



A Polish Artist Capturing Life in Japan

Polish-born Mateusz Urbanowicz is an artist known for his work on several anime and for his books of illustrations. His exquisite, nostalgia-evoking paintings of Japanese scenery fascinate people around the world.

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OLD shops that make long-time residents of Tokyo feel nostalgic (*Tokyo Storefronts*). Dimly lit back alleys like portals to other dimensions (*Tokyo at Night*). These two series of illustrations were painted by Mateusz Urbanowicz, a Polish artist whose works are receiving great reviews. Urbanowicz

typically uses watercolors in his paintings to depict so much detail that the viewer can sense the breath of the people that live in the places portrayed in his work.

“For example, when I see washing drying on the second floor of a small shop, I try to imagine who lives there,” he says. “I want to draw a story within a

single illustration.”

When he was a student studying electrical engineering in Poland, Urbanowicz had the chance to participate in a presentation for a Japanese pen tablet manufacturer. Pen tablets are digital tools that allow artists to create art on the computer using a special touch pen and digitizer, similar to using pen on



An illustration from the series *Tokyo at Night*

paper. When Urbanowicz drew an illustration on a tablet as a test, a large crowd gathered around. This marked the beginning of his interest in digital art. He went to Kobe Design University to study animation and comics, continuing to graduate school.

In 2013, after graduating, Urbanowicz was hired by the animation production company CoMix Wave Films Inc. where he was involved in the production of *Your Name.*, an animated film released in 2016 that became a hit in Japan and around the world. Urbanowicz worked on the background art for the film under director Shinkai Makoto, whose works have a reputation for breathtakingly beautiful background art.

“Shinkai Makoto considers the scenery of downtown Tokyo to be as beautiful as nature and portrays the beauty overlooked by everyone in their everyday lives,” says Urbanowicz. “His digital paint-

ing techniques have influenced me.”

In his free time, Urbanowicz likes to go for walks with his camera in hand, searching for common yet beautiful and memorable scenes. One day, he went to visit Seiseki-sakuragaoka in Tama City, Tokyo, which was the setting of director Miyazaki Hayao’s animated film *Whisper of the Heart*. A painting, *Bicycle Boy*, based on the impressive scenery he saw there, became the first in a series of Urbanowicz’s own illustrations. The *Bicycle Boy* series, comprising ten watercolor paintings, conveys the breath, physical warmth, and feelings of a young boy, without any dialogue or written explanations. The series marked the beginning of the popularity of Urbanowicz’s illustrations, speaking to the hearts of people in Japan and abroad.

Most modern works by illustrators in Japan are actually created digitally. Since going freelance in 2017, Urbanowicz has

distanced himself from the digital drawings from his time at the anime studio and continues to release works drawn by hand using pencil, pen, and watercolor on paper.

“With digital art,” Urbanowicz explains, “you can easily make numerous edits and can draw by zooming into details. Since you can’t do that when drawing on paper, there is less ‘digital’ clarity, but equally, it leaves more room for the viewer’s imagination.”

Urbanowicz says that he would like to try and create his own manga and anime. Let’s lookout for the stories Urbanowicz will weave as he encounters scenes and people on his wanderings in Tokyo and other parts of Japan. [J](#)



An illustration from the series *Bicycle Boy*



Urbanowicz on the streets of Tokyo with camera in hand