

Ghosts and Demons in Japanese Prints

The Art Institute of Chicago
Chicago, IL, USA

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The Art Institute Chicago transports visitors into the captivating realm of Japanese art with its latest exhibition, “Ghosts and Demons in Japanese Prints.” This carefully curated collection of prints offers a fascinating glimpse into the supernatural world of Japanese folklore and theater. As visitors wander through the dimly lit, long corridor-like gallery, they are confronted with a myriad of ethereal beings, each with its own story to tell. The show takes place throughout the sweltering summer—the traditional season for telling ghost stories in Japan.

The exhibition is divided into three subthemes. First, Katsushika Hokusai’s (1760–1849) *One Hundred Ghost Tales* (*Hyaku monogatari*) greets as they pass the Grand Staircase inside the museum’s main entrance. Today, only five prints are known because Hokusai did not complete the series. The Art Institute’s collection of these five illustrations is considered one of the best editions of Hokusai’s *One Hundred Ghost Tales* series. Four of this incomplete set are presented at the beginning of the exhibition. The eerie images of Oiwa, Kohada Koheji, the ghost of Sara Yashiki, and the laughing demoness Warai Hannya conjure up the world of death and the occult with the bright blue color of the Berlin Blue pigment.

The second section features images of Shōki the Demon Queller, also known as Zhong Kui in Chinese, a mythological figure who is regarded as a vanquisher of evil beings. A *surimono* print by Matsukawa Hanzan (c. 1820–1882), one of the images of Shōki displayed in the gallery, captures people’s belief in his protective power. In this print, Shōki appears on a fluttering banner, raising a

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sword in his right hand to ward off attackers. Such banners traditionally appeared at the Children's Day festival or Tango no *Sekku*, not only to celebrate the boys in a family but also to protect them against deadly diseases such as smallpox.

The third and the largest section of the exhibition is devoted to *kaidan* mono, or Kabuki ghost plays. Ghost plays were famous for their dramatic special effects, which included quick costume changes at moments when an actor turned into a ghost or used trap doors and flying devices to awe the audience. The west wall of the gallery is filled with dramatic depictions of famous Kabuki actors dressed as a female demon, a ghost, or a skeleton, famously illustrated by Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792), Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815), and others.

The exhibition also highlights the Art Institute's two recent acquisitions of illustrated ghost story books: *Kyōsai's Pictorial Record of One Hundred Goblins* (*Kyōsai hyakki gadan*) by Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889) and *Ghost Story by Yotsuya* (*Yotsuya Kidan*) by Shunbaisai Hokuei (c. 1824–1837) from the Martin A. Ryerson Collection. Visitors cannot help but be struck by the meticulous craftsmanship evident in the displayed books and illustrations. The precision of the woodblock technique is a testament to the dedication of the artists who labored on these prints. The detailed expressions on the faces of the ghosts evoke their anguish and remorse, while the demons exude a powerful aura that is both alluring and intimidating. The use of vibrant colors and delicate lines brings a sense of life to these otherworldly beings, blurring the line between reality and the supernatural.

"Ghosts and Demons in Japanese Prints," curated by Janice Katz, Roger L. Weston Associate Curator of Japanese Art, is on view at the Art Institute's Clarence Buckingham Gallery of Japanese Prints from July 15 through October 15, 2023. Clarence Buckingham (1854–1913) and her sister Kate Buckingham (1858–1937) donated their collection of Japanese prints and an endowment to the museum. Since then, the original gift of some 2,500 works has grown to more than 12,000, a selection of which is regularly displayed in this gallery.