

# Interview – 40 Years of Shoji Kawamori

by Dimitri Seraki | Aug 1, 2019 | Interview | 9 comments



During the month of June, an exhibition celebrating Shoji Kawamori's career 40th anniversary was held at Tokyo Dome City's Gallery AaMo.

Mr. Kawamori is one of Japan's most famous Mecha designers and the face associated with the *Macross* series. Aside from his work as a Mecha Designer, he is also a renowned director and scriptwriter on the *Macross* later series and shows such as *The Vision of Escaflowne* and *Earth Maiden Arjuna*.

The exhibition presented many original materials back from the first *Macross* series up to his latest works on *Macross Delta*, *Hisone to Masotan (The Dragon Pilot)* and *Devil May Cry 5*, as a way to celebrate Shoji Kawamori's career. The storyboards of some of *Macross*'s iconic scenes left a remarkable impression on us, so did the layouts of the movie "*Do You Remember Love?*" and various Mecha prototypes made out of cardboard or Lego bricks.

At the end of our visit, we were given the opportunity to meet with Mr. Kawamori himself for an interview. This was a chance for us to look back on various aspects of his career and expand on the exhibition's themes.

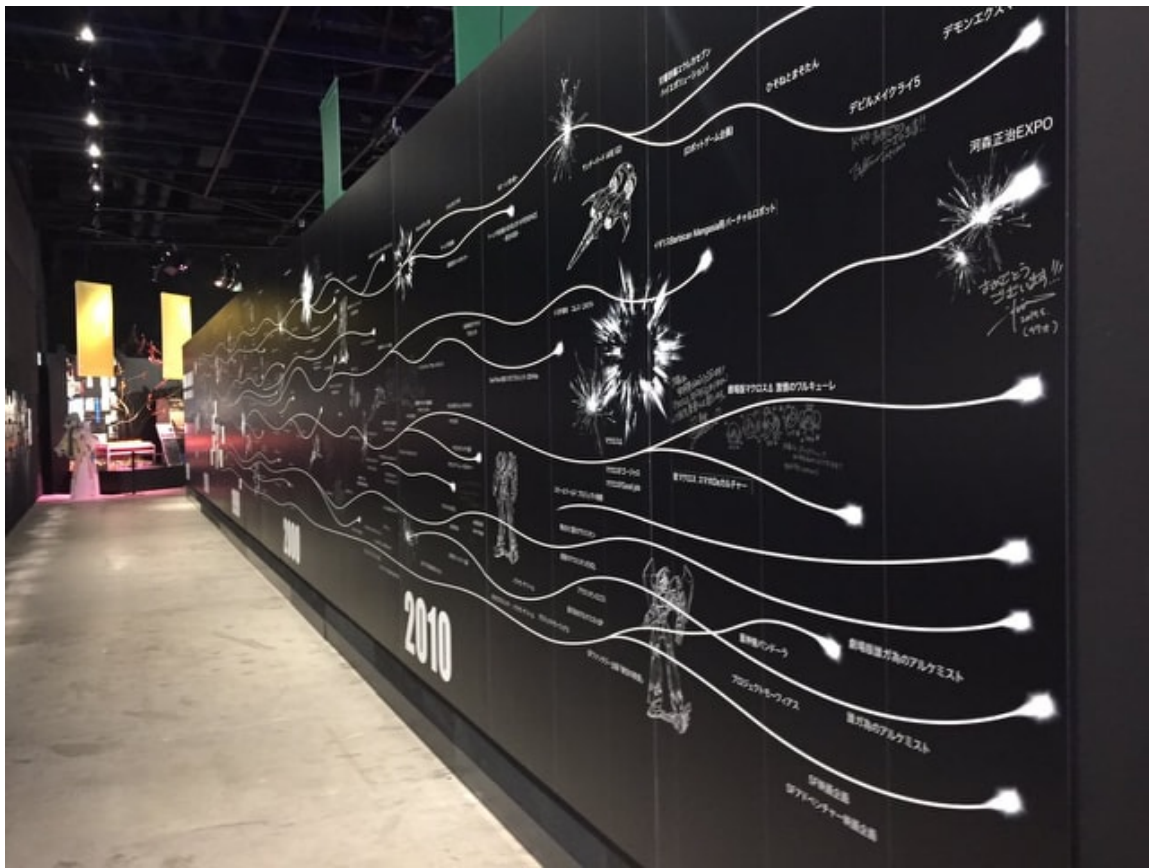


Photo Credit [KAWAMORI EXPO Official Twitter Account](#)

**At first, I'd like to talk about “Macross Do You Remember Love?”. It's amongst the most beautiful animated movies ever made. The details are incredible. How did you manage to get such details? Were you using larger celluloids?**

**Shoji Kawamori:** No, the celluloids weren't bigger. But usually you paint celluloids from the back, and special effects were made with an airbrush. That's the usual way. For “Do You Remember Love?” I painted the celluloids myself, from the front, by adding more details with MAGIC Paint Markers and more significant shadows with Pro Markers.

**Regarding the design of the Zentraedi mechs, they have a look which doesn't look mechanical. They have an almost organic design. How did you approach it?**

**S. Kawamori:** I wanted the designs to be different from the Valkyries so that one can clearly distinguish foes and allies. Also, in the future biotechnology would be more advanced, so the ships would not be developed through technology but using biologic processes, like corals, combining the mechanical and the biological.

**Regarding the show *Hisone to Masotan (The Dragon Pilot)*, how did you end up in charge of Mechanical Design?**

**S. Kawamori:** *Hisomasa* was produced by Studio BONES, whose director is M. Minami [Masahiko]. We used to work together on *Escaflowne* when he worked at Studio Sunrise. Shin-chan [Shinji Higuchi] is the director of the show. Him and Mari Okada, the show's writers, asked me to be in charge of the Mechanical Design.

**Since the dragons transform into fighter jets, Mr. Kawamori was indeed an obvious choice. Was it hard to have the armor fit with the dragon's designs?**

**S. Kawamori:** I didn't know how scary or how cute I should make them look. It was hard finding a consensus. The monster's design was handled by M. Koyama [Shigeto], and I didn't have the designs to work with for a while. So in the meantime, I was trying to imagine what the dragons could look like, but it was hard. I'm used to the transformation process itself, but it's slightly different for dragons. How are they supposed to shrink into planes? That's the kind of question I asked myself.

**Mr. Kawamori, you take much inspiration from your travels. I understand that Hinduism touched you?**

**S. Kawamori:** More than Hinduism in particular, the thing is that compared to Christianity, in which people believe in one unique God, Japanese and Asian religions are more similar to Hinduism because we have multiple deities as well. It follows the idea that there is not only one answer to a question but surely several ones.

**How does this influence your work? We can see that, especially in *Chikyuu Shoujo Arjuna (Earth Maiden Arjuna)*, you draw your inspiration from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, what is the thinking process when creating this kind of work?**

**S. Kawamori:** I took quite a bit of inspiration from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. In this scripture, there is a conversation between the prince Arjuna and Krishna. Plus, the enemies of Arjuna are members of his family (there's a dilemma). I wanted to replace the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna in a futuristic setting where we asked ourselves how to balance between technology and ecology.

**At the beginning of your career, you tended to say that technology was necessary to humankind but going further, you've taken more criticism towards that statement. With the ecological trouble world knows today, how do you see your work evolving in terms of thematics in the future?**

**S. Kawamori:** That's a difficult question. If I had to answer, in my case, I both like nature and advanced technology. Because I like both, it was difficult for people to understand my position. In Japan, too, I was asked which one I would pick. Now, in this digital century, society tends too much to exacerbate a black or white distinction between technology and nature where one should take over the other. I wish to show my vision where both should and could coexist.

**Can you tell us about how you befriended Mr. Mikimoto and Mr. Itano?**

**S. Kawamori:** I met Mikimoto in 2nd grade of High School. He was very good at drawing girls. It was impressive. Regarding Itano, I met him while working on *Crusher Joe*. We had a

great discussion about fireworks. At the time, we were young and obnoxious. We talked about *Star Wars* and how it felt too slow. We wanted to have faster action.

**It can be felt in *Macross*. The first episode has so many Circus. It differs a lot from *Gundam*, which feels turn-based. We have one shot where the Gundam fires, then a counter-shot with the enemies firing back, then another shot with the Gundam dodging. In *Macross*, all the action happens in a single shot with many camera movements. What pushed the need for such advanced and dynamic action?**

**S. Kawamori:** I was still very young. At that time, I didn't know how production worked in an anime studio, how the action was produced. I promised myself never to do the same thing as *Gundam* does. *Gundam* is produced with efficiency in mind. The production plans it that way. So on *Macross*, we tried to do the things animators were told not to do on *Gundam*.

**At the time several members of soon to be Studio Gainax came to work on *Macross*, like Mr. Anno and Mr. Sadamoto. What impression did they leave on you?**

**S. Kawamori:** At the time we were still students and great friends with Mikimoto and Hosono Fujihiko. We heard that there were very talented artists who were also SF fans in Osaka. We searched them and asked them to come to work with us in the studio. We were astonished to find such talented artists who were approximately the same age as us.

**At the exhibition, we could see a lot of prototypes done with Lego. Where did this idea come from, and what's the process behind making them?**

**S. Kawamori:** I used to do them with paper models as you can see at the start of the exhibition. Then I switched for polystyrene models. But with them, you can't redo if you have to change something you need to start from scratch again. As I used to play with Lego when I was a kid, I thought about using them for my prototypes. As for the process, it depends on the case. Sometimes I start with sketches and then build a lego prototype, but sometimes I start by doing a prototype.

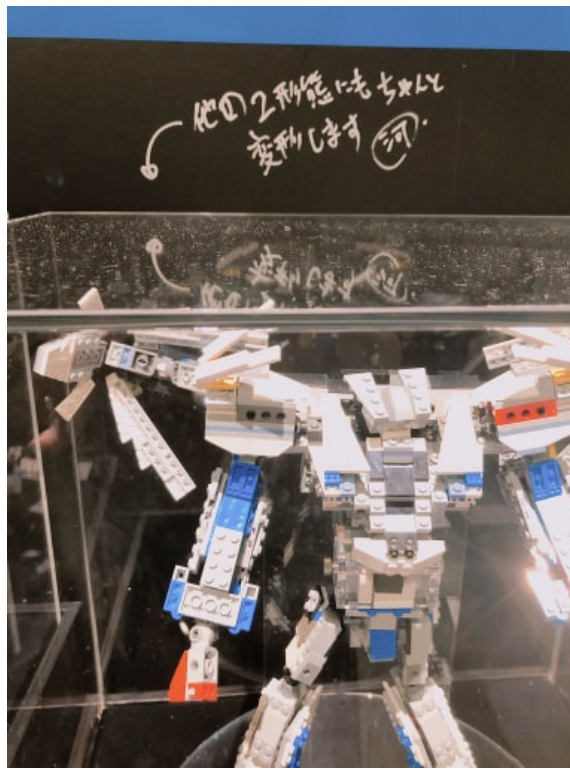


Photo Credit [KAWAMORI EXPO Official Twitter Account](#)

**Does the prototype help you to conceptualize the transformation?**

**S. Kawamori:** It does help, especially for the toymakers. If you only draw sketches, you can cheat the transformation. When you draw the transformation, the way it moves, you cheat a lot.

**Studio Satelight is a studio which employs a lot of foreign animators. How does it feel to work alongside them?**

**S. Kawamori:** It's great stimulation for me.

**Can you talk us about your relationship to Mecha Designer Stanislas Brunet?**

**S. Kawamori:** He's very good at drawing. Since he also does paper models, we can freely talk about figurines and transformations. It's easy to talk to him about those topics.

**I know you've been giving him more and more responsibilities on mecha designs.**

**S. Kawamori:** That's right. Not only mecha design in his case. In the *Macross Frontier* movie *Sayonara no Tsubasa*, he designed the stage and the spaceship in *AKB0048*.

**On the *Macross Plus* OVA series, you worked alongside [Shinichiro Watanabe](#). Can you tell us about your roles during production?**

**S. Kawamori:** I took care of the story concept, the base for the characters, and story continuity.

After that Watanabe and scriptwriter Nobumoto [Keiko] joined, we discussed and then made the script. We shared the parts for the storyboard, I took care of the main aerial

battle scenes, Watanabe of the other ones but of course we still advised each other. I checked angles and layout myself, but I let Watanabe handle details and directions. Music order was done by both of us, but I had the final decision. I also handled editing and voice recording. That's for the OVA. Then, for the movie, I managed it myself for the most. I had to adapt and edit the story of the OVA into a film, make the new movie storyboard. Maybe we could say I had more influence on the movie. That's about it.

**Concerning *Escaflowne*, it's a pretty interesting work, to my knowledge there were not many other works like that back then. How did you come to the idea behind *Escaflowne*?**

**S. Kawamori:** For *Escaflowne*, I wanted to do something different from the usual robot anime. First, I wanted to create something in another setting than space or military ones. There wasn't many fantasy anime except *Aura Battler Dunbine* when I started to think about it. I wanted to have a main character who didn't pilot the robot, so I created Hitomi. With Van, there are two main characters. Then, I wanted the psychic powers in *Escaflowne* to have the same purpose than the songs during the battles in *Macross*, that's why psychic abilities aren't used to destroy but to feel. So, in that case, I really wanted to do something different than other works.

**In the second part of the nineties, we also had much more mecha anime like *Evangelion* focusing on feelings more than battles. Was it also something you were influenced by, maybe because it was popular at the time?**

**S. Kawamori:** My motto is not to be influenced by others. For *Escaflowne*, I took 4 or 5 years to make it. During this process, there was also the same kind of ideas coming from other people.

**You started working in the animation industry at a young age compared to other people. I was wondering how you came to start so early and if it was difficult for you at that time.**

**S. Kawamori:** The first time I came to know people working in the industry was with studio Nue during my 3rd year of Junior Highschool. I think it's the experience which changed me the most at that time. The main difficulty I guess was that I was a student at the same time even if I already had several projects. Besides, at an earlier age, I didn't get proper credit.

**On which works didn't you get credit?**

**S. Kawamori:** I wasn't credited at the time of *Daimos*. For the first *Macross* series, I was credited for the designs but only by my pen name for the supervisor position. I also wasn't thought as an actual supervisor but only as a setting supervisor. It was a hard time.

**How did you come to meet the people from studio Nue?**

**S. Kawamori:** During my 3rd year in Junior Highschool, they broadcasted *Uchuu Senkan Yamato (Star Blazers)*, and I became a huge fan. Then, one of my classmates found out the

contact information of Studio Nue to visit them. Without him, we couldn't have been able to meet.

**Who was that classmate? Did he also end up working as an animator?**

**S. Kawamori:** Later he created the Ogawa Modeling company which was behind *Gunhed*. He was also involved in the preps of the movie *Sayonara Jupiter*.

**Could you tell us about your implication in the last *Devil May Cry* game? How did you come to work on it, and which designs did you create?**

**S. Kawamori:** The director of *Devil May Cry 5*, Itsuno Hideaki from Capcom, is a big fan of *Macross*, so he ordered me to work on some of the transformable hands.



**How did you handle it? What were the challenges compared to other designs you made?**

**S. Kawamori:** It's an action game, and the hand is small, so I try to visualize how to make bigger weapons. But mister Itsuno asked me to make possible transformations, so I came up with multiples ideas.

**How many designs did you make?**

**S. Kawamori:** I did eight of them.

**About *Ulysse 31*, that was a co-production between France and Japan. How was it to work with French people back then? How did you come to work with them at that time?**

**S. Kawamori:** At that time they called TMS Entertainment which itself contracted studio Nue on the project. Usually, there was a person to communicate between french and Japanese animators. A toy company was involved too, so it was a bit difficult to balance the

various ideas and opinions we had. But I didn't feel anything special by working with a French company. One particular thing was that because we worked on an anime intended for children, we were asked not to make too sharp parts. I found it interesting because we didn't have these kinds of orders for the Japanese market.

**I know the director of *Ulysse 31*, Nagahama Tadao, died during the production. Since you weren't working at TMS, you weren't directly affected but did it have any effect on the production of the show?**

**S. Kawamori:** My part of the work was already done at that time, but I was also quite surprised when I heard the news. He had done a lot of work for the animation industry.

**Yes I know he was considered to be equal to Miyazaki at that time.**

**In America, they have a modified version of Macross, which is called Robotech. Nowadays, there are a lot of people who are fans of Robotech without knowing that *Macross* exists. How do you feel about it?**

**S. Kawamori:** I don't understand, nor do I accept the fact that they took and modified my work without even asking. I can not comprehend how a pirated version like this exists. However, I feel I was very fortunate that many other people from other countries around the world were able to see *Macross*.

**Harmony Gold has a lot of new project around Robotech in America. I think they are working on a new movie, for example, do you take any credits from the American Robotech works?**

**S. Kawamori:** I don't want to talk about it. Please support the official *Macross* releases.

Obviously, we would like to take the time to thank Mr. Kawamori for the time he dedicated us, as well as Ms. Fukuyama from Studio Satelight who made this interview possible and took charge of the translation.

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