A BRIEF HISTORY OF KAMISHIBAI

Kamishibai (kah-mee-shee-bye) or “paper-theater” evolved from a form of vibrant street storytelling that was extraordinarily popular throughout urban Japan from the 1920’s to the 1950’s. Before there were television and movies for children in Japan, special storytellers, called “Kamishibai Men” would bring stories to children on a bicycle.

Each Kamishibai man was also a candy seller. Riding a bicycle equipped with a large box attached on the back, he would enter a neighborhood and loudly strike together two wooden clappers called hyoshigi (hyoh-shee-ghee). The sound was a signal for children to run from their homes and gather around for an exciting story and candy snacks.

There were drawers in the big wooden box on the back of the bicycle filled with sweets. The children who bought some got to stand nearest to the wooden stage attached to the top of the box, and those who didn’t had to stand in the back. The Kamishibai man would insert the story cards into the stage and then, in a dramatic manner, deliver episodes of two or three kamishbai stories. These were suspenseful serials, and the Kamishibai man always concluded at a cliffhanger, leaving the children impatient for his next visit.

The introduction of television in 1953 led to the gradual disappearance of Kamishibai men from Japan’s streets. The artists who had made their living writing and illustrating Kamishibai turned to more remunerative ventures such as the creation of manga (Comic books) and later anime. (Animated cartoons)

In recent years, however, kamishibai stories have enjoyed a renaissance in Japanese schools, libraries and cultural centers.

The renowned author, illustrator and Caldecott Medalist, Allen Say grew up in Japan during Kamishibai’s spirited heyday. His recent highly acclaimed book, Kamishibai Man, recreates through exquisitely detailed watercolors and simple text, the excitement and pleasure that kamishibai stories convey.
USING KAMISHIBAI CREATED BY CHILDREN AS PART OF A SHARED, GUIDED AND INDEPENDENT WRITING PROGRAM

1. Kamishibai stories can be made individually, in pairs (one illustrator, one writer), in small groups or as a class project.

2. The sources for student-created kamishibai are unlimited: original ideas, topics related to the curriculum, the retelling of an existing story or some item of current events.

3. Kamishibai stories do not have to be a specific length.

4. Some children prefer to start by drawing illustrations; others by creating the text, either way works.

5. When composing the text for a kamishibai story, remember the characters use dialogue. The children can either write or dictate the story and dialogue.

6. Have the children divide the text into sections and make sketches for each one. Some children prefer working on and completing the illustrations before the text; either way works.

7. Check to see that the sketches correlate with the text. Reread and edit the text. Work on the final illustrations.

8. Arrange the illustrated cards in order and write the number for each card in sequence in the front, lower left-hand corner.

9. Tape the text for illustrated card #1 to the back of the last illustrated card. Tape the text for illustrated card #2 to the back of card #1 and so forth.

10. Now your children have their own kamishibai story. Children gain proficiency and fluency when they perform the stories they have created.
USING KAMISHIBAI WITHOUT A STAGE

Face Audience. Hold bottom of pack of cards in left hand or place them in lap, supported by left hand.

1. Read text for picture of Card 1 from back of last card.

When text for Card 1 is finished, slide Card 1 to right with right hand. Place it at back of pack.

3. Picture on Card 2 can now be seen by audience.

4. Read text for picture on Card 2 as written on back of Card 1.

Continue procedure until kamishibai story is finished.
USING KAMISHIBAI WITH A STAGE

1. The stage is easiest for children to see if it is set slightly above eye level. For a classroom audience of 15 to 30 children, place the stage on a desk or table with the children seated on the floor or on chairs in front of it. For larger groups, it is best to place the stage on a higher stand such as an AV cart. Some Japanese storytellers put the stage on a tripod, then adjust the height of the legs according to the audience size. For aesthetic reasons, the AV cart or tripod is often covered with a large piece of plain-colored cloth.

2. Make certain the cards are in correct numerical order. The numeral for each card is in the lower left corner of the colored illustration. Insert the cards as a pack into the stage, illustration sides facing forward.

3. The opening to the stage, from which the cards are inserted and pulled out, is on the right. Sit or stand on that side of the stage to make it easier to pull the cards out. Use your right hand to do this. Try to keep eye contact with the audience. Avoid standing directly behind the stage.

4. You can begin the kamishibai performance with the use of the traditional wooden clappers, hyoshigi (hyoh-she-ghee), or use a similar percussion instrument such as a clave or even wooden blocks. The hyoshigi are struck slowly at first, then faster and faster, to build anticipation for the performance. Children love this ritualization of “kamishibai time.”

5. Open the stage doors one by one, and announce the story.

6. Begin reading. The text for Card 1 is on the back of the last card. When you have finished reading the text for Card 1, slide it out (toward you, to the right) and then slide it in again, but this time, at the very back of the pack. The audience will now see the illustration for Card 2. The text for Card 2 is on the back of Card 1.

7. Continue telling the kamishibai story in this way. When the story is finished, end it with a simple “The End” or use the Japanese phrase, oshimai (oh-she-my), then slowly close the doors of the stage.
STORYTELLING NOTES

Japanese folktales often begin with the phrase, Mukashi, mukashi (moo-kah-she), freely translated as: Once upon a time, long, long ago. They often end with the word, Oshimai (oh-she-my), freely translated as “The End.”.

Helpful Ideas From Our Japanese Kamishibai Colleagues:

This method allows the storyteller to see the text more easily. After you finish reading the Text for Card 1, pull out the Illustration for Card 1 but do not put it back into the stage. Instead, hold it behind the stage with your left hand and with the text facing you. This will be the Text for Card 2. After you finish reading, place the Text for Card 2 on the table and use your right hand to pull out the Illustration for Card 2 from the stage. Hold it behind the stage with your left hand in the same way and read the Text for Card 3 from the back. The complete kamishibai story can be told in this way. Do not remove the last card at the end of the story, rather signal the end of the story, by sliding the “stage curtain” card slowly back in to the stage as you quietly say, “And that is the end of my story,” “The End,” or whatever comparable phrase you wish to use.

To make the performance more theatrical, make a simple “stage curtain” from a piece of oak tag or light cardboard, cut to the dimensions of a kamishibai card. Cover or collage the front with attractive paper that fits the mood of the story. Insert this “stage curtain” card in front of the kamishibai story cards. The stage doors may remain open. Pull slowly to the right before or while announcing the kamishibai story title. Slowly reinsert the “stage curtain” card at the end of the story.

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Characters in kamishibai stories move! The movement is always right to left. The pulling of the card from one scene to the next is a distinguishing and important feature of kamishibai. The directions found in the text, enhance and reflect the mood and tempo of the story. Sometimes they say to pull out the card quickly, sometimes slowly and at other times only partway. Follow these directions to achieve maximum dramatic effect. It is often helpful to practice with the kamishibai and stage in front of a mirror.