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# Drainspotting, Japan's Underrated Street Art

*A rare look at treasures that protect us while resting under our toes*

Upon hearing the words drain, sewer, and manhole, I bet most of us cringe imagining dark, stinky, filth infested drains. Hold up, wait a minute; check our assumptions at the entry gate. Which country flipped something mundane into a sought after landmark? Well, seeing as this is Senyum Press, that'd be those same folks that brought you "gotta catch 'em all" 'Pokémon, the Japanese. When on the streets of Japan, you pay attention beyond your feet because the ground is exactly where the delicate art pieces are hidden in plain sight! Yes, Japan established manhole covers as an art.

Many of us may only look at feet to judge footwear game, ignoring the path underfoot. Manhole covers are not the most accessible objects either. Generally located in the roadway, they serve as protection from falling into underground public utilities. A manhole (マンホール) is this entry point to Pennywise's creepy land of constricted underground spaces such as shafts, utility vaults, and something referred to as a large vessel. Have you ever entered one? Not many of us do.

These round iron covers are not just on the road for no reason. While their roles vary, they are always installed in places where sewer projects, aqueduct projects, telephone lines, fiber optics, gas, and other utilities are buried. Most importantly, utilities are maintained and managed there. In Japanese, a manhole cover is sometimes referred to as a "human hole" 「人孔(じんこう)」, since it functions as a doorway into the utilities inspection.

## History of manhole & some general knowledge

In the 1950's, Japan's major cities began experiencing some rapid infrastructural change. Updates to sewage systems throughout the country became a top priority. Rural communities resisted some projects based on the huge expense. In an effort to encourage taxpayers to support much needed expensive sewage projects, the decorative manhole cover was embraced.

Although manhole covers have been tied to southern Pakistan settlements from 2500BCE, and Romans even had Cloacina the sewer goddess, Japan brought it to another level in the 1980s. Covers with specialty designed patterns representing their localities began appearing beyond Tokyo and Nagoya. As an effort to enhance the image of the sewage industry and raise awareness about these pricey sewage projects, civil servant Yasutake Kameda from the Public Sewer Division's Ministry of Construction proposed each municipality add some kawaii motifs to the manhole covers.

While they have always been there, sewer, water, and fire hydrant covers rapidly became part of walkways and streets with amazing urban art. The very first one appeared in Nagoya city, soon followed by the rest of the nation. People were obviously surprised and thrilled with this new thang. Soon enough, manhole hunting has boomed into a new branch of the tourism industry.

A big fan of public artworks himself, artist and photographer Remo Camerote dubbed hunting down the designs as drainspotting. Japanese manhole covers, in a range of designs depending on territory, utility category and manufacturer style, have captured the attention of a massive number of "drainspotters" all across the world. According to Camerote, nearly 95% of the 1,780 municipalities in Japan have their very own customized manhole covers with designs depicting the local culture - it could be anything, like a landmark, sports team, and mascot character. Most recently Pokémon has become a popular addition.

There are series numbers that designate details like the location and the year it was installed on each manhole cover. Typically, a designed manhole cover that measures up to a diameter of 60cm costs around 60,000yen (≈RM 2345) while the 90cm one costs about 300,000yen (≈RM 11,728).





# Manhole cards

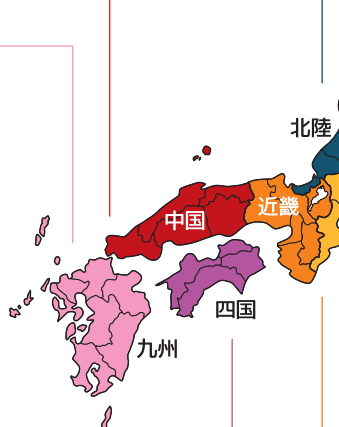
It may sound unbelievable, but hey, anything is possible, certainly in Japan. In April 2016, the Sewer System PR Platform organization (GKP or Gesui Koho Purattohomu) launched its first set of collectible 'Manhole Cards'. Now you may wonder, what the heck are manhole cards? While manhole covers attract public attention as local street adornments, manhole cards remind everyone of the real invaluable role of this underground system. Regional leaders have left on this fruitful opportunity to promote Japanese cultural assets. After all, the sewer system is much more than a pretty exterior.

Since we've gone to print (September 2020), there are 12 series of manhole cards. These remarkable collections feature unique manhole covers from 535 municipalities. All of them add up to 667 types, distributed free of charge at tourist information centers and other select locations. For more information on the location of each card, visit GKP's website at <http://www.gk-p.jp/> (only available in Japanese).

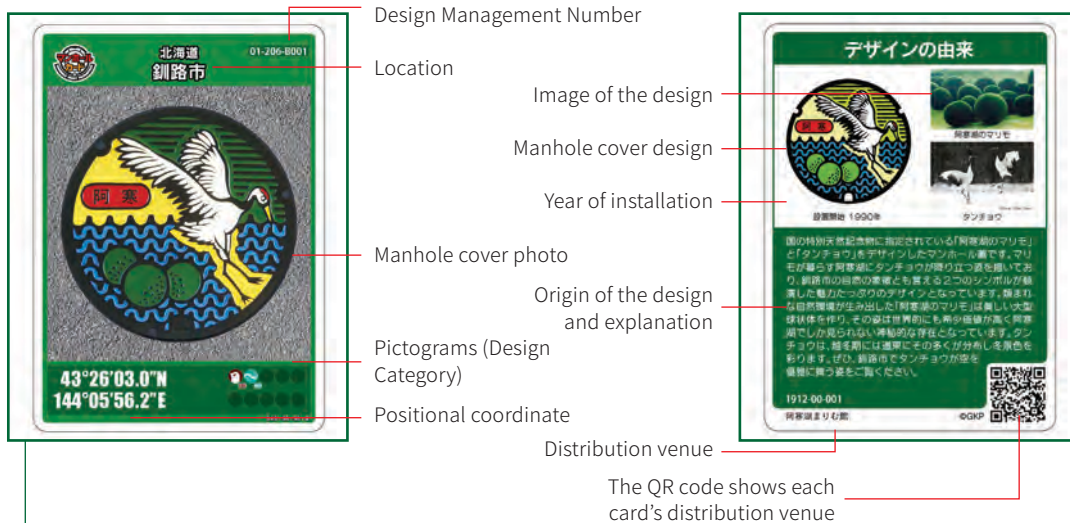
Each card has a color that corresponds to Japan's nine regions map below: Hokkaido, Tohoku, Kanto, Hokuriku, Chubu, Kinki, Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu.

## Five facts about Japanese manhole covers

- 01. On average a custom cover design adds 5% to the total cost.
- 02. The most important function is to provide traction in any weather.
- 03. Manhole cover specialty designs arose in the 1980's.
- 04. Fans dubbed as 'Manhoru Mania' trade info on covers and a subgroup collect manhole rubbings called 'takuhon'.
- 05. While half of the designs are of plants, official flowers, and trees, local animals, birds, and local attractions are also popular themes.







This manhole cover features "Marimo of Lake Akan" and "Japanese crane", which are categorized as one of the national special natural monuments. It depicts a Japanese crane on Lake Akan where Marimo lives, and it has an attractive design with two symbols, which represent the symbol of Kushiro City's nature. The "Mariko of Lake Akan" bred in such a natural environment has a beautiful large spherical body, and its appearance is so rare that one can only find it in Lake Akan. Most Japanese cranes are distributed in the eastern part of Hokkaido during winter, adding color to the winter scenery. Come and have a look at the Japanese cranes flying elegantly in the sky of Kushiro City.

### Manhole cover manufacturing process

Before a manhole cover is born, the city or council must submit ideas to the foundry. The foundry's in-house designers then develop designs based on these specifications and criteria, going back and forth until it is approved. Once confirmed, the designers proceed to create the mould before the final cast.

Recycled scrap metals, many obtained from the local factories, are the base materials for producing these incredible manhole covers. These recycled metals are first delivered to the production facility, where workers take the next step to melt them down in an induction furnace. Next, Magnesium, Sulphur, and other chemical substances are added to create sturdy resilient malleable iron. The metalsmith then removes impurities from the molten metal, before pouring into moulds with the help of manually operated machinery. This process is vital as the speed and volume is a pivotal factor affecting the quality of the finished cover. Once they cool down and the sand moulds are removed, residual sand particles are eliminated by a 'shot-blasting' (a process of firing the metals with a high-speed stream of steel particles).

Following a precision clean and polish, the covers are coated in an anti rust electrocoat. All of the parts then are assembled. After all this they are transported to their distribution center.

Here comes the final step, coloring! Not every manhole gets color, though, only the ones with particularly unique designs are hand-painted using colored resin. For a skilled worker to paint each one, it consumes no less than an hour. Last but not least, a gas burner is used to dry and harden the coloring. Voila! Newborn manhole covers are now ready to make their debut!

## EDITOR'S NOTE

I love the fact that the Japanese are big on the little things, and I'm amazed that they lavish so much attention on the details. It's funny how I started to pay attention to manhole covers only after a few visits to Japan. Now that I've become a drainspotter, I'm dying to tell Malaysians about the existence of these kawaii hidden gems in my favourite country. It's a shame that we can't travel to Japan soon, but promise me you'll go and see them for yourself someday!

(Vender ♡)



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