While Kenji’s tales are now outside of the temporal and spatial social context in which they were initially written, they are being reinvigorated and re-visioned in picture book form. Like words, pictures are culturally encoded and affect higher meanings. The power of the original author’s work may be changed by cultural and contextual constraints and by the artistic reinterpretations. Contemporary illustrators are therefore reinterpreting the tales’ meanings for modern readers. This chapter places the picture books of Kenji’s 1920s narratives in the context of Japanese visual culture and reviews the artistic codes, conventions and narrative strategies that are operating in Japanese art and picture books. It also explores the significance of different levels of artistic modality within the Japanese context, making reference to the effects of such modalities in pictorial representations of Kenji’s work. In the process, it considers the issue of how the artists, partly because of the subordination of the artwork to the written text, need to find inventive ways to connect with Kenji’s fixed narratives.

**ARTISTIC CODING**

There is no such thing as a simple uncoded text, be it verbal or visual. As Ernst Gombrich states, “the innocent eye is a myth.” Bill Nichols explains that the notion of ‘simplicity’ or an ‘innocent eye’ arises because ideological elements within the production of meaning are “invested with meanings that naturalize themselves as timeless, objective, obvious.” The process of representation itself, the investment of meanings as a material social process, often remains hidden. This applies as much to the artwork as the narratives and such culturally acquired reading knowledge can be ideologically powerful. As Kress and Van Leeuwen further suggest, any notion of simplicity is “always based on a particular cultural orientation and ideological stance, and [is] the result of intensive training.” Perry Nodelman, too, insists that artistic knowledge is culturally acquired and meaning and interpretation of visual images is often completed through cultural conditioning and the use of prior knowledge of other texts. Images can only appear ‘natural’ or ‘simple’ after much practice and, children’s literature in the form of picture books offers the site for such training.

Just as socio-cultural factors affect subjectivity and reading, graphic codes in picture books are intrinsic to the construction of ideologies and subjectivities. As Jane Doonan notes, picture books are cultural objects. In the same way that broader cultural ideologies affect the way the phenomenal world is read and represented, the textual processes that include both visual and verbal coding affect how significances are formed and meaning is created. This is, of course, similarly the case in the...
interaction between text and images in the pictorial re-visionings of Kenji’s work. Picture books, with their two modes of discourse, utilise artistic forms that work with the text to implicitly or explicitly promulgate ideologies. The interplay between the artwork and the words creates narrative positions for implied readers and constructs certain subjectivities. The different artistic codes and conventions hence interrelate with point of view in both written and pictorial discourse to shape attitudes.

Both cultural and artistic traditions, then, form the basis of cultural coding and have implications for how the verbal and pictorial interaction in picture books is read. A Japanese audience familiar with certain cultural and artistic ideals will inherently understand or interpret the texts accordingly and gain a sense of the symbolic and metaphoric implications, consciously or unconsciously. Even though less experienced readers may not recognise the implicit ideologies, cultural proximity and experience will facilitate understanding of texts which are often mediated through adults and educators (and through the canonisation process). It is for this reason that, from a position outside Japanese culture, Japanese pictorial coding needs to be investigated a bit further in order to understand what kinds of subjectivity are being inscribed in pictorial representations of Kenji’s tales.

**JAPANESE ARTISTIC TRADITIONS**

In the same way that artistic realism in the West is based on a set of conventions, Japanese art is based on conventions of ‘truth’ that favour the non-representational mode. The earliest literary and artistic remains show that Japanese artistic conventions have generally avoided symmetry and regularity. The artists who depict Kenji’s narratives are working within a long-standing aesthetic tradition that has a preference for abstraction, asymmetry and a sophisticated ‘artlessness’ or ‘simplicity.’ These less representational modes also work to deepen the dialogic relationship with the subject matter. Because such matters are more complex than meets the eye, it is pertinent here to consider what the notion of ‘artlessness’ or ‘simplicity’ might mean in relation to the history of Japanese art and literature. Discussion of some of the more enduring conventions from a long syncretic history (from before Japan’s closed Tokugawa Era in the 1600s) will help comprehend aspects of the modern pictorial representations of Kenji’s works and contextualise the discussions in later chapters.

As Stephen Addiss suggests, despite all Japan’s borrowing from other countries of many generations, artistic styles have always been modified to suit the Japanese temperament and vision. For instance, *Yamato-e*, paintings considered to be typically ‘Japanese’, arose in opposition to those thought to be typically ‘Chinese’ or *kara-e*. (*Yamato* is an ancient name for Japan.) *Nihonga* (literally, Japanese art), a “modern neo-traditionalist painting style … arose in the Meiji period (1868–1912) as traditional painting schools responded to the challenges of western painting styles and techniques.”

Evidence shows that Japanese experimented and adapted Western realism from the middle of the sixteenth century when the Portuguese first arrived in Japan. Gary Hickey suggests that representational modes were considered and rejected because the regularity of linear perspective and chiaroscuro “conflicted with Japanese traditional taste which emphasised the abstract poetic qualities of a painting.” Perspectival shading was eschewed in favour of an emphasis on the beauty of line and shape. In a similar vein, Hibbett observes that even though the tales and prints of the seventeenth century moved away from the prevailing didacticism towards a more realistic mode, these tales and their accompanying woodblock illustrations were by no means representational in the Western imitative style that sought mimesis. Appreciation of these Japanese tales and prints chiefly requires “a willingness to forgo the illusionistic conventions of Western realism, rather than [needing] detailed knowledge of their exotic background.”
