

# The Ways of Mice and Men

By Nobuo Tsuji



Choju giga, Tokyo National Museum





A series of four hand scrolls believed to have been painted in the 12th century, the *Choju giga* or Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Humans, are the property of Kozanji, a temple in northwestern Kyoto, although they are now being kept at the Tokyo National Museum.

The first scroll opens to a scene of rabbits and monkeys playing in a rapidly flowing mountain stream (left). Here a rabbit holds its nose in preparation for a backward dive off a boulder. There a rabbit and monkey swim hard to avoid being carried away by the current. Over here a monkey who has just clambered atop a rock is having his back rubbed by another monkey while a rabbit stands by with a ladle. Another rabbit riding on the back of a deer makes its way ashore as a monkey splashes water on it. The scene is full of life, and one can almost hear the playful chatter of the animals and the rippling of the swift current.

Another roll of the scroll reveals an archery contest between frogs and rabbits. In the next scene they are apparently preparing for a horse race: the "horses" being deer and wild boars and their riders rabbits and frogs. Suddenly a monkey runs by, pleading forgiveness as he flees from his rabbit and frog pursuers. Behind them a frog lays prostrate on the ground surrounded by an indignant crowd. Apparently the fleeing monkey has knocked the frog down.

Another group, this one watching two frogs dancing, includes a cat, and two mice peek out fearfully at the cat from behind the protective shield of a rabbit. A little later on, there are a rabbit and a frog playing at sumo. At the end of the scroll, monks recite sutras at an altar where the usual image of a Buddha is replaced by that of a frog (above).

These unusual scrolls do not appear to be relating any particular narrative or depicting specific allegories. Rather, the artist's aim seems to have been simply to satirize typical everyday human activities. Postures and facial expressions are subtly yet vividly portrayed with simple black ink brush strokes in a masterful presentation of humor and wit.

A Heian period verse, of the ballad genre known as *imayo* sung by the women entertainers of the day, eloquently describes the playful spirit of these scrolls in its ode to the child in all of us:

For sport and play  
I think that we are born.  
For when I hear  
The voice of children at their play,  
My limbs, even my  
Stiff limbs, are stirred.

(trans. by Donald Keene)

Traditionally, the *Choju giga* scrolls have been attributed to the priest-painter Kakuyu, also known as Toba Sojo (1053-1140). A high-ranking Tendai sect priest, Kakuyu is best known for his paintings of Buddhist images. While there is no actual proof that he painted the *Choju giga*, he has long been associated with them. After all, a young man undergoing the rigors of training for priesthood might well have consoled himself with such humorous paintings. The *Choju giga* are just one of the many ancient antecedents to the modern *manga* comic genre so popular among the Japanese today.

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