

# Friends of Japan



## Åsa Ekström

After visiting Japan seven times, she moved here in 2011 to study graphic design at college. She published an original three-volume storytelling manga in her native Sweden and has also done illustrations for 13 other works. In 2014 she began a four-panel comic blog describing interesting aspects of her life in Japan. She published two volumes of *Hokuo josbi Osa ga mitsuketa Nibon no fushigi* (Nordic Girl Åsa Discovers the Mysteries of Japan) in 2015. Her favorite manga include *Ranma 1/2* and *One Piece*.



In this scene, Ekström struggles to find individuality among university students decked out in identical job-hunting suits.

<http://www.comic-essay.com/hokuoujoshi/>  
(Japanese only)

## Åsa in Wonderland:

### The Comical Adventures of a Swedish Manga Artist in Japan

While living in Japan, Swedish manga artist Åsa Ekström encountered a multitude of unexpected cultural differences. She related these experiences in a four-panel comic series, which became a huge hit when published as *Hokuo josbi Osa ga mitsuketa Nibon no fushigi* (Nordic Girl Åsa Discovers the Mysteries of Japan) this year.

In the manga, Ekström pokes fun at herself, humorously depicting her struggles to use chopsticks, familiarize herself with Japanese toilets, learn the intricacies of formal Japanese speech, and grapple with the etiquette for exchanging business cards.

The young artist first became captivated with Japanese anime and manga after watching the series *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* when she was 13 years old. Although she went on to become a manga artist and illustrator in her native Sweden, she maintained an active interest in Japan and harbored a strong desire to live and draw manga here. After making numerous trips to Japan, in 2011 she entered a program at a design school in Tokyo. Ekström graduated with flying colors in March of this year, and almost before the ink on her diploma had dried, she accomplished her manga debut in Japan with the release of her book. The sequel to this manga was released in September.

Ekström's voice takes on a tone of excitement as she talks about her newfound success. "I never imagined I would become a manga artist right away," she says. "I thought I would use my schooling to get a job at a Japanese design company and then draw comics in my free time. I'm absolutely thrilled at publishing two volumes this year." But she regards the relative ease of her debut with humility. "I consider myself very lucky," she explains. "I took my comic diary to the independent comic exhibition COMITIA in May last year, but was only able to sell 15 copies. So I decided to pitch it at a publisher's booth at the event. That's how it got picked up and published."

The series is already slated to be published in Taiwan, and the author has hopes for an English version down the road. To escape the hustle and bustle of Tokyo, Ekström has made trips to different areas in Japan, including Hiroshima and the Tohoku region. "I'm attracted to the slower pace of life, the inexpensive and delicious vegetables, and the wonderful mountain views, which are so different from those in my home country," she says. "If I can, I'd like to set the third installment of the series in the Japanese countryside."

While she is currently enjoying producing four-panel comics following the success of her manga, she is also looking to create manga in a similar vein to *Sayonara September*, a work she drew in Sweden following the classic storyline of the girls' comic genre. "I would like to try and tell an original fantasy tale set in northern Europe," she declares. For Ekström, the greatest appeal of Japanese manga is the depth of the characters, which is generally not to be seen in European and American comics. "Readers are able to relate on a human level to characters, laughing and crying together as they develop and grow through a series. This is what makes me want to continue creating manga in Japan."

Finally, Ekström strongly encourages members of the younger generation in other countries who have an interest in manga to experience Japan first hand. "I wasn't very good at Japanese when I first came, but I was still moved by little things like visiting Tokyo Tower. Japan is heaven for manga lovers. I hope as many young people as possible have the chance to visit the country."