

## 6 *Oni*: the Japanese Demon

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Throughout Japanese folklore, legend, and religious apocrypha, certain supernatural beings called *oni* exist which incarnate universal forces, sometimes beneficial but most often destructive to the human world. Easily moving between the realms of the living and the dead, these demonic spirits often interact with luckless humans. For Japanese artists, *oni* became the means to depict not only malignant supernatural forces, but one side of the inherent nature of mankind as well.

*Oni* have already been introduced in the discussion of the origin of Shōki the demon queller (see chapter 5). One account of Emperor Ming-huang's dream describes the mischievous spirit as being horned and wearing a tigerskin loincloth. Artistic depictions of male *oni* such as a large staghorn *netsuke* (Cat. 43) often follow the description. The neckless demon with furrowed brow possesses two horns and a wide mouth revealing fangs. The *oni*'s toes and fingers are claws. His arms are raised at the shoulders as though he is ensnared. His worried expression seems to reflect such a desperate situation, for indeed, as

a *netsuke* he would be "caught" and tied around the sash of his owner. The quality of the staghorn is masterfully brought out by the carver. Rather than polishing the entire surface, he has left the porous matter exposed in areas of shadow.

The Japanese *oni* may not be inherently malicious, but merely apt to cause trouble. This is true not only of Emperor Ming-huang's demon, but of the earliest recorded female *oni* in Japan as well. This female demon is described in the *Kojiki* (ca. 712),<sup>1</sup> which relates the Age of the Gods and tales of creation. A grotesque female spirit, *shikome*, is sent to catch Izanagi before he leaves *Yomi*, the land of the dead. His visit to *Yomi* was prompted by a desire to see his wife, Izanami, who died from childbirth. Repulsed at the sight of his wife's decaying body, Izanagi flees. He manages to distract the *shikome* enough to successfully escape *Yomi* and return to the land of the living. This *shikome* is not necessarily evil, but merely a very ugly servant of the underworld. The *shikome* may have served as a prototype for all female demons.



45 Hannya Mask

Many examples of female demon masks are available in *netsuke* form. Their ugly countenances are reminiscent of the early descriptions of *shikome*. A specific type of female demon, called *hannya*, is characterized by a particular psychological force. She is fearful, wrathful, and often represents a highly jealous female.<sup>2</sup> Usually *hannya* are depicted with horns, as in two unsigned wooden mask *netsuke* representing different versions of vengeful female demons. The smaller piece has a round face with glass-inlaid eyes (Cat. 44). Her nubby horns are visually offset by a knobby chin. Her mouth is open, displaying two fangs, but her overall expression is not as dreadful as one might expect. The larger *hannya netsuke* attains the visual terror of a wrathful demon (Cat. 45). Though she has no fangs, her mouth has been bored open to reveal a malicious grin of bared teeth.

Her horns are sharp and point straight out. The rectangular face with squared jaw and round, glaring eyes conveys the sense of a cruel, hard, and cold female demon.

A huge freely brushed sketch by Shibata Zeshin (1807-1891), made in preparation for his finished painting at the Zenzōji temple, shows a *hannya* flying through the air (Cat. 46). Zeshin has depicted a tenth-century legend in which the *hannya* endangered all who passed through the Rashōmon gate in Kyoto. A hero named Watanabe no Tsuna waited by the bridge to confront her but was persuaded to leave by a beautiful woman. While they were riding away on his horse, Watanabe glanced over his shoulder and was shocked to find the beauty transforming into a demon. As she began to lift him off his horse, Watanabe swiftly drew his sword and cut off her arm, which he then kept in a locked chest. Several months later the *hannya*, disguised as Watanabe's aunt, managed to gain his trust and convinced him to bring out his "trophy." She once again reverted to her devilish form, grabbed the arm and fled.

Zeshin's sketch reveals the *hannya* in her moment of flight. Her bulbous eyes strain and her jaw, exaggerated to reveal jagged teeth, hangs open as she looks behind her in fear of Watanabe's reprisal. She clutches her clawed arm as her garments billow from the velocity of her escape. Zeshin's deft brush captures the sense of her anxiety and screaming speed with a few expressively modulated strokes. The female *oni* with all her supernatural powers is conquered by Watanabe no Tsuna in legend and by Zeshin's brush on paper.

*Oni* did not only represent particular legendary beings but also natural forces. Throughout Asia, the devastating anger of storm spirits has been personified as demons in the form of wind and thunder deities. A boxwood *netsuke* by Tomokazu (active late 18th-early 19th century)

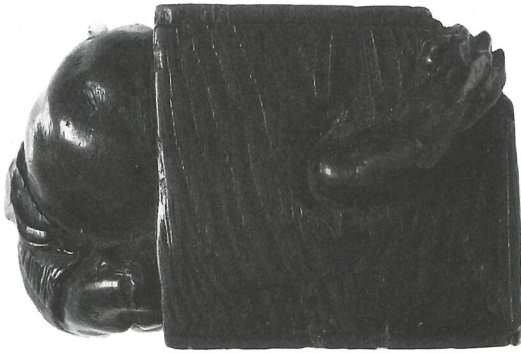




46 Shibata Zeshin, *Hannya Retrieving Her Arm*



47 Kano Tomokazu, *Wind and Thunder God*



49 Oni Hiding in a Box

of Gifu shows a combined wind and thunder god oni crouched, his clawed toes on a swirling cloud, with a drum upon his back (Cat. 47). Pulling more clouds from his bag, the demon bares his fangs, while his horns protrude from the long hair which covers his neck. Drumming up thunder, blowing out wind, this is a fierce spirit indeed.

A common Japanese rite used to avert natural disasters caused by oni is known as *oniyarai* or *tsuina* (demon expelling). On the night of the last day of the year the ceremony is performed at the Imperial Palace to banish ills and evils. The rite became popular among the populace as well, and was used to drive out the oni associated with the diseases and misfortunes of the previous year. Specially prepared beans are scattered in the four directions while the chant, "In with fortune, out with the oni!" is repeated. An ivory *netsuke* signed Suzuki Kōsai (active late 19th century) depicts Uzume, the deity of mirth, who has just thrown the ceremonial beans at an oni who flees towards the left (Cat. 48). A detailed engraving on the reverse shows the demon in flight with both feet in the air and its head bent down to avoid the beans. In another more humorous wooden *netsuke* an oni tries to hide in a box while beans are pelting his back (Cat. 49). In this work of the early nineteenth century, the carver has skillfully contrasted the wood grain of the

box with the oni's body and his characteristic loincloth.

Depictions of oni reached a zenith of artistic expression during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Japan, but the form and character of these demons are a result of long interaction between native beliefs and Buddhism, which was imported in the mid-sixth century. This religion introduced to Japan a clear distinction between heaven and hell. The regent of hell, Emma, is often accompanied by red and blue oni who carry out his judgments.

A triptych by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892), entitled *The Fever of Taira no Kiyomori*, shows Emma and his demon servants waiting for the soul of the dying man (Cat. 50). The fever killing Kiyomori is a curse he brought upon himself through his treacherous and unpius deeds. The oni flanking Emma seem to be waiting for their master's signal to cross the barrier of flames, anticipating the tortures to be inflicted upon Kiyomori's soul. The grotesque servants of hell add terror to the strangely colored imagery of this unworldly scene. Yoshitoshi overtly contrasts the infernal realm with the world of the living in which Kiyomori's wife and son pray reverently for his redemption.

Buddhist oni do not always represent the forces of evil or hell. At times the soul of a revered priest became an oni in order to protect his followers by dispelling disasters which could harm them. The Tendai priest Gazan Ryōgen became such an oni. As the eighteenth abbot of Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei during the tenth century, Ryōgen carried out the restoration of the temple buildings and established rules of pious behavior. After his death, his soul remained on Mt. Hiei, for he had promised to reappear as a demon to ensure the temple's well-being. In accord with his promise, Ryōgen's physical appearance hardened and two horns grew from his head. An



original carved woodblock depicts an abstract version of the horned priest (*tsunodaishi*), as Ryōgen came to be called (Cat. 51). The “hardened” body is expressed by sectioned areas which distinguish his chest and abdomen. His horns sit atop his head in a W-shape with the ends pointing outward. Such prints were often distributed by mountain ascetics to be hung over doorways in order to ward off evil or misfortune.

Zen Buddhism provided numerous opportunities for the depiction of *oni* as evil forces overcome by good. An ink painting by the monk Shunsō (1750-1835) visually expresses the power of religious meditation (*zazen*) which can convert even the corrupt forces of an *oni* (Cat. 52). The demon, in a pose of meditation, looks humbly upward while his mallet, so often used as a tool for devilish tricks, is discarded before him. He wears a tigerskin loincloth and one of his two horns has been broken. Freely drawn wavy lines indicate his once coarse, now palpable, skin. His grisly hair is softened, too, by the monk-artist’s light touches of the brush. Shunsō’s inscription emphasizes the power of *zazen* meditation:

This is the ultimate test of the  
meritorious two words [*zazen*].  
Resolving right or wrong, in a  
tigerskin,  
And breaking the horns of a  
corrupt demon.

As well as the strict practices of Zen, Buddhism offered to the Japanese public a number of displays of religious rites, including ceremonial dances. Some of these are still performed today, such as *gigaku*, a form of masked dance imported from Korea in the year 612, and a Chinese-derived ceremonial dance called *bugaku*. Furthermore, under the influence of Zen, Buddhist ceremonial dances and theatrical presentations were transformed into the formal and restrained *noh* drama. Utilizing a variety



51 The Horned Priest Ryōgen



52 Shunsō, Oni in Zazen

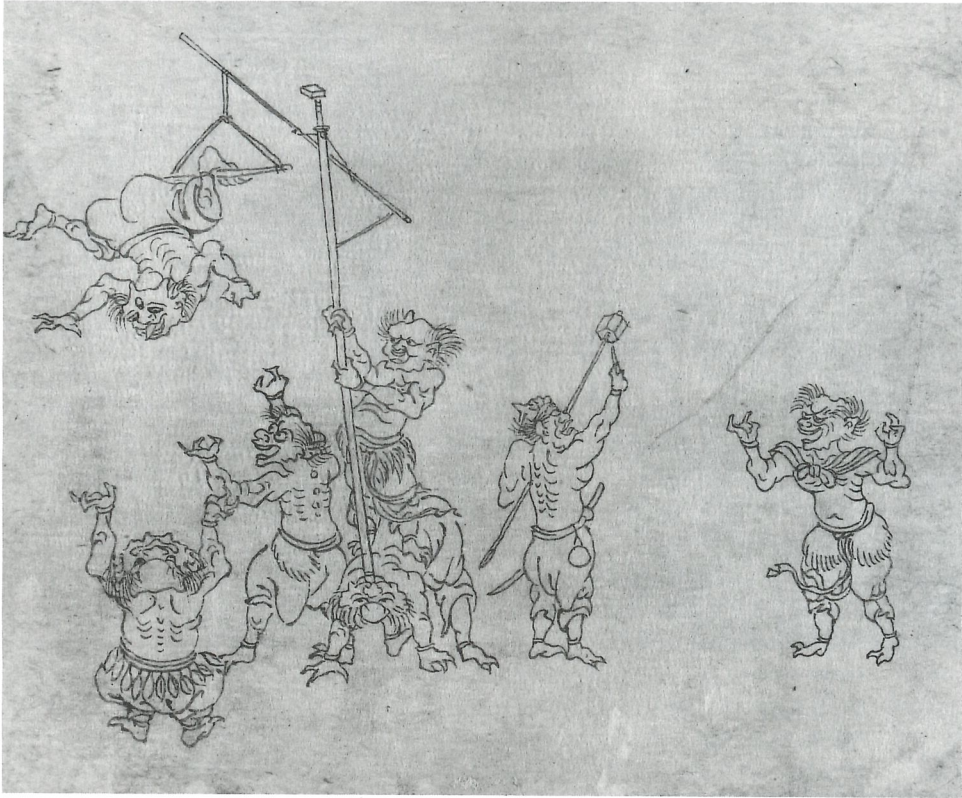
of masks, *gigaku*, *bugaku*, and *noh* include a wide repertoire of demon characters taken from both Buddhism and popular folklore.

In popular ceremonial presentations, demons usually appear in the performances staged last on any particular day. Subjects of these closing dances include anything supernatural and are often humorous. *Sarugaku*, translated “monkey dances,” are included in this category, although they are more like acrobatic shows than dances. A small ink drawing by Kawanabe Gyōsai (1831-1889) portrays *oni* as acrobats, possibly in a *sarugaku* performance (Cat. 53). Although the *oni* are shown with horns and claws, Gyōsai has them gesturing in playful antics and grimacing with humorous facial contortions. The drawing is delicate and relaxed, heightening the whimsical portrayal of beings who can otherwise be ferocious.

The vanquishing of ferocious *oni* often exemplifies the military skills of Japanese heroes. Minamoto no Yoritomo of the twelfth century is credited with numerous miraculous feats. More than seven feet tall, with his left (bow) arm four inches longer than his right, Yoritomo was considered the greatest archer in Japan. His mighty bow was over eight feet long. In a drawing attributed to Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, Yoritomo’s ability to bend his bow is matched against the forces of nine demons (Cat. 54). Try as they might, their pulling is to no avail. Yoritomo himself sits and watches in haughty amusement. The crisp lines and sharp details defining the hero act as a foil against the wriggly lines and rough contours defining the *oni*. As if undecided on the exact expression Yoritomo should display, the artist sketched another calmer and clean-shaven face next to his drawing.

The use of crisp lines and striking sense of color is evident in Yoshitoshi’s 1889 print of Lord Sadanobu (Cat. 55).





53 Kawanabe Gyōsai, Oni as Acrobats



54 Oni Can't Bend the Hero's Bow

Through sheer determination Sadanobu wards off a demon that has grabbed his sword from behind. The reddish brown hues of the *oni* are graded to emphasize his rippling muscles. His disproportionately long left leg extends behind Sadanobu, exposing a hairy foot with three claws. The demon roars in frustration as Sadanobu stands firm, refusing to be frightened. Yoshitoshi's use of a black-on-black pattern for Sadanobu's robe adds a note of refined elegance to the portrayal of the stern hero.

An impressive pair of six-fold screens dating from the second quarter of the seventeenth century visually narrates the legend of the greatest military conquest over demons (Cat. 56). The *Tale of Mount Ōe* describes how Minamoto no Yorimitsu, along with four trusty warriors, destroyed an *oni* stronghold. The narrative is masterfully arranged across both screens, beginning and ending in the lower right corner of the right screen. Through divination rites, Lord Kunimasa discovers that his daughter, among other fair maidens of the capital, has been abducted by the evil demon, Shuten Dōji, and is being held captive in his fortress on Mount Ōe. Kunimasa takes his case to the Emperor, who then commissions Yorimitsu to find and rescue the missing women. Aware of the danger involved, Yorimitsu prays at a shrine for three days, invoking the aid of the Shinto war god Hachiman. The narrative continues across the upper portions of the two screens as Yorimitsu and his companions traverse hills and forests in their quest. With the aid of mountain ascetics, they come upon one of the missing ladies at a stream. She is washing the robes of a fellow prisoner, now dead at the hands of Shuten Dōji. The distraught woman recounts the scenes of horror occurring at the demon's fortress and leads Yorimitsu and his men to its gates. Disguised as mountain ascetics, they enter. Shuten Dōji, seeing an opportunity for fresh

male meat, plies his guests with food (human flesh) and drink (blood). Yorimitsu, in return, offers the demons his own sake, which has been drugged. Once the wicked beings get drunk and sick, the warriors throw off their disguises and proceed to annihilate them. The climax of the battle is shown in the last two panels of the left screen. The captive ladies help bind the *oni* chieftain while Yorimitsu cuts off his head. The lower portions of both screens contain the heroes' triumphal procession; the surviving *oni* are subjugated and the women are brought back to the capital. Although Lord Kunimasa's daughter is safely returned, there is one sad note to the ending. The noble parents of the woman whose flesh and blood was served at Shuten Dōji's banquet can receive only a lock of hair in her stead.

The artist has drawn from a vast repertoire of *oni* types to compile his demon forces. The chief demon, Shuten Dōji, is red and the others are various shades of green, blue, and brown. Their features are exaggerations of grotesque noses, ears, and eyes, occasionally similar to those of bats, pigs, and birds. Several demons have clawed toes or hands, some have third eyes, and others have fangs and horns. The artist has left no doubt as to the evil forces behind these creatures. The angular brush strokes, technical virtuosity, careful composition, and colorful depiction tend to indicate that these screens are from the Kano school of painters.<sup>3</sup> The quality of representation and the unique manner in which the tale is arrayed across both screens make them an exceptional work of art in addition to a vivid testimonial to Yorimitsu's martial prowess.

Although *oni* have most frequently represented the demonic forces of the supernatural, during the Edo period in particular, their dichotomous behavior often became the subject of satirical parodies. An ashtray *netsuke* illustrates

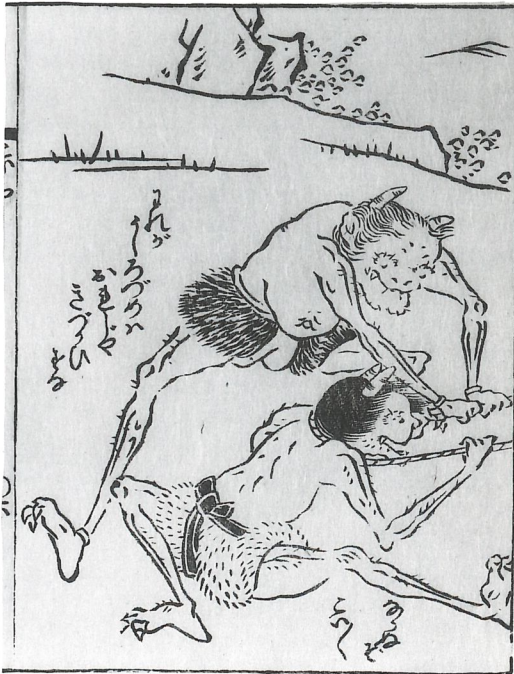




57 Oni Ashtray



58 Oni



59 Oni in a Tug of War





61 Oni as an Itinerant Priest



a fitting role for a servant of hell (Cat. 57). The lid of the metal container is crowned with two horns while the bowl is molded with the facial features of a bearded, two-fanged demon. How apt, indeed, is an *oni* head for the receptacle of ashes! Comical, too, is the sight of an *oni* grunting under the weight of a sacred building. This large wood sculpture of a demon is the work of a folk artist and was probably used as an architectural support in a country temple (Cat. 58). His stance and great mass bring to mind a sumo wrestler ready to pit his utmost strength against his opponent.

A page from the woodblock-printed *Toba-e fude byōshi* (Comic Pictures in Rhythmic Brushplay, 1772),<sup>4</sup> attributed to Hasegawa Mitsunobu (active 1730-1760), shows a tug of war with the rope looped around the contestants' necks (Cat. 59). The scene is from a *kyōgen* play in which several *oni* are forced to lead Asahina Yoshihide to heaven because he wins the tug of war. Mitsunobu adds visual irony by giving Asahina leverage through pressure on the foot of his *oni* opponent.

In the world of satire, how can an *oni* be a true Edo dandy without a visit to the brothel? Utagawa Yoshiiku (1833-1904) parodies the "thriving business of Asakusa" in his diptych of 1860 (Cat. 60). Four *oni* dressed as noblemen and samurai unabashedly peruse two courtesans displaying their finery behind the "viewing window." The parody is clear; the *oni* posing as dandies show

the less than gallant nature of fashionable gentlemen. Yoshiiku's use of bright colors heightens the element of satire.

A final transformation of the *oni* image is an Ōtsu-e painting of *oni no nembutsu* (*Oni* as an Itinerant Priest, Cat. 61). Ōtsu-e have long been produced by the villagers of Ōtsu, near Ōsakayama on the Tōkaidō Road. Their rapidly brushed and naively colored images are unsigned and undated. *Oni no nembutsu*, originally intended as a Buddhist icon, rapidly became a satirical comment on human failings. The *oni* priest carries an umbrella on his back, a wooden pole in his right hand, and a subscription list in his left. Traveling the countryside, he sounds the gong which is hanging over his chest, reminding people of their religious duties and asking for alms. But beware! Is he really a demon converted to Buddhism? Or is he tricking donors into contributing money for an evil cause?

This theme of an itinerant *oni* priest became so popular that it was used as a standard signboard advertisement by Ōtsu-e painters. At a time when the image of *oni no nembutsu* became an invitation for prospective buyers of Ōtsu-e, it is clear that the original spiritual nature of the demon had been thoroughly transformed by the secular wit and humor of the age. While the belief in *oni* has never been completely lost in Japan, its fearsome supernatural powers have been superseded by its parody of human frailties.

1 This episode is found in Book 1, Chapter 10.

2 See chapter 9.

3 In particular, the treatment of landscape elements seems based upon a scroll attributed to Kano Motonobu (1476-1559), in the Suntory Museum of Art. Sections of the scroll are reproduced in *Bijutsu kenkyū* 270 (July 1970), p. 72, pl. 19 and in *Kokka* 204 (May 1907), pp. 663-5.

4 Several editions of this work exist, dated variously from 1724 to 1823.

Photography for Cat. 56 by Eric Pollitzer, New York.

# Japanese Ghosts & Demons Art of the Supernatural

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