

Much more on this topic can be found in my 2017 book [“Animated Film in Japan until 1919. Western animation and the beginnings of anime”](#) (ISBN: 978-3-7448-3052-2)

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## On the Earliest (Foreign) Animation Films Shown in Japanese Cinemas\*

The history of Japanese animation for the cinema usually begins in 1917, with the first films by SHIMOKAWA Ōten 下川凹天 (also read SHIMOKAWA Hekoten; 1892-1973), KITAYAMA Seitō 北山清太郎 (1888-1945) and KŌUCHI Jun'ichi 幸内純一 (aka KŌUCHI Sumikazu; 1886-1970) (Litten[2013]). However, European and American animation films were shown years earlier in Japanese cinemas, although this part of the history of animation in Japan has proved difficult to research. In this note I will retrace my identification in December 2012 of what has often been called the first (foreign) animation film shown publicly in Japan, but also discuss other possible examples of the earliest animations from the West to be released in Japan.

In 1933, film critic YOSHIYAMA Kyōkō 吉山旭光 published a history of Japanese film with a brief chapter on animations. There he put forward a film called *Nippāru no henkei* ニッパールの変形 [*Nippaaru's Transformation(s)*] as the first animated film shown in Japan.<sup>1</sup> According to Yoshiyama it premiered in 1909 at the Asakusa Teikokukan 浅草帝国館 in Tokyo and was well received, because stop-motion ‘trick films’ (‘majutsu eiga’ 魔術映画, ‘magic film’) had grown somewhat stale by then with the audience. (Yoshiyama[1933], p. 62f.)

Even though Yoshiyama gave no details on this film beyond its Japanese title and the somewhat vague company name ‘Patē’ パテー<sup>2</sup>, it became accepted as the first foreign animated film shown in Japan, especially in YAMAGUCHI Katsunori’s 山口且訓 and WATANABE Yasushi’s 渡辺泰 seminal history of Japanese animation film (Yamaguchi/Watanabe[1978], p. 8). However, in a study published in 2001, Watanabe pointed out that a comprehensive listing of films released in Japanese theatres<sup>3</sup> includes one called *Nipparu no henkei* ニッパールの変形 [*Nipparu's Transformation(s)*] premiering on 15 April 1912 at the Asakusa Teikokukan (Watanabe[2001], p. 18). Later studies also give this date, but still consider *Nipparu no henkei* to have been the first animation film shown in Japan (Tsugata[2004], pp. 84, 210; Akita[2005], p. 84).

Yet, any details about this film remained elusive. While several researchers, such as SUGIMOTO Gorō 杉本五郎, already suspected that it could have been made by Émile Cohl (1857-

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<sup>1</sup> Yoshiyama here uses the word ‘senga’ 線画 (‘line picture’) which, besides ‘manga eiga’ 漫画映画 (‘manga film’), was used at the time for animated film. Senga often implied educational content (Tsugata[2011], p. 36).

<sup>2</sup> This could have referred to the French or the American Pathé company, or to the Japanese company M. Pathe, although Yoshiyama usually seems to be giving the full name for the latter. For some reason later authors, such as Akita[2005], p. 84, tend to specify American Pathé.

<sup>3</sup> The 1960 *Nihon eiga sakuin taikan* 日本映画作品大鑑 by Kinema Junpō キネマ旬報.

1938) (Watanabe[2001], p. 19), none of his films, or those of others, could be tied to *Nipparu no henkei*.

Only recently did the identification of *Nipparu no henkei* succeed. In 1912 cinemas in Australia and New Zealand showed a short ‘rib-tickling’ ‘trick’ film called *The Nipper’s Transformations* (e.g., Auckland Star, 1 April 1912, p. 12; Wairarapa Daily Times, 17 July 1912, p. 1). It is a reasonable assumption that this film was, in fact, shown at the same time in Japan using the translated title *Nipparu no henkei*. According to several sources (Lee[1973], p. 328; <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/296863>), *The Nipper’s Transformations* had been produced by Charles Urban’s (1867-1942) company ‘Urbanora’ in 1912. But, as Luke McKernan pointed out to me on 16 December 2012, Urbanora was a trade mark for distribution rather than a production company, and it was much more likely that the film had been produced by Urban’s French production company Eclipse, founded in 1906 (see also McKernan[2003], pp. 103ff.).

This suggestion proved to be an important step towards solving the mystery because, for a few months at the end of 1911 and beginning of 1912, Émile Cohl produced films for Eclipse (Crafton[1990], pp. 362f.), of which two are available on DVD.<sup>4</sup>

The final step was the entry on *The Nipper’s Transformations* in the British film journal *The Bioscope* (15 February 1912, p. xix):

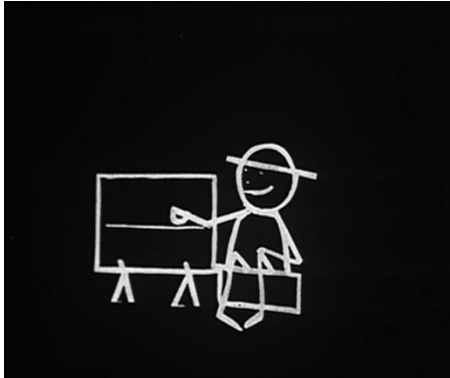
‘A line-drawn nipper first appears, and his rapid transformations into all sorts of shapes is beyond description. He first becomes a musical box, out of which come tumbling all the notes of the keyboard, chasing one another round the screen, finally fixing up as the nipper, who next becomes a rabbit, menaced by a gun. The rabbit becomes a tortoise, who goes for the nipper, and he immediately resolves into a pig. This strange medley next changes into a balloon. The nipper plays pranks with the man in the moon, and finally falls into the sea, where he is gobbled up by a shark, and further strange configurations take place. (Released February 21<sup>st</sup>. Length 325 ft.)’



Screenshot from *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* showing the Nipper and the shark in cutout animation. (See note 4.)

<sup>4</sup> I have used the DVD collection *Gaumont. Le Cinema Premier 1907-1916. Volume 2*. However, other DVDs with Cohl’s films are available.

This description matches Cohl's film *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* (*Will-o'-the-wisp's Exploits*), produced at the end of 1911<sup>5</sup> and one of the two films for Eclipse still extant. *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* is a hybrid of drawn and cutout animation, three-and-a-half minutes long, with the main character a stick figure reminiscent of Cohl's serial hero 'Fantoche'.



Screenshot from *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* showing the Nipper in drawn animation.

Obviously *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* became *The Nipper's Transformations* for export markets – and *Nipparu no henkei* in Japan.

Yet one major problem remains: Was *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* really the first foreign animation shown in Japan, especially as the release date had to be corrected from 1909 to 1912? In fact, other titles are mentioned in the literature, although all of them raise questions of their own.

Animation researcher TSUGATA Nobuyuki 津堅信之, for example, lists Émile Cohl's film *Le Mobilier fidèle* (1910) as having premiered in Japan on 1 September 1911, before *Nipparu no henkei* (Tsugata[2007], p. 60). He does not mention this film in the text, however, and it is, of course, a conventional trick film. While one might argue that this was a live-action/stop-motion hybrid, to call it an animation film would seem to go to far.

A similar case would be Segundo de Chomón's (1871-1929) Pathé film *Le Rêve des marmitons* (1908). Yoshiyama thought that from this majutsu eiga (with object animation), shown in Japan about 1908, with its scene of faces being drawn on a bald head, the senga or manga eiga might have been born (Yoshiyama[1933], p. 62).<sup>6</sup> But he wisely does not claim that this was the first animation film.



Screenshot from *Le Rêve des Marmitons* showing a face drawn on a bald head. (From <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGDiqm8U78Y>)

<sup>5</sup> Crafton[1990], p. 328, gives 11 November 1911 as the production date; Emile Cohl[2009], p. 28, says 7 October 1911.

<sup>6</sup> Yoshiyama had forgotten even the Japanese title, but his description matches de Chomón's film exactly. Apparently this film has not been mentioned in the Japanese literature afterwards.

On the other hand, he wrote that the Pathé film *Shabondama no awa* シャボン玉の泡 [*Soap Bubbles*], released in Japan in 1911, should be counted among the masterpieces of senga of the time (Yoshiyama[1933], p. 63; Yoshiyama[1940], pp. 147f.). This might have been *La Vérité par les bulles de savons* (*The Soap Bubbles of Truth*; 1910), which was shown, for example, in Singapore in October 1910 (The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Adviser, 19 October 1910, p. 1). But this film has been described as a ‘drama with animated sequences’ (<http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/351119>), so it would again be at best a hybrid, not really a senga. The 1911 Italian film *Le bolle di sapone* (*Soap Bubbles*) was a trick film without any animation; about another 1911 Pathé film called *Soap Bubbles* nothing seems to be known but that it was a ‘beautiful study in light effect’ (Poverty Bay Herald, 13 September 1911, p. 9).

Yet another contender for earliest animation shown in Japan was proposed by Watanabe Yasushi in 2001: James Stewart Blackton’s (1875-1941) *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* from 1906. Watanabe had discovered a stock list of films and film projectors from 1910 by Yoshizawa Shōten 吉沢商店, a Japanese film trading company – and the description of a film there called *Fushigi no bōrudo* 不思議のボード [*Miracle Board*] matched Blackton’s film (Watanabe[2001], pp. 19f.). Two questions, though, remain: Was *Fushigi no bōrudo* ever released in a Japanese cinema? And can *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* be called a (pure) animation film?

On the former, Watanabe guesses that a film called *Kimyō naru bōrudo* 奇妙なるボード [*The Strange Board*]<sup>7</sup>, released by the distribution company Yokota Shōkai 横田商会 on 8 August 1907, might have been Blackton’s film and identical to *Fushigi no bōrudo* (Watanabe[2001], pp. 22f.). But as he writes himself: ‘it is a shame that I cannot prove it’ (Watanabe[2001], p. 17).



Screenshot from *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*.  
(From <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dRe85cNXwg>)

The second question leads back to how to treat, and define, hybrid films (cf. Litten[2011]), as *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* is a mixture of live-action, drawn and cutout animation. This would not be as much of a problem with the final candidate(s) for the title of earliest foreign animation shown in a Japanese cinema: Cohl’s ‘Fantoche’ films. Arguably beginning with his famous *Fantasmagorie* in 1908 and ending with *La Maison du Fantoche* in 1921, they were, most of the time, (2D) animation. And, according to Yamaguchi and Watanabe, some of these films were shown already in 1910 under the series title *Dekobō shingachō* ... 凸坊新画帳... (*New Picture Album of the Mischievous Boy*) (Yamaguchi/Watanabe[1978], p. 8).

<sup>7</sup> The ‘to’ 卜 in ‘bōrudo’ is thought to have been a misprint for ‘do’ 卜 in the *Nihon eiga sakuhin taikan*.

Yet there is quite a lot of confusion in the literature about ‘Dekobō shingachō’, which for some time became a generic term for animation. Yoshiyama also dates the series to 1910, but only calls them Gaumont films (Yoshiyama[1933], p. 63). Much more problematic is whether Yoshiyama and later authors in fact had an absolute date for these films, or were just dating them in relation to *Nipparu no henkei* and its erroneous release date of 1909. FURUTA Hisateru 古田尚輝, for example, while following Yamaguchi and Watanabe’s history, dates *Nipparu no henkei* to 1912 and the ‘Dekobō shingachō’ films, which he also attributes to Cohl, to 1913 (Furuta[2009], p. 201).

Some authors, on the other hand, don’t seem to accept the notion that the ‘Dekobō’ title came from the prominent head of the Fantoche character – as Tsugata assumes, for example (Tsugata[2007], p. 57) –, instead pointing to an earlier, very popular manga (comic strip) character by KITAZAWA Rakuten 北沢楽天 (1876-1955) called *Dekobō* 凸坊, thus severing the connection with Cohl (Animēju henshūbu[1989], p. 4; Jo[2013], pp. 41, 121f.). Others relate the ‘Dekobō shingachō’ to films by John Randolph Bray (1879-1978) and Raoul Barré (1874-1932), dating to the time of the First World War (Ōtsuka/Matsunomoto[2004], p. 34).

And what was held by some to have been the first foreign animation film shown in Japan, Charles Armstrong’s (?-?) British silhouette animation *Isn’t It Wonderful!* from January 1914 (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0175778/>), was released in Japan in the same year simply as *Dekobō no shingachō* 凸坊の新画帳, which has the same meaning as *Dekobō shingachō* and might indicate that this release marked the beginning of the use of this particular term.<sup>8</sup> That Cohl’s Fantoche-like *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* was not released as a ‘Dekobō shingachō’ title also suggests that the term was not yet common in 1912.

Considering how quickly films were imported to Japan (beginning in 1896), it seems quite likely that at least some of Cohl’s Fantoche films from his time at Gaumont were shown in Japan soon after their release in France, i.e. about 1909/10, but not under the ‘Dekobō’ title. It might even be the case that Yoshiyama had seen such a film in 1909, but later confused it with *Nipparu no henkei*. But there is no proof for this (yet?).

At this stage it is still Cohl’s *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* alias *Nipparu no henkei* which has the earliest proven release date of any (2D) animation film in a Japanese cinema: 15 April 1912. None of the other titles mentioned in the literature can safely be said to have been theatrically released earlier and to have been fully or mostly (2D) animation. Finally, it should also be noted that German 2D animation, on 35mm film and in colour, was available in Japan at roughly the same time for home projectors; but this topic will be covered separately (Litten[2014]).

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<sup>8</sup> This was the opinion of film historian TANAKA Jun’ichirō 田中純一郎 (quoted in Watanabe[2001], p. 23) as well as the editors of the Japanese animation journal *Animage* アニメージュ in their history of anime film (Animēju henshūbu[1989], p. 4). Akita[2005], p. 84, also claims that the ‘Dekobō’ term originated only with Armstrong’s film.

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## Films

Le bolle di sapone = Soap Bubbles; produced by Arturo Ambrosio; released 1911; trick film; 5:30 min.

Les Exploits de Feu Follet = The Nipper's Transformations = Nipparu no henkei ニッパールの変形 (= Nippāru no henkei ニッパールの変形); realised by Émile Cohl at the end of 1911 for Eclipse; released in Japan on 15 April 1912; drawn animation, cutout animation; 3:30 min.

Fantasmagorie; realised by Émile Cohl in 1908 for Gaumont; drawn animation, live action; 2 min.

Humorous Phases of Funny Faces = Fushigi no bōrudo 不思議のボールド =? Kimyō naru bōrudo 奇妙なるボールト; realised by James Stewart Blackton for Vitagraph Company of America in 1906; live action, drawn and cutout animation; 3 min.

Isn't It Wonderful! = Dekobō no shingachō 凸坊の新画帳; realised by Charles Armstrong in 1914; released in Japan on 15 April 1914; silhouette animation; 4:30 ft.

La Maison du Fantoche; realised by Émile Cohl in 1921 for Éclair; drawn animation; 8:15 min.

Les Mobilier fidèle; realised by Émile Cohl in 1910 for Gaumont; released in Japan on 1 September 1911; live-action, stop-motion; 6 min.

Le Rêve des marmitons; realised by Segundo de Chomón in 1908 for Pathé; released in Japan in 1908?; live-action, animation; 6:18 min.

Shabondama no awa シャボン玉の泡; released in Japan in 1911(?); animation.

Soap Bubbles; 1911.

La Vérité par les bulles de savons = (The) Soap Bubbles of Truth; 1910 for Pathé; live-action, animation?; 3:50 ft.

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