought that it would give me a chance to talk with young people about why they liked reading manga, and how to appreciate those manga. That was such a fun course! I learned so much from my students! I taught it from 2006 to 2010. After that I was discouraged from continuing to teach it because the emphasis shifted within the libraries. However, I was encouraged to continue teaching the “Understanding the Global Information Society” course (which is now a required course). I started teaching that in 2009.

In 2010 when for the last time I taught the “Analyzing the Appeal of Manga” course, I made it an all-Tezuka and Urasawa Naoki reading list. The students loved it! Previously I had only included one Tezuka on the reading list each year, but by making it all-Tezuka the students were able to follow his career chronologically and catch some of the “intertextual” puns and references that really make reading Tezuka fun. Then they could also see how Urasawa Naoki echoed Tezuka in the works we read. That seminar was such a memorable experience for all of us! Through teaching the freshman seminar, my involvement with the student clubs began. Some students just did not want to stop getting together around discussions of manga after the course ended. I really enjoyed working with them to set up the clubs! So, as I mentioned, collecting manga for the library has really been about connecting with people in so many ways.

CM: To be clear, these were manga books in English, or in Japanese language?

MD: The freshman seminar books were all in English. We just read volume one of a title. I arranged the readings according to the original publication in Japan. This really helped the students because all the translations came out at the same time, although the books were originally published over decades in Japanese. As for people with whom I connected, I met many people in the manga world in Japan. Lots of people have helped me learn about manga in Japan. As for why manga are important in a library context, first of all, they are primary sources — can be used by linguists, people studying all sorts of subjects such as history, literature, culture, and global flows of information, too! Second, to support creativity. Manga are inherently creative and inspire creativity. Finally, the world of manga is very participatory. I’ve mentioned how they have helped me connect with people. People who read manga want to do things—cosplay, draw, write, and discuss. Having manga in the
Japanese collection has made it a more dynamic collection, more engaged with people around campus and in the community.

**CM:** Great answer! What are some of your personal favorite manga?

**MD:** I love Doraemon! Also, I love reading Tezuka and encountering his intertextual puns and references. Other favorites include Mizuki Shigeru and Takahashi Rumiko. I love Dragonball! While I was living in Japan I became a big fan of Shiriagari Kotobuki, who writes manga for the Asahi Shinbun. I would read his manga every day — he takes the pulse of the nation and really nails it every day! As I was thinking of what to say about favorite manga, I realized I have not been collecting his manga books for a while. This is really bad. I have a lot of catching up to do, because I read that he has been doing some amazing work in writing post-Fukushima manga. Another manga I really like is Oishinbo — about eating and food!
Yamiuri Sande manga (Sunday newspaper comics from Japan, 1930s)

CM: Sounds like I’ll have to check them out myself! Tell me about one or two most unique manga items you have collected?

MD: Most unique... That would have to be the newspaper manga, *Jiji Manga* and, more recently, *Yomiuri Sande Manga*. Also, the original manga by Tezuka. I got that because we were planning to have an exhibit for the Astro Boy birthday. I found it in a used bookshop in Tokyo. I remember that it was a rainy day — and I was carrying this amazing manga under my arm....

CM: Was there anything that you wish you could have gotten for the collection, but never could?

MD: I wish we could have more original manga. I hope my successor will concentrate on getting such materials.

CM: What do you see as the future of manga in the classroom and the library? Did you ever expect it to come this far?

MD: As for the future, I have actually been surprised at how slow it has been for manga to be included in teaching and research. Since English translations do not stay in print very long, it may be hard to incorporate them into teaching, though. Already a great number of students are drawn to study Japanese language because they want to read manga and watch anime. At OSU enrollments in Japanese remain high, mainly for this reason. Perhaps the availability of the manga collection draws more students to OSU to study Japanese? I hope so!

CM: Looking back, what is your proudest and moment in your career at OSUL?

MD: My proudest moments at OSU... those were probably related to my early web sites and other Internet-related initiatives. In the mid-90s I had a lot of grants to promote use of the Internet for resource sharing among Japanese collections. That work has continued with the Wiki projects I initiated, including the index of *Jiji Manga* [http://library.osu.edu/wikis/library/index.php?title=Jiji_Manga](http://library.osu.edu/wikis/library/index.php?title=Jiji_Manga) and Mangajin [http://library.osu.edu/wikis/library/index.php/Mangajin](http://library.osu.edu/wikis/library/index.php/Mangajin) as well as other manga-related wiki pages. I am also really excited about the new manga collection development strategy, which emphasizes manga magazines and original manga. In particular, I am really happy that I could arrange the first donation of manga magazines from the Kyoto International Manga Museum. Those materials have now been processed and are available for researchers. When I lived in Japan and saw the recycling trucks going around collecting people’s old manga in exchange for rolls of toilet paper and boxes of tissue, I felt despair! How could we ever collect manga? Volumes that were issued in millions of copies were essentially unavailable for researchers! However, with cooperation with Japanese
institutions such as the KIMM, I really hope that the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum can continue to collect these works and make them available for researchers.

Recycling truck full of manga in Maureen’s neighborhood in Kyoto in 2004

CM: I’d love to hear more about stories from your collecting trips in Japan and people you met who helped you along the way.

MD: I have had so many memorable experiences on collecting trips in Japan! First of all, I want to mention Makino Mamoru. I met him through my involvement with Japanese cinema scholars and Kinema Club http://kinemaclub.org/about-us/history He specialized in collecting materials about Japanese film history—documentation, not the films themselves. I met with him a few times and viewed his collection. Also, he invited me and my family for “bonenkai” (year-end party). Through those conversations I learned about how to collect materials to support research on popular culture—books listing the “best” ones, biographies, directories, guides, how-to books—all these are important research resources. In 2001, I
had a wonderful visit to the Japan Cartoonists Association. Yanase Takashi was president. He was the creator of Anpanman—he recently passed away. I met him and several other famous cartoonists. The purpose of the visit was to let them know that we were planning events to celebrate the “birthday” of Astro Boy (April 7 2003) to see if we could get some cooperation. That did not happen but the visit was fun! Also I went to Tezuka Productions which also was fun! They donated some books and things. The Astro Boy birthday events was definitely one of the high points of my career! We had events all spring in 2003, including an exhibit. It was covered in the International Herald Tribune! I worked on that with Professor Mineharu Nakayama, who has been a great supporter of the manga collection. He gave me the first list of manga to prioritize collecting back in 1997. We got a grant to bring in speakers and so on. I gave a presentation, again in Japanese, at the Japan Society for Studies in Cartoon and Comics (Manga Gakkai) in 2004. That was about challenges of collecting manga in an American academic library. At that conference I met or saw many cartoonists and people active in the manga studies community. Also, I gave another talk in Japanese, on copyright issues and manga studies this time, in 2009 at International House in Tokyo. One of the key people whom I met on several occasions in Japan is Shimizu Isao. He donated some wonderful resources to our manga collection, including the “akahon manga” (little manga books) about which he wrote a monograph. I met with him a few times. He is a collector as well as a prolific scholar and is very generous, meeting with people like me and others who are studying manga.

CM: I really wish I was here when you guys had the Astro Boy celebration. It sounds so wonderful.

Is there anything else you’d like to add? If not, I just want to say thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. I have learned SO much from you over the past three years, and am so sad that you’ll be leaving. Whether you feel like your job is truly done or not, I hope you know you are leaving a major legacy behind you, that generations and generations of OSU students and scholars in the future will be so grateful for. You’re our manga hero!

MD: I hope that the manga collection will continue to bring Ohio State into contact with people in the manga community in Japan in the future! That’s about it for me. My future plans are not clear, but now that I will have more time, I hope to read more manga—and perhaps do some research on manga! Thanks so much for this interview!

CM: Great, thank you so much Maureen! It was my pleasure. I hope you have a fabulous final month here at OSUL, and I look forward to celebrating your retirement with you!

* * *

I want to thank Maureen Donovan for taking the time out of her busy final month at OSUL to speak to me, and for the years of inspiration and fun. Best of luck in your future endeavors Maureen, and enjoy retirement!
Maureen Donovan, delivering a paper on Yomiuri Sande manga at our March 2015 manga symposium which celebrated Maureen’s career and retirement.