



Japanese Graphics Now!

Eds Gisela Kozak and Julius Wiedemann, Taschen GmbH, 2006

Japan's design sensibilities continue to intrigue and inspire much of the western design world. Traditional notions of balance and harmony co-exist with the mad intensity of manga and anime; child-like 'cute' characters adorn all sorts of products; and this unique visual blend has captured our attention.

Japanese Graphics Now! is a well produced book with simple and clear aims. Through the selection of a diversity of graphic products from contemporary Japan, editors Kozak and Wiedemann set out to illustrate the harmonious co-existence of what may seemingly be inherently contradictory design directions. This is not a book of manga, AstroBoy-esque cool or beautifully balanced minimal packaging. It is a book that bounces around everywhere, seeking to showcase not only graphic design work but the way a vibrant culture is translated into a visually rich modern landscape.

Short but informative introductory essays set the reader up with a broad understanding and appreciation of Japanese culture. Kozak seeks to expand our understanding of technology and tradition sitting side by side harmoniously, without any apparent contradiction or compromise. She attributes this to a culture of respect for many things – balance and simplicity, the old, the modern, the origin of things. Wiedemann's essay explains Japanese typography as a combination of four alphabets – Kanji (an ideographic system) Hiragana (a phonetic system for writing Japanese words), Katakana (also phonetic but mainly for foreign words) and also the Roman alphabet – thus giving greater possibilities for typography.

The works of over eighty Japanese designers are featured. This work is logically divided into packaging, posters and ads and print material categories. The showcased work is left to speak for itself, text being limited to crediting the designer/design firm responsible for each work. And there are some superb examples of work – simple and balanced designs; designs where traditional materials have been replaced but the essence of the original materials intent remains; where the graphics pay homage to the western origin of some products; where all manner of illustrative and typographic styles are successfully combined.

This is a clear and unpretentious book. Both the diversity and coherence of Japan's design culture is well portrayed through the selection of images. Contemporary Japan provides a visual reference for designers worldwide and as such this book offers inspirational snapshot for those who seek new ways in communicating through print and packaging.

Kathy Fox