

FEATURES



This photo shows a heart-shaped display (left) on the counter at a floor prepared specially for Valentine's Day gift sales at a department store in Tokyo. — AFP photos



Customers shopping for chocolates at a floor prepared specially for Valentine's Day gifts at a department store in Tokyo.

Chocs away as Japan cashes in on Valentine's Day

A billion-dollar Valentine's Day bounty is on the cards for Japan's retailers as women celebrate the festival of romance by stocking up on 'obligation chocolates' for men. February 14 is a huge money-spinner for the country's confectioners, with women traditionally expected to fork out for chocolates

years, meaning more women will buy "giri choco"-or obligation chocolates for the men they work with or for. On Monday, 27-year-old Maika Suzuki visited a floor dedicated to Valentine's Day at the Mitsukoshi department store in Tokyo's Nihonbashi area to buy more than 30 boxes of chocolates for her male co-workers.

Such chocolates "are for expressing gratitude to men," she explained as she surveyed products on offer from 110 manufacturers. "Japanese men are happy to get chocolates" as there is a culture in Japan that women give them to men, she said. "We can also boost their pride" by giving them chocolates on Valentine's Day, she added. Although Japan is one of the world's most efficient and high-tech societies, marketers have exploited the country's rigid gender roles and social pressures to conform. Valentine's Day first appeared in Japan in the late 1950s when a firm called Mary Chocolate advertised February 14 as "the only day of the year a woman professes her love through presenting chocolate"—establishing it as Japan's currency of romance.

But confectionery maker Ezaki Glico said in its 2016 report that only 8.7 percent of 312 female respondents gave chocolates to the men they love. In a sign of equality, however, the country next month celebrates White Day, a Japanese event confectioners cooked up in the 1980s to keep the cash tills ringing that sees men buy a white gift such as vanilla cookies, marshmallows and handkerchiefs for the women in their lives. Marie Kondo, 24, bought nearly 30 boxes of chocolates for the men in her office, forking out a total of 10,000 yen. "But I'm going to spend more for myself," she said, adding that she plans to buy chocolates from Sadaharu Aoki, a high-end Japanese chocolatier. "To me, Valentine's Day is not a day to confess love." — AFP



A customer shopping for chocolates at a floor prepared specially for Valentine's Day gifts at a department store in Tokyo.

and gift them to boyfriends, husbands, colleagues and bosses. This year's Valentine's Day haul is estimated at 138.5 billion yen (\$1.22 billion), up three percent from 2016, according to Kinrenbi Culture Laboratory, an organization that researches Japanese holidays and other annual events.

Part of the growth, according to the organization, is due to Valentine's Day falling on a weekday for the first time in three



A woman looking for chocolates at a floor prepared specially for Valentine's Day gifts at a department store in Tokyo.



A customer (right) test-tasting some chocolates at a floor prepared specially for Valentine's Day gifts at a department store in Tokyo.



This file picture shows Japanese comic artist Jiro Taniguchi drawing in his studio in Tokyo.



This file picture shows Japanese comic artist Jiro Taniguchi at an awards ceremony at the French embassy in Tokyo.

Japanese manga legend Jiro Taniguchi dies at 69

Jiro Taniguchi, a legend in Japan's comic art of manga, died in Tokyo on Saturday at the age of 69, leaving behind an international following for his exquisite line drawing of scenes from everyday life. The artist's French publisher Casterman announced his death on its website, adding that he had been seriously ill, as it expressed its deep condolences to his family. Taniguchi first shot to fame in Japan at the end of the 1980s with the first volume of "The Times of Botchan", which centers around Natsume Soseki, one of Japan's greatest writers.

Just over a decade later, he hit the international manga scene with "A Distant Neighborhood", about a Japanese salaryman who travels back to his childhood-widely seen to this day as his masterpiece. Taniguchi's work is hailed for its delicate line drawing and intricately-constructed landscapes.

Critics have also praised his gentle subject matter for standing in stark contrast to the usual fare of high school romance or sometimes violent pornography consumed by some of Japan's manga fans. In works such as "The Walking Man", the protagonist is occupied less by any specific action as with a fascination with aspects of everyday life—the things he finds, the scenes he sees and the people he meets on his strolls through suburban neighborhoods.

'Extraordinarily kind'

Taniguchi's detailed landscapes populated by vaguely cartoonish characters drew comparisons in the West with some of the better-known European comic heroes, such as Tintin. Born in 1947 to a modest family in the city of Tottori, 100 kilometers (60 miles) northwest of the old imperial capital Kyoto, Taniguchi had his first cartoon published in 1970. He became especially popular in France, one of the biggest markets for graphic art. "He was seen by French readers, illustrators and publishers as a god, while he presented himself as a regular guy," fellow manga artist Tori Miki said on Twitter.

In 2011, the French government awarded Taniguchi the

Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters—one of the country's most prestigious prizes. Four years later, the annual cartoon festival in the French city of Angoulême held a retrospective of his work. "He was preparing a new work intended for family readership, a story in three volumes, 'The Millennium Forest,' in full color, a new approach to manga," his agent and translator Corinne Quentin told AFP in Tokyo.

Taniguchi "really did bridge the two worlds of cartoon art—Japan and France," said Sebastien Langevin, a graphic art specialist and Canal BD Manga Mag chief editor. Casterman, his publisher, also praised Taniguchi's character, describing him as an "extraordinarily kind and gentle" person. "The humanism that imbued all his work is familiar to his readers, but the man himself was much less well-known, naturally reserved in character and more inclined to let his work speak on his behalf," it said.

Hand-drawn Cambodian king to open Jolie's film on Khmer Rouge survivor

Taniguchi's panels were painstakingly hand-drawn, using paper, pen, and a craft knife. "I do not use a computer because I don't know how, I don't have that skill," he told AFP in an interview in Tokyo in 2012. "I don't know why I am also known outside Japan. Perhaps it is because my work is similar to Western comics, which I've followed for 30 years and they have influenced my subconscious," he said.

He was deeply affected by Japan's devastating 2011 tsunami and nuclear accident at Fukushima and even considered abandoning his work as useless in the face of such destruction. But he said he drew inspiration from how his fellow Japanese people dealt with the aftermath of the disaster and carried on. "I continued thanks to my readers, thanks to the voice of the survivors that made me realize that they still wanted to read my work," he said. — AFP

Pompeii unveils Roman kiss for Valentine's day

The lava may have cooled 2,000 years ago but Pompeii is a hot destination this Valentine's day with a special opening of the exceptionally preserved House of the Chaste Lovers. This rich baker's dwelling, complete with garden, stables, mill and a sumptuous fresco of a tender kiss, stands on via dell'Abbondanza, the once-bustling thoroughfare of this ancient Roman city. It also boasts the grinning skeletons of petrified mules caught in the 79AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

Visitors will be able to snatch a rare glimpse this weekend of the 1500-square meter (16,000 square foot) site. After February 14 it will close its doors again for a four-year restoration as part of a multi-million euro Pompeii preservation project. "The complex encapsulates both the beauty and the challenges of Pompeii," archaeologist Alberta Mattelone, 40, told AFP. "There is the archaeological heritage - the houses and frescoes - as well as the traces of the eruption, the volcanic deposits. Then there are the conservation problems; roofing, escarpments, preserving the frescoes," she said.

Ghosts of mules past

The kiss decorates one of the walls of the triclinium, the small dining room where ancient Romans would have lounged on couches to eat and drink. Whether the menu was cheese and honey or dormice, it will have been accompanied by freshly baked bread. Next to the triclinium sits the bakery, with its stones used to ground the grain and a large oven where flat, round loaves scored across the top were prepared and sold at a little shop next door. Just inside the shop's doorway are the scribbled running tabs of customers who still owe the baker money for bread they likely munched on with dried fruits and olives sold at the food stall opposite.

The stone mill was driven by six mules and a donkey kept in the stable and trapped inside when the molten rock and ash hit. "They were analyzed by an archaeo-

zoologist: they suffocated, all apart from one killed by a blow to the head as the building collapsed," Mattelone said, adding that the unfortunate four-legged creatures were "in an excellent state of conservation".

Behind the stable lies the House of the Painters at Work, where interior decorators were half-way through sprucing up a room when the volcano erupted, as well as a garden which is being re-created exactly as it was thanks to archaeo-botanists. The complex was first explored in 1912, unveiling a balcony later damaged by Allied bombs in the Second World War. It was not until 1982 that serious digs began. They ran until 2004 and the site opened briefly in 2010, only to close again.

'Great impact'

"We are opening it for Saint Valentine's because we wanted the public to be able to get in before we close the site to refurbish the roof and supporting structure," said Michele Granatiero, 61, the project's head architect. "It is an opportunity to create an architectural, structural and technological work of great impact," he said.

Pompeii, the second most visited attraction in Italy after the Colosseum in Rome, with a record 3.2 million visitors in 2016, has been plagued in recent years by a series of collapses due to lack of maintenance and bad weather. The rusting poles holding up the walls at the House of the Chaste Lovers will be replaced with a few external braces and dozens of underground struts. Visitors will explore the site from a new raised walkway under an aluminum and plexiglass roof. Those lucky enough to get in now will tour in groups of up to 20 around an enchanting area with mosaics of coloured marble, storerooms of ceramic pots and frescoes of birds, plants and one of the softest smooches of the Roman era. — AFP

A picture shows a fresco with a couple kissing in the House of the Chaste Lovers at the archaeological site of Pompeii, near Naples.—AFP

