

# An Exploration of Eye Design of Japanese Animation Characters

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## Abstract

Nowadays, with popular culture sweeping the whole world, the animation is impacting the cultural market of all countries as a mainstream trend. In this regard, Japan has a successful practical experience and has successfully built a good national image in the world with its powerful animation resources. In Japanese animations, we can see not only Japanese culture and value system, but also characters with unique Japanese characteristics. It is useful for learning and innovating animation characters to understand and study the design concept of Japanese animation characters. And the most impressive thing in Japanese animation character modeling is the watery eyes, so this paper will start with eyes to analyze its origin and deep meaning.

## Keywords

Japanese animation, Character modeling, Eye design.

## 1. Preface

Nowadays, when it comes to Japanese animation characters, people will immediately think of oval faces with pointed chins, exaggerated big eyes, small noses and slender bodies. This unique modeling and aesthetics have become the “symbol” representing Japanese animation. If some non-Japanese-made animations have the above characteristics, they will also be regarded as imitations of Japanese-style animations. Among them, the most recognizable feature is the “eyes” which occupy about half of the face. And it is helpful for better understanding the character modeling of Japanese animation and innovating the animation character setting to explore the meaning of this special modeling and setting.

## 2. The Origin of “Big Eyes” in Japanese Animation

### 2.1. The Characteristics of Japanese National Culture

In addition to being inclusive and open, Japanese culture also complements inheritance and continuity. It can not only break the shackles of traditional culture, but also maintain the foundation of traditional culture. Based on this native culture, Japan constitutes the keynote of today’s Japanese culture, that is, the gradual Japanization of foreign cultures as they enter Japan. Everything in today’s Japanese animation style is the result of decades of style evolution, and the characters in the early days of Japanese animation development are not what they are today. In Japan’s traditional painting art, ukiyo-e paintings, the characters in bijinga (beauty paintings) are full of oriental features, such as hanging small eyes, long faces, long noses, cherry mouths, pointed chins, and sloping shoulders. In the early days of Japanese animation, there were indeed such animation works with very national characteristics. Japan did have such animation works with distinctive national features in the early days. For example, “Shonen Sarutobi Sasuke (Magic Boy)” is said to be the first “own” animation film of Japan. It is not only due to the story of Sarutobi Sasuke, which is well known in Japan, but more importantly, the Japanese features are reflected in the “animation”. The Japanese style of “Shonen Sarutobi Sasuke” was not made for a particular type of character, but extracted the spirit of traditional Japanese paintings and art and integrated them into the new animation style, thus better achieving the

goal of “depicting Japanese animation”. Before this animation style with Japanese national features became popular, the unprecedented success of “Astro Boy” came along, and the limited animation finally set out the journey of becoming popular in Japan.

Tracing back to the origin of universal big-eye settings, we can find that 1960s was a turning point. Beginning with Astro Boy directed by Osamu Tezuka in 1963, the characteristics of this animation became the style basis of almost all subsequent works. It is easy to recognize Astro Boy’s eyes, because this is a style that is still very popular today. They are big and dark, allowing animators to express a lot of information with very simple visual effects. In one of his books, Osamu Tezuka once said that the design of Astro Boy in “Astro Boy” was influenced by Disney’s famous cartoon character, Mickey Mouse, in many aspects. [1] In fact, a large number of Osamu Tezuka’s contemporaries and later anime writers were influenced by Disney’s western style. If Osamu Tezuka is the source, many Japanese anime writers have experienced a long exploration process of gradually getting rid of limiting Disney, forming the “great river” of Japanese animation style, and creating the unique “symbol” of Japanese animation.

## 2.2. Eyes Are the Spiritual Connotation of Characters

The well-established personality of characters can add vitality to animation works, and the inner emotional world of characters can be better displayed through depicting eyes. Without the embodiment of inner emotions, it will not be able to establish emotional communication with the audience and generate a sense of immersion, resulting in a loss of empathy for the audience. In this case, even if there are gorgeous scenes, excellent special effects, and smooth movements, it cannot make up for the fatal blow of animation —— lack of vitality!

The cultures and arts of any nation and mode in the world are mutually influential and interconnected. For example, in the field of traditional Chinese painting, Gu Kaizhi, a painter in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, put forward the artistic proposition of “chuan shen a du (good literary and artistic works depict vivid characters)”, where “du” refers to eyes. Gu Kaizhi pays great attention to the eyes when painting. In his view, figure painting is the most difficult, because painters should not only show the appearance of the figures, but also show their inner spirit, and the depiction of figures’ eyes can more effectively reflect their inner spirit than the depiction of their appearance and four limbs. Only by paying attention to the expression of the figures’ inner feelings can we achieve the purpose of “chuan shen (vivid expression)”.

The same is true in Japanese animation. Osamu Tezuka believes that it is better to care about the characters’ hearts than the characters’ movements. He thinks that as long as the story is good, even two pieces of paper can be appealing, so Osamu Tezuka started to minimize the production cost. The success of “Astro Boy” proves that this attempt is recognized by the public. One of the most important points is the delicate and simple design of the play. It can not only enrich the expression of emotions, but also keep the realistic style of animation. It was obvious that at that time, Japanese production studios were not yet operating at the same level as other animation studios (such as Disney), so the movements must be fully utilized. Astro Boy’s character design is very clever. Movable joints such as elbows and knees have almost no details, leaving complexity for static parts like his belt and hair, which not only makes Astro Boy look interesting, but also makes him easy to animate. The emotions are expressed through his hands and face, which leads to an important element —— eyes. Exaggerated eyes are the most delicate design. The eyes are the window of the characters’ hearts, and if you don’t pay attention to the expression of the details of the eyes, the expressions of facial expressions and emotions may be quite different.

### 3. The Meaning of “Eyes” In Japanese Animation

#### 3.1. Sweet, Innocent and Passionate about Life and Love

This type of eyes applies to children or young women, who are always curious about mysterious things. For example, for Usagi Tsukino in “Sailor Moon”, her exaggerated eyes are blended with light to express emotions. Osamu Tezuka once took “Princess Knight”, one of his animation works, abroad. After reading it, the foreigners were surprised. They had many questions: Why do Japanese people look like this? Why do their eyeballs look like this? A big black ball with stars in it doesn't look like Japanese people by any means. Why do you draw a face like that? Later, Osamu Tezuka's answer was: This is the type that Japanese women yearn for. Japanese women are getting better figures, more beautiful makeup, and more fashionable clothes, and one day they will be like animations. The big eyes shining with stars not only symbolize the beauty and kindness of characters in animation, but also show an attitude of Japanese women's expectations for life.

#### 3.2. Ruthless or Cruel and Evil

Usually, when the eyes of a just character are small and long, it indicates a decisive and cool character. For example, Saitama, the hero in “One Punch-man”, usually has enlarged and slightly dull eyes. Fig.1. But when he enters combat, his eyes become angular and long, which can better reflect the character's determination and strength in fighting. This kind of long eyes is also suitable for villains, which can better highlight the darkness and evil in the characters' hearts with facial expressions. For example, the long eyes of the villain leader in “Demon Slayer” can reveal the cruelty and ruthlessness of the character. In some cases, if the eyes of a character are black except the pupils, it generally means that it is not a human being. If it has exaggerated big eyes, it may be friendly to human beings. On the contrary, if it has long eyes, it may have hostile feelings towards human beings.



Figure 1. Contrast in Saitama's eye state.

### 4. Conclusion

From World War II to the 1960s, Japanese animation was still greatly influenced by Disney in artistic style. But since the 1970s, their styles have obviously begun to differentiate. By the 1980s, they had completely gone their separate ways. In fact, since the 1980s, Japanese animation has been “stagnant” in terms of artistic style. It is most obvious for the faces (the face shapes are always the same, similar to “Saint Seiya”, but the face shapes in some animations with distinctive painting styles will be different), noses (a tip or a point), lips (the characters usually have no upper lips and seldom have short, thick and nude lower lips), hair (the hair of the characters often appear as “octopus tentacles”, much thicker than real hair), and eyes (The characters have multifarious eyes, pupil colors that do not belong to Japanese/East Asian people at all, and deep eye sockets that are rarely seen in the yellow race. The eyes are stereotypical and coincidentally drawn with borders on the top and bottom and none on the

left and right.) for the main characters. It can be said that this templated face modeling is a Japanese feature or a flaw, but it all depends on how the style is perceived.

## References

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