

MOSTRI, SPIRITI
E ALTRE INQUIETUDINI
NELLE **STAMPE GIAPPONESI**

LA NUOVA MOSTRA

150 OPERE INEDITE



怪
談
集

mostrigiapponesi.it

Yōkai - Monsters, spirits and other disturbing creatures in Japanese prints

Sensations, anxieties and fears of the Edo period

After long internal struggles, the Edo period began in Japan at the start of the 17th century, ushering in a period of peace and stability that was to last over two hundred years. It was characterised by the sakoku policy, or “closed country”, aimed at preventing any contact with the West, by strict political and social control and by profound economic imbalances. In artistic production – both figurative and literary – the aesthetic of “twilight”, *tasogare* in Japanese, emerged, suited to giving voice to this era of transformation. The *yōkai* and *yūrei*, the monsters and spirits that have populated Japanese legends since their origins, when they were handed down orally, perfectly embody the feelings, anxieties, fears and desires that were the result of this particular historical moment.

And so the *odokuro*, giant hungry skeletons, the *bakeneko*, monstrous cats, the *kappa*, aquatic beings that harass boats, and the *kitsune*, attractive fox women, began to be depicted by famous artists, invading *ukiyo-e* prints, where they mingled with scenes and spaces of everyday life – city alleys, merchants’ homes, major thoroughfares, pleasure quarters, theatres – to recount the re-emergence of everything that people try to hide, control and regulate: the fear of the night, with shadows lurking in the streets or in the countryside forgotten by the process of urbanisation; passions that explode uncontrollably and challenge rigid codes of behaviour; the threat of creatures that hide at the bottom of rivers and return to reclaim the space and time of nature that man tries to govern.



Find out more by watching the video



YŌKAI, YŪREI, ONI, BAKEMONO, KAPPA AND TENGU

Fear on Display

Bizarre amphibians, animated objects, shape-shifters, skeletons and ghosts, disturbing and improbable hybrids: the aesthetics of the grotesque and the monstrous have pervaded Japanese culture since its origins, playing a leading role in visual art and literature thanks to the exceptional vitality of its creative potential, which allows it to be reincarnated in ever-new images and narratives.

From the traditional figures of bakemono and yūrei crystallised in ukiyoe prints from the Edo period (1603-1868) to the esoteric-apocalyptic exoskeletons of Evangelion, the Pokémon parade, the disturbing protagonists of J-Horror and cyberpunk, Murakami Takashi's super-flat monsters and the urban aesthetics of monster kawaii, the monstrous retains its exceptional energy and continues to establish itself as a privileged symbol of a culture perceived as constantly changing.

The word yōkai is composed of two characters, 妖 (yō) and 怪 (kai): the first suggests charm, enchantment; the second means appearance, mystery. The creatures that fall into this category are practically innumerable. After all, Japan is the land of eight thousand deities, because every natural element – trees, rocks, streams – but also every object created by human ingenuity or labour can contain a spark of the divine. Japanese culture, therefore, is imbued with a form of spirituality that is already predisposed to the proliferation of creatures born from the intersection of fantasy, religion and everyday life.

The yōkai “is the embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling and a place”, wrote J.J. Cohen in a famous essay in 1994.

It is on this concept that the exhibition is based.



Kuniyoshi Utagawa, Sumino Juheiji Tsugufusa, 1847-1848, private collection



Chikanobu Yoshu, Snow in Tsukuba, 1884, private collection



Exhibition itinerary

A HUNDRED CANDLES AND FEAR ENVELOPES YOU

An ancient ritual to find courage

The exhibition opens with an immersive room that allows visitors to relive the experience of the most legendary test of courage of the samurai: the ritual of the 100 candles. This ritual began after sunset, with the samurai gathering in a room lit by the light of a hundred candles. Each of them had to tell their companions a story populated by yōkai, Japanese monsters, with the aim of testing their courage by scaring them to death. At the end of the story, the storyteller had to stand up, extinguish the candle in a lantern, take a mirror and look at themselves in the corner furthest away from the others: the gradual darkening of the room accompanied the narration of increasingly frightening and suspenseful stories.

In the same way, visitors will enter a completely dark room, lit only by the dim light of a hundred candles which, with a play of mirrors, will seem to multiply and cast flickering red shadows on their faces. The candles will then go out one by one, accompanied by the hoarse voice of the ghost of an old samurai who died after going mad when he encountered a real monstrous yōkai in the night.

Once out of the hall of a hundred candles, making their way through the dim light of the exhibition, visitors will encounter prints of monsters, surprised by voices, sounds, sudden hoarse tales and evocations that will bring to life the fear of the ancient samurai.



SECTION

TOKUGAWA JAPAN



Kuniyoshi Utagawa, Actors' s Feast under the Moonligh, 1851, private collection

The exhibition opens with a selection of prints by masters such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) and Utagawa Toyokuni III (1786-1865), immersing visitors in the bustling atmosphere and pleasures of the Tokugawa era. It concludes with a dive into one of the most beloved stories of the the latter part of the period, Takizawa Bakin's (1767-1848) *Nansō satomi hakkenden*, a famous 106-volume novel written between 1814 and 1842, beautifully translated into images by Utagawa Yoshitaki (1841-1899) and Utagawa Toyokuni III.

The entire exhibition is therefore constructed by giving voice to the places, spaces, feelings and sensations that *yōkai* embody, in order to get to the heart of the creation of an imaginary world deeply rooted in Japanese culture and, through it, explore its most intimate folds, where sensations, anxieties, fears and desires, alive, real and tangible, are hidden.



Kunimatsu Utagawa, Kabuki Actors Gathering around Shintomi Theatre, 1882, private collection

TREPIDATION: TRAVELLING WITH THE IMAGINATION

In the section Trepidation - travelling with the imagination, we find The Extermination of Demons by Momotarō, attributed to Katsushika Hokusai or his school. The print depicts one of the most iconic moments from the famous Japanese fairy tale of Momotarō, the “peach boy” who manages to defeat the terrible oni – mythological creatures similar to demons and ogres – on the island of Onigashima, returning it to the local lord.

Also Shoki Capturing a Demon in a Dream is also on display here, a work from Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's incredible series The New Forms of the Thirty-Six Ghosts, in which the artist, considered the last great master of ukiyo-e, illustrated thirty-six of his favourite stories inspired by Japanese tales and legends, with his distinctive style that made the works extremely terrifying.



Yoshitoshi Tsukioka, Shoki Capturing a Demon in a Dream, 1890, private collection



Yoshitoshi Tsukioka, Full Moon of Sumiyoshi, 1887, private collection

THE DEMONS OF REVENGE

From Katsushika Hokusai's unfinished series One Hundred Ghost Stories comes the famous print *The Grinning Demon Woman*, in which the master revisits an ancient Buddhist legend about Hariti, a cruel and terrifying ogress determined to eat all the children in the city of Rajgir, India. The story ends with the fearsome ogress being converted into a benevolent deity, protector of children, but Hokusai chooses to portray her in her most frightening version, making her a symbol of the dark side of femininity and the threat it poses to male power.

It is in fact from the need to stem this threat that the deeply patriarchal culture of ancient Japan generated countless tales featuring old witches who devour men who fall victim to their cunning deceit, vengeful ghosts and cruel demons who hide behind the features of beautiful and seductive maidens.



Kuniyoshi Utagawa, *Yato Yomoshichi Norikane*, 1853, private collection



Yoshitoshi Tsukioka, *The Peony Lantern*, 1891, private collection

TO THE THEATRE TO EXORCISE FEARS

Ghost characters were very common in Kabuki theatre performances, and woodblock print artists drew inspiration from theatrical dramas to immortalise them in many of their works. It is no coincidence that one of the exhibition rooms is entitled “At the theatre to exorcise fears”.

This room includes, for example, the splendid triptychs by Toyokuni III Utagawa – a prolific woodblock print artist who became known as “the painter of actors” – based on some of the most popular plays of the time, such as *Meiboku sendai hagi*, written around 1780. The play was based on real events that took place in the 17th century: a dispute over succession within a military family.

The various prints on display dedicated to the historical story of the forty-seven ronin of Edo, who avenged their lord in the 18th century and then committed suicide by seppuku, tell a tale of loyalty and revenge. Among these is *The Tribute of the Forty-Seven Ronin to Their Lord* by Kuniyoshi Utagawa, a master of war prints.



Masamitsu Ota, No.9 Actor Onoe Baiko VI in *Mo-mijigari*, 1945, private collection



Chikashige Morikawa, Kabuki play, *Meibokou Sendai Hagi* , 1882, private collection

THE OTHER SECTIONS



- **MONSTER HUNTERS: THE SHADOW OF THE SAMURAI**
- **TASOGARE: THE WAY OF THE TŌKAIDŌ**
- **TOKUGAWA JAPAN - CARPE DIEM OR THE PLEASURES OF THE CITY**
- **THE REVENGE OF THE NATURAL WORLD**
- **LEGENDARY SPIRITS**
- **THE SAMURAI'S FAREWELL**



Kuniyoshi Utagawa, Samegai, Kanai Tanigoro, 1852, private collection

IS THE YŌKAI EXHIBITION SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN?

The Yōkai exhibition is very suitable for children and young people.

Children aged three to twelve will be the most amazed, entertained and intrigued by the countless activities designed especially for them at the exhibition. All children arriving at the exhibition will be invited to take part in a treasure hunt within the exhibition rooms to find clues left by the elusive Ambrogio, a yōkai explorer who needs their help.

At the end of the treasure hunt, each child will receive one of ten coveted treasure hunter pins depicting a yōkai as a prize. In one of the exhibition spaces, there will be a playroom full of monsters to colour in and a card game created by us where each child can create their own yōkai.

Japanese monsters entered our television culture in the 1950s with Godzilla, bringing Japanese customs and traditions to our country. The series, films and generations that watch them change, but Japanese monsters are always there to enchant young people through new channels, new media and new stories. A visit to the exhibition for a child who is passionate or curious about anime and manga can become an opportunity to analyse the origins of their favourite characters. Younger children will enjoy recognising the features of monsters and little monsters from their cartoons and animated films in the depictions of the various yōkai.



The Curators

Paola Scrolavezza

A lecturer at the University of Bologna since 2011, she conducts research in the field of modern and contemporary Japanese literature and culture. Her studies have focused in particular on women's literature and genre literature, noir and light novels, as well as the intersections between cinema, literature and urban space. Recently, her research interests have expanded to include cultural processes from the advent of modernity in Japan to the contemporary era. Drawing primarily on critical approaches that have emerged in cultural and postcolonial studies, she has examined the transformations and circulation of fiction in the age of new media and the construction of transnational imaginaries in the context of globalisation, within the current debate on global fiction and world literature. Author of numerous critical and essayistic publications, she has also translated Yoshiya Nobuko, Enchi Fumiko, Ogawa Yoko, Higashino Keigo, Ekuni Kaori and Hayashi Fumiko into Italian. In addition to her work as a translator, critic and lecturer, Paola Scrolavezza has also been the curator and director of the NipPop festival since 2011, a multifaceted project dedicated to contemporary Japanese pop culture.



Eddy Wertheim

Eddy Wertheim is one of the foremost experts on Japanese art and antiques, best known as the owner of the Japanese Gallery Kensington in London. He has built one of Europe's most renowned collections, specialising in works spanning the entire artistic history of Japan. The gallery presents a wide selection of carefully curated pieces, individually chosen for their beauty and craftsmanship. Eddy's cultural approach prioritises artistic and educational value over commercial value, which has earned him esteem and recognition among collectors and scholars. He actively collaborates with museums, educational institutions and Japanese embassies, playing a key role in promoting and disseminating Japanese art and culture throughout Europe.



Technical details



**Total number of works:
approximately 160**

Curators:

Paola Scrolavezza and Eddy Weirtheim

Exhibition conditions

- all the works are framed
- the exhibition travels in crates
- for private collectors, personalised transport contract
- works available according to exhibition dates

Scenographic installations included:

- Immersive Candles Room
- 1 Kappa statue with base
- Children's play room
- Room Audio (ITA, upon request ENG)

Transportation

From Milan and lenders' premises

Rental conditions

To be paid by the requesting entity:

- Transportation costs
- 'Nail-to-nail' insurance
- Travel and accommodation for the exhibition manager and the curators

Contacts

chiara@vertigosyndrome.it



WHAT IS VERTIGO SYNDROME?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vertigo S.R.L. is a cultural enterprise operating since 2022, specialising in the conception, design and production of exhibitions and exhibition events in Italy and abroad. The company offers turnkey solutions for public bodies, museums, foundations and cultural institutions, combining scientific content and immersive technologies.

COMPANY DATA

- Company name: Vertigo S.R.L.
- Registered office: Corso Milano 23, Monza
- Legal form: Limited Liability Company
- Year of incorporation: 2022
- Sole Director: Chiara Spinnato (CEO & Institutional Relations)

ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES

Vertigo is involved in the creation of:

- Temporary exhibitions produced in-house
 - Strategic consulting
 - Design of exhibition itineraries for third parties (museums, organisers, public and private bodies)
 - Integrated services: curation, set-up, graphics, transport, technical coordination
- Main clients: private entities (exhibition organisers), public bodies (municipalities, museums), cultural associations, private museums, collectors.

THE VERTIGO SYNDROME BRAND

In just a few years, Vertigo Syndrome has built a highly recognisable brand, focused on an innovative, accessible and engaging cultural offering.

The exhibitions produced by Vertigo Syndrome are aimed primarily at a non-specialist audience, using narrative, visual and technological languages that aim not to bore visitors who may arrive at the exhibition legitimately unprepared for the theme covered.

The scientific content is always rigorous, but conveyed in an experiential, immersive and creative way, going beyond the “classic” model of traditional exhibitions.

This positioning has allowed Vertigo to build its own niche, with a loyal audience (thanks also to a newsletter affiliation of over 51,000 contacts), greater digital virality and interest from public and private entities eager to renew their cultural offerings.





VERTIGO SYNDROME

UNA CROCIATA CONTRO L'UGGIA DELLE MOSTRE D'ARTE

**“A crusade against the boredom
of art exhibitions”**

www.vertigosyndrome.it