

CREATURES OF THE DARK



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection



Art Gallery New South Wales, Yasuko Myer Bequest Fund 2018



Minneapolis Institute of Art, gift of Louis W Hill, Jr

Charles Shafaieh takes a journey through the supernatural forces of Japanese art

Japanese folklore is replete with ogres, magical animals and even anthropomorphised household objects. One of the most widely known stories concerns an oni, loosely translated as a demon, named Ibaraki-doji, who haunted Kyoto's southern gate. According to some interpretations of the legend, upon being told of its presence, the legendary samurai Watanabe no Tsuna travelled to the gate to investigate. As he approached, a fierce wind arose and he felt a large hand exert pressure on his head. Waving his sword through the air in defence, the warrior sliced off the oni's arm, forcing it to flee. Later, the creature returned disguised as Watanabe's aunt. Fooled by this transformation, Watanabe welcomed the demon and proceeded to show it the box in which he kept its arm. Upon seeing the missing appendage, Ibaraki grabbed it and

flew away, turning back into a terrifying beast as it escaped.

Since the early 19th century, such tales about the supernatural have been staples at kabuki theatres during the summer months. The logic holds that these stories induce a much-needed shiver in audiences sweltering in the heat. Sydney's Art Gallery of NSW no doubt hopes Australians will feel similarly inclined this summer as they visit its new major exhibition, *Japan Supernatural*. Curated by Melanie Eastburn, the museum's senior curator of Japanese art, the show features an impressive collection of fantastical woodblock prints, paintings, sculptures, photography, animation and carved objects spanning more than three centuries. In addition to those works on loan from Australian and international institutions like the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, the Art Gallery of NSW has commissioned a six-panel, large-format painting series by Takashi Murakami.

Many of the otherworldly beings represented in the exhibition are collectively referred to as yokai — a catch-all term meaning “strange” or “eerie” that was popularised by the scholar Inoue Enryō (1858-1919). Believed to exist everywhere around us, and often invisible, these beings help explain the existence of “inexplicable” phenomena as diverse as thunder and the unappealing brown stains found on ceilings. Unlike corollary entities in other mythologies, they cannot be categorised into a clear-cut Manichean system of good and evil. Rather, like humans, they have the potential to be both benevolent and malevolent, and how they are treated in an encounter or venerated in their absence can determine the nature of their manifestations and demeanour.

Due to Japan's effective use of soft power beginning in the latter half of the 20th century that continues today, yokai have become a constant presence internationally through manga such as Shigeru Mizuki's series *GeGeGe no Kitarō*, first published in 1960, the video game franchises *Pokemon* and *Yo-kai Watch*, and horror films like *Ju-On: The Grudge*. But it is not widely known outside the country that these works that seem so contemporary in their aesthetic and narrative content are intimately tied to ancient religious beliefs as well as a tradition of supernatural-themed art that reached its height during the Edo period (1603–1868).

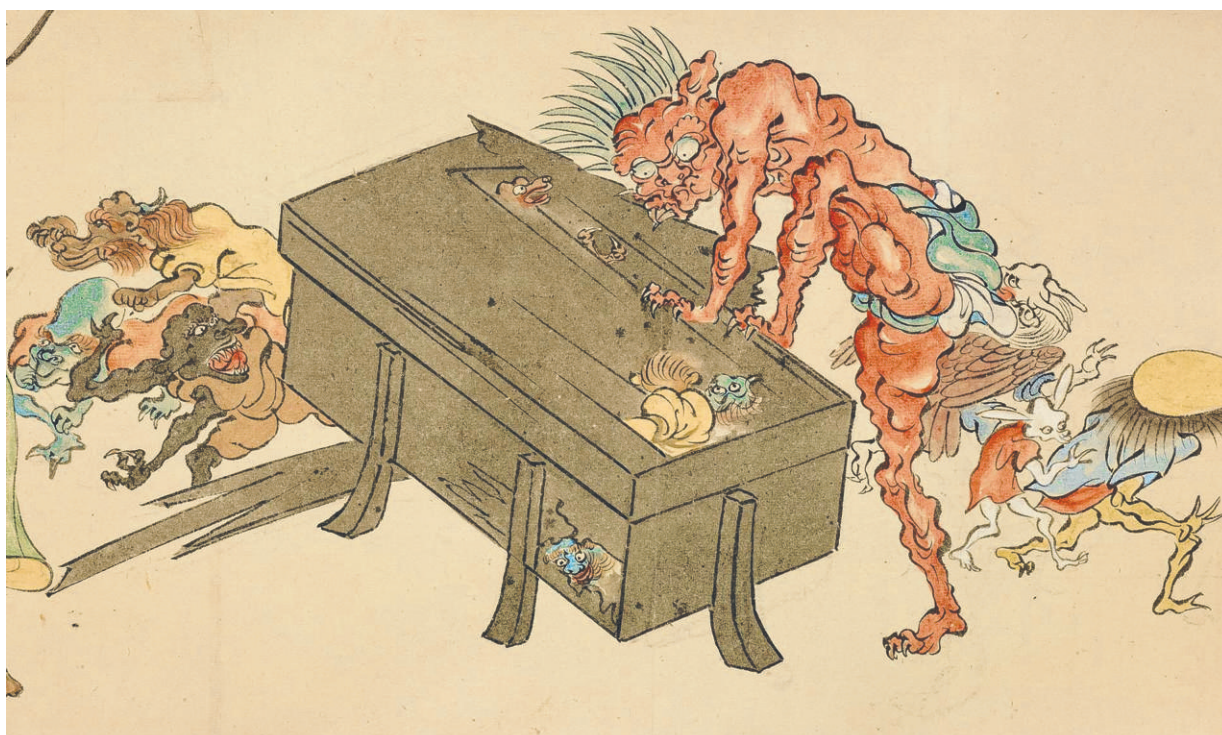
Yokai have long been a facet of Shintoism, Japan's animistic indigenous religion, and evolved following the importation of Buddhism and Taoism from China and Korea. They did not, however, assume a significant role in local popular culture until the mid-18th century. The artist Toriyama Sekien (1712–88) is

credited as the principal instigator of this shift when, in a manner akin in its significance to the Brothers Grimm's documentation of European folklore, he created a pictorial “record” of these mythic creatures.

Sekien's output includes the silk hand scroll painting *Night Procession of the Hundred Demons* (1772-81), the only existing version of which is a highlight of the exhibition. It begins quietly at night, with a pine tree and cherry blossoms painted in the academic style using fine, meticulous brushstrokes. As the scroll unrolls from right to left, an elderly couple appears. While they seem human, a vaporous plume that emerges from the tree trunk acts as a subtle sign that they are in fact spirits of the tree — a form of kami, a highly respected divine presence in Shintoism. More unambiguously supernatural creatures follow, such as a rokuro-kubi (potter's wheel neck) that looks like a normal woman except for her head flying far from her body thanks to a long, tube-like neck, and a grotesque kappa, known to Harry Potter readers as an aquatic beast that is part frog, part tortoise with a concave skull that serves as a water basin. If the water spills, its powers disappear. As the painting continues, Sekien's technique becomes more expressionistic, with splashes of red pigment around the ghost of a mother who died in childbirth and the concluding image of yokai silhouettes as they vanish into the ether when the sun emerges from behind night's black clouds.

Visitors to the exhibition will see both this painting and Itaya Hiroharu's more humorous scroll on the same theme (c. 1860) fully extended. Like all such scrolls though, these were originally intended for a single viewer who, as they slowly unwound the cloth, would only see small segments of the work at one time. This movement creates a proto-cinematic effect and imbues these paintings with a sense of drama and even suspense. The continuous landscape in both also gives the impression that the narrative may continue without end, which in turn supports the notion that yokai might be found anywhere.

While Sekien painted for a scroll's individual audiences, he reached the masses thanks to Japan's robust publishing industry with a series of black-and-white books that became the most significant and influential yokai encyclopaedia. Each page features a different yokai in its natural setting, including nekomata, cats whose tails have split, who walk on two legs and can converse with humans, and yamabiko, a monkey-like being believed responsible for the echoes produced in mountainous areas. As with the scrolls, the cumulative effect of this bestiary is a sense of the constant presence of these beings — specifically as Sekien depicted



Art Gallery NSW, Asian Collection Benefactors Fund 1995. Picture: Jenni Carter



Private collection, courtesy Look Gallery Berlin



Private collection, courtesy Look Gallery Berlin

Clockwise from far left Kawanabe Kyosai's A nose-pulling contest with an elephant and the great tengu does calligraphy (1863); Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's The old woman retrieves her arm (1889); Katsushika Hokusai's The ghost of Kohada Koheiji (c1831-32); Itaya Hiroharu's Night procession of the hundred demons (c1860); Miwa Yanagi's Rapunzel (2004); and The little match girl (2004)

ed them. "They became a generation's memory of how these monsters look," says Anne Nishimura Morse, the William and Helen Pounds senior curator of Japanese Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

As widely collected as these books and those they inspired were, individual woodblock prints were disseminated even more and purchased by nearly every group within Japanese society. Costing only about the price of a small meal, they were affixed to domestic walls, not unlike university students decorating their dormitories with inexpensive posters. When owners got bored with one image, they would simply tear it off and replace it with others, any of which might also disintegrate. "Some kept them in albums but, really, this was an art form that was consumed," explains Andreas Marks, the Mary Griggs Burke Curator of Japanese and Korean Art at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. "It's comparable to The New Yorker magazine — how many people keep them?" This practice explains why, despite the hundreds of

thousands of prints produced, only a small percentage remain. Lost as well are the identities of those carvers who created virtuosic effects, such as intricate embossing of kimono fabric or burnishing that makes dark evening skies shimmer, that are visible only in the original prints.

Some prints feature macabre scenes, such as the five images from Hokusai's One Hundred Ghost Stories. In this series, Hokusai depicts one of Japan's most well-known yurei, or ghosts, named Okiku, who haunts her husband because he killed her by throwing her down a well after she broke one of his precious plates. Hokusai depicts Okiku with a rokuro-kubi's neck made of porcelain plates as she emerges from the well and coolly breathes a plume of smoke against a deep indigo sky. Other images are more comical than creepy, such as Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's The Greedy Old Woman, whose trio of bulbous monsters seem like characters in Futurama.

Not all prints were decorative though. Despite their prohibition, political cartoons critical of the government were often made using the supernatural as a thinly veiled cover of its message. Consider Kawanabe Kyosai's Comic One Hundred Turns of the Rosary (1864). The title refers to a practice at Buddhist temples in which a giant rosary would be passed, but Kyosai presents a diverse cast of humans and beasts performing the ritual surrounding a gigantic octopus with only five tentacles. The spineless creature is thought to symbolise Japan and each appendage represents one of the five nations involved in a controversial trade treaty signed a few years after Japan broke its seclusion policy in 1854.

Around this time and coinciding with Japan's pivot towards scientific rationalism upon its engagement with Europe and America, supernatural-themed art suffered a decades-long ban. Yet even so, these figures did not disappear; they merely transformed. Again, outside influence played a significant role in their evolution, this time through Greek-born Irish writer Lafcadio Hearn, who spent his latter years teaching at Japanese universities. Hearn rewrote and published these stories first in America in the collection Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things (1904). However problematic they may be, Hearn's versions became popular in Japan, too, and even inspired Masaki Kobayashi's award-winning film, Kwaidan (1965).

The worldly cosmopolitan and ever-morphing identity of the fantastical in Japanese art remains true, as exemplified by the black-and-white photograph series Fairy Tale (2004–05) by Miwa Yanagi (b. 1967). Yanagi took inspiration from both traditional art and those European folktales brought to Japan around the time Hearn was exporting Japanese stories. In the unnerving Rapunzel, a dense mane of black hair — a common trait of female yurei, including Sadako Yamamura in the film Ringu — descends inexplicably from a hole in a dilapidated attic's ceiling. A figure with a child's body wearing a mask of a wrinkled old woman, similar to those from Noh theatre, holds a large pair of shears in a room already littered with hair while a young girl gazes at the scene from the floor.

Pictorial representations such as this and the other art in this exhibition were long believed to temper some of the power these entities possessed by making them less mysterious. Yet Yanagi's enigmatic scenes, especially when displayed alongside centuries of works with similar themes, suggests that such mastery is not so easy. Rather, a show like Japan Supernatural — itself an iteration of Sekien's bestiary through its size and scope — furthers the long-held notion that the supernatural beings from Japanese culture are not easily understandable, that they cannot be concretely defined or managed, and that they seem present everywhere at all times, regardless of political or social trends. The sheer variety of this horde, which extends to the Pokemon GO characters that we are told surround us, instead complicates our understanding of what we perceive as real. It is possible that rather than taming the supernatural, these pieces hint at what is happening in the realm of the invisible — a proposition that, like many yokai, is simultaneously wondrous and terrifying.

Japan Supernatural is at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from November 2 to March 8, 2020.



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