



*THE THUNDER GOD RAIJIN & WIND
GOD FUJIN:*

A LOOK THROUGH THE CENTURIES, FROM THE THIRTEENTH TO THE
TWENTY-FIRST



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Created in the early 17th century *The Thunder God Raijin & Wind God Fuji* (Fig.1) is a screen painting by the Rimpa School artist Tawaraya Sotatsu (approx. 1570-1643). These two figures seem to have had a profound impact in the Japanese culture after being made by Sotatsu. We can find mentioning of these two gods as early as the 6th century. They first appeared in Japanese art in the 13th century until the 21st. One aspect that the pieces after the 17th century have in common is the similarities that they have with that of Sotatsu's print. We will be looking at the depictions for the Thunder God and Wind God in Japan, Sotatsu's influence in the depictions, and their progress through the centuries.

Starting off with Sotatsu's painting *The Thunder God Raijin & Wind God Fuji*, it is a two-fold screen door painting. Each door is approximately 169.8 x 154.5 cm in size. As you are looking at this piece, your eyes are taken back with the voluminous color of the gold that stands out in its brightness. After your eyes adjust you then see the figures that are among the bright background, your eyes darting from one side to the other, and finally focusing onto one of the two figures. Starting on the top left side of the screens, we have Raijin, known as the Thunder God. He is floating in the air within a dusting of clouds. Once you continue to look closer to the painting, your eyes then follow the circle which surrounds him. This circle contains the drums which Raijin strikes with the sticks in his hands to create the sound of the thunder according to Asian mythology. Raijin's appearance is that of a demon or monster lookalike creature. He has piercing yellow eyes, which narrow down to the audience. You see two pointy horns, along with pointy ears with a yellow headband and we can see a sharp tooth sticking out of his mouth. Raijin's stance shows him with his right arm and leg pulling back, and his left arm and leg moving forward like he is mid jump or getting ready to jump. And with each arm and leg, he has

a gold bracelet, and his muscles are very much defined showing his strength. Raijin is shown sporting a skirt like clothing with mixes of green, navy blue, and red.

Once you finish looking at Raijin, your eyes then dart towards Fujin, Wind God. Compared to Raijin, Fujin's color is much darker than his fellow deity. Fujin is displayed surrounded by a darker or heavier set of clouds. You also cannot miss the dark green color of his skin giving him more of a monster lookalike appearance. You start with his yellow monster eyes that appear to be staring right at Raijin. As your gaze begins to take on the whole picture of this god you notice that Fujin only has one pointy horn, that you can see. Within his hands you now get to see his special instrument, which is a cloth-like object. It could be described as a bag, which he uses to contain and direct the winds of the mortal world. This is an object that can be seen all throughout history within different cultures.

Fujin's stance though is interesting, the right side of his body is portrayed correctly but the left leg is in an awkward upside-down position as if he were about to start running. Perhaps towards Raijin. You can again see that he has three sets of gold bracelets on each limb. Fujin's clothing is like Raijin. He is only wearing shorts in red and green. Through his body you get to see the defining muscles in his chest, arms, and legs. This shows us the detail that the artist had when creating his mythological beings. Giving him a sense of strength but the different characteristics of these figures are incarnated in the curves of the "Wind," as contrasted with the jagged angles of the "Thunder"; by thus stressing the inner spiritual differences of these imaginary creatures, Sotatsu avoids the arbitrarily imposed, externally geometric motion that makes for monotony in much of High-Renaissance and Baroque art in Europe.¹

¹ Grilli, Elise, and Ichimatsu Tanaka. *Tawaraya Sotatsu: Active Early 17th Century*. Vol. 6, Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1960.

After you finish looking at each god individually, you step back and then admire the painting as a whole. You cannot help to wonder if perhaps the gods are preparing themselves to go against one another and/or are even beginning to assemble their powers to bring down some havoc to the humans as a team; thunder and wind side by side as we often see in present day thunderstorms.

Painted in the 17th century, this piece is part of the Edo Period (1603-1868) in Japan. This period in the country was of peace, economic growth, and political stability under the shogun (military dictator). During this time, Japan also saw a flourish in the arts, from the development of the famous woodblock art to paintings of courtesans. This specific painting is ink and color on a gold-foiled paper, which was a technique used by those of the Rimpa school in Japan. These schools or guilds were created by artists who had apprentices to assist with their work. They also had individual styles that went into each school. If you look closely at this painting, you can still see each individual piece of the gold leaf.

The Rimpa school played an especially key role in the development of early Edo art. They were responsible for the “revival of indigenous Japanese artistic interests...” (The Met). One of the most important artists that came out of this school is Tawaraya Sotatsu. Not only is he important within the Rimpa school but he could be considered to be one of the most influential Japanese artists. Sotatsu played an important role in the formation of an original, decorative, and specifically Japanese art during the Momoyama period (1573-1615, after a long subservience by Japanese artists to the influence that flowed from T’ang and Sung China².

² Grilli, Elise, and Ichimatsu Tanaka. Tawaraya Sotatsu: Active Early 17th Century.

During his time in Kyoto, Sotatsu participated in the court life among other Japanese artists. He started as a son of a craftsman and was able to rise as a non-academic artist selling to upper classman in Japan. In his lifespan Sotatsu was able to create various pieces and among them is that of the “Gods of Wind and Thunder.” Years later, the styles and themes of Sotatsu are still thought about. This specific piece is so popular and made such a big impact in the culture that even after he created his version of these deities’ artists were copying his figures for their own adaptations. Among one of them, who is famous on his own, is Ogata Korin (1658 – 1716). Korin learned from Sotatsu in the typical Oriental way of reverential copying, which still survives in Korin’s precise renditions of the “*Gods of Wind and Thunder*”³ (Fig. 2) created in the early 18th century.

Sotatsu drew from the lore and myths of the country to paint this amazing piece that we now study. Japanese mythology comes from the two main religions of the country, Shinto and Buddhism. Even though the Shinto belief system is the main religion of the country and the oldest, Buddhism arrived around the sixth century which has the belief that all beings, no matter who or what they are, can reincarnate. The Shinto believe “the way of the gods”; it focuses on the worship of the spirits known as kami; animals, objects, and locations such as mountains can each have their own kami.⁴ Over the years, Buddhism might have ended up developing and growing around Shinto.

The myths at the earlier stages were written down for the emperor in a document called “Koiki”, “A Record of Ancient Matters” and “Nihonshoki”, “The Chronicles of Japan”. Koiki contains the myth that would prove the emperor to be of divine heritage, giving a genealogy of

³ Grilli, Elise, and Ichimatsu Tanaka. Tawaraya Sotatsu: Active Early 17th Century.

⁴ Frydman, Joshua. The Japanese Myths: A Guide to Gods, Heroes and Spirits. Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2022.

the gods. It also talks about the tale of how the world came to be and it retells the history of early Japan. Both documents can be dated back to around early eighth century and they both give us a look into the early Japanese beliefs. Among the stories that were written, it gives us a small look into the creation of our famous Fujin and Raijin.

It is said that Fujin and Raijin were created from the corpse of Izanami, main Japanese goddess, and a heavenly deity. Both were represented as an Oni or demons due to how they came to be, created from the corpse of Izanami and being born in the underworld. They are brothers always shown together due to their powerful authority directing the weather. Raijin brings to the humans not only rain but also destruction and chaos. Fujin is no different, he controls the winds that create the typhoons that bring devastation to the Japanese people. They both spend their days traveling throughout the skies, but it is said that you can see them both once a storm starts to brew. Together they create the perfect noisy and big thunderstorms.

One of the earliest depictions of the Wind and Thunder gods that Sotatsu could have seen would be the statues in the temple of Sanjusangen-do in Kyoto (Fig.4. & Fig. 5.). These statues were both created in the 13th century, completely made from wood. They are both located at the entrance on opposite sides, and they are together as mythology talks about being brothers. If you take a closer look at the statues, you can see that they have some human-like resembles and they are not the scary creatures as they were later portrayed. This could be said that it is a turning point of their physical description. They might have had some influence when creating his own versions, but his paintings still have a lot of creativity.

“Sotatsu’s originality is all the more accentuated when the sources of this theme are analyzed. Similar flying divinities occur in some pictorial scrolls of the Kamakura period’ and a

very close ancestry can be traced in two statues of the same gods of wind and thunder that stand in the Sanju-Sangendo Temple in Kyoto, where Sotatsu must surely have seen them. In the very act of taking on such traditional material and transforming it into a free creating, the full measure of Sotatsu's genius can be seen. He took the vocabulary of the theme and then created a new pictorial arrangement, filled with its own rhythmic and poetic compulsion." (Grilli & Tanaka. Tawaraya Sotatsu: Active Early 17th Century. Pg.43).

Sotatsu was able to create the movement that the statues were missing and place it within his painting, bringing to life his own versions of the demon deities. This could have been why so many people took it upon themselves to mimic Sotatsu, just like he was able to bring his name into a higher level of achievement their predecessors might be looking for the same thing on their own. Copying is also a form of flattery, just as we continue to copy and put our own spin into masterpieces to this day.

Proceeding to the eighteenth century, after Sotatsu's painting, Ogata Korin decided to take on the screen door gods in his own version. Created in the early eighteenth century, Korin was so inspired by this piece by his fellow Rimpa school artist that he took it upon himself to copy it and have his own small change (Fig. 2). Korin was still not able to recreate it 100%. The main images are still the same, but faithful though their copies are they lack the inner vitality of the original creating.

Korin's version of Sotatsu's painting copies the two main figures but there are some aspects that are different between them. One of the differences between Korin's version and Sotatsu's are the stronger skin colors for both Raijin and Fuji. Their faces are clearer and easier to see than Sotatsu's but the facial expressions remain the same. The movement and position of

both gods are very identical to the original piece by Sotatsu, but Korin might not have been able to capture the movement of the gods that we first see in that of Sotatsu's. It is a clear statement that Sotatsu opened a whole new world of art when he created his screen doors.

Another Japanese artist who decided to take on Sotatsu's deities to create his own version was Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1829). Hoitsu is another painter from the Rimpa school in Japan, he took it upon himself to revive the style of Ogata Korin. While doing this, he ended up creating multiple reproductions of Korin, including the one of *Thunder God and Wind God* screens. Hoitsu's *Wind God and Thunder God* (Fig.3) continue to copy almost everything to that of Sotatsu's. The posture of the figures is the same and the movements. Small differences of this piece to that of Sotatsu's are the density of the clouds, the more vibrant colors used. Hoitsu's does create more emphasis on the lines of the figures, making them more define. Yet, everything else remains very similar.

Proceeding forward in the late eighteenth century Japanese artist Keisai Eisen (1790-1848) printed a triptych of an everyday scene at the Kinryuzan Sensoji Temple in Edo. As you look closely at the entrance of the temple in this print you can see both Raijin and Fujin on each side. On the left side you find Raijin (Fig. 7) but this time you see him with red skin tone. We have now moved to a completely different color scheme; this red allows him to look way more like a demon. This Raijin is still within the drum circle that we continued to see starting from Sotatsu's. On the right corner of the temple entrance, you then get to see Fujin (Fig.8) in his typical green skin color and with the wind bag over his shoulders. It is interesting how in this everyday scene you get to see how the statues of the deities are portrayed. The artist believed that they are so important that they must have been portrayed.

These gods not only are they shown in paintings and statues, but they are also depicted in other forms of art. One of them being the famous Japanese fans. We can also find them in earthenware vases as shown in figure 9 created in the 19th century as well as in clothing shown in figure 10. This piece of clothing Raijin, deity of Thunder, is shown very differently from Sotatsu's but one aspect that still remains are the drums, the clouds, and the demon-like portrayal.

Sotatsu's Raijin and Fujin characters had such a big influence in the nation that even to this day they are still found within Japanese culture. Artists are still taking their figures and giving them a more contemporary twist. Not only can you find them within art, but now they are so popular that you can find them in anime and even tattoos. The popular Japanese anime, Naruto, gave us a glimpse into how they used these deities and gave them a different look. They are no longer the demon like creatures that we have seen across this time, but they are now animation characters. One of them being the main character, Naruto, and the other his arch nemesis.

One aspect that we can think about is the influence that other countries could have had in the development of these deities. Japan was a closed port country for a long time, from around 1603 to 1868, but before their ports closed off there could have been some kind of impact that could have led to the artist into creating Raijin and Fujin as they are. China, being so close to Japan and sharing the Buddhist religion, it could have had a huge impact on how they were thought of and portrayed.

In Gansu Shen, China there is a cave called Tun- huang where there are ceiling paintings. In one of those ceilings, located in the west slope there is a portrayal that shows what they

thought for the “Thunder God” (Fig12). In this painting, you can see a figure within a circle of blue circles. These would be the drums that Raijin is always shown with as being part of his image, the drums that allowed for the god to create the rhythm of the thunder. This specific wall painting is believed to have been created around 386-589 AD. In this painting you can only really see the drums, there is no real depiction or silhouette of the figure itself. The main idea might have come from China but perhaps the development of the appearance of the figure might have come from Japan.

This gives us the chance to see that there might have been some kind of influence between China and Japan especially in this mythology. There could be the chance that before Japan took it upon themselves to close off the ports, some type of Chinese influence could have reached their shores. Travel to China was still allowed people, artists could have viewed this bringing it back to their native land as the trade with China never really stopped when the shogun closed off the ports. The closure of the ports was mainly to keep out European influences.

Unfortunately, there is little on the Chinese god of Wind, also known as Feng Bo. There is little on a statue dated from the 1800s, which depicts the wind god but there are no big similarities. Perhaps the influence for Fujin could have come from another different nation other than China.

Both Raijin and Fujin don't have a lot of change from Sotatsu's version to now, but it is clear that this screen door painting had a huge influence on the Japanese culture and how they viewed these two deities. Sotatsu's creation allowed them to be able to live on even to this day and their portrayal remained pretty much the same after Sotatsu gave them life. There might have been some influence from China and/or earlier versions but we must give Sotatsu the majority of

the credit. He allowed us to see them in a completely different light and gave them the movement that they were lacking at the beginning of time. If Sotatsu had never decided to take on the mission of creating his painting, would these two deities have been as popular as they are now or if someone else had taken it upon themselves to create it?



Figure 1. Sotatsu, Tawaraya. *Wind God and Thunder God Screens*. 17th c. Paint

on two-panel screens, gold foil and color on paper, 154x169 cm each. Kenninji, Kyoto.



Fig. 2. Korin, Ogata. *Wind God Fujin and Thunder God Raijin*. Early 18th c. Kyoto, Japan. Paint on screen.

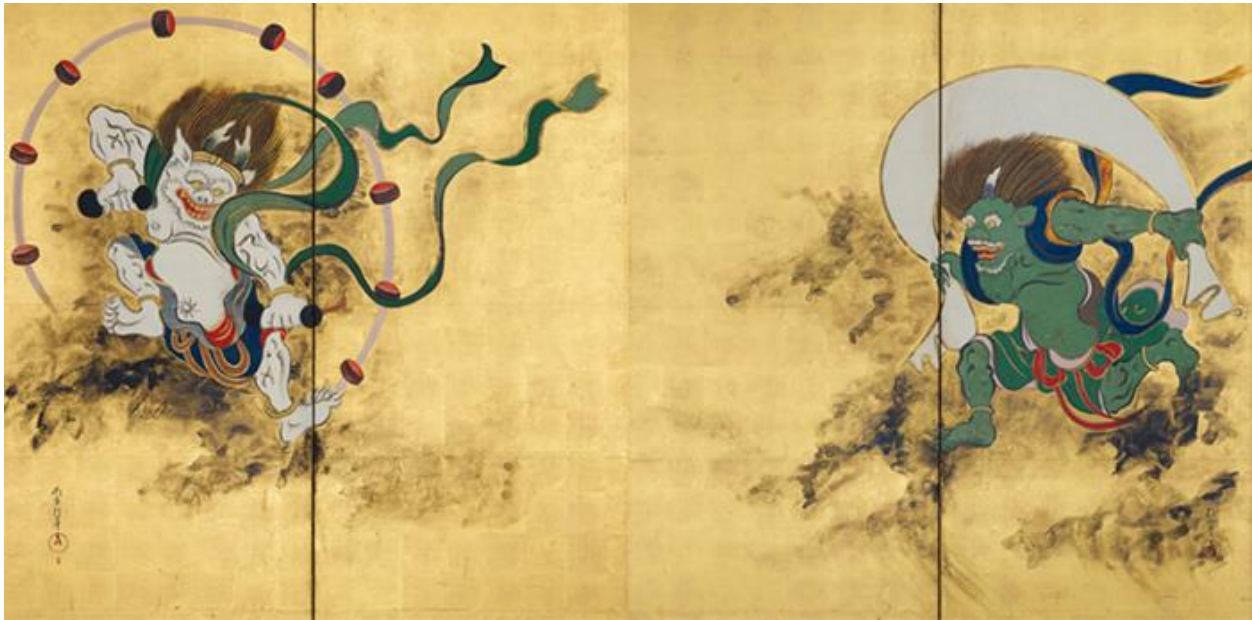


Fig. 3. Hoitsu, Sakai *Thunder God and Wind God*. 19th Century.



Fig. 4. *Wind God Fujin*. 13th c. Sanjusangen-do temple, Kyoto, Japan. Wooden statue.



Fig. 5. *Thunder God Raijin*. 13th c. Sanjusangen-do temple, Kyoto, Japan. Wooden statue.



Fig. 6. Keisai Eisen. Picture of the Kanzeon Raijin Gate at the Kinryuzan Sensoji Temple in Edo (Edo Kinryuzan Sensoji Kanzeon Raijinmon no zu). Late 1820s. Print; triptych. Sheet: 37.8 x 76.2 cm (14 7/8 x 30 inches).

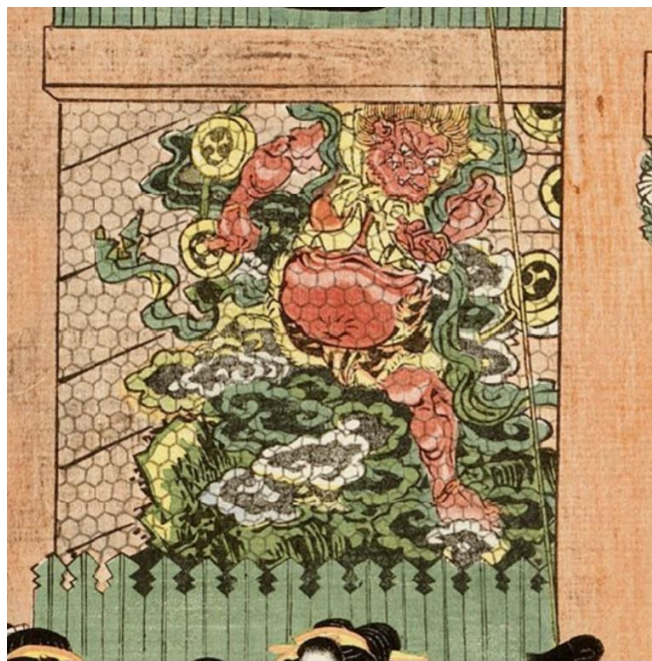


Fig. 7. Raijin Thunder God. Picture of the Kanzeon Raijin Gate at the Kinryuzan Sensoji Temple in Edo (Edo Kinryuzan Sensoji Kanzeon Raijinmon no zu). Late 1820s. Print.



Fig. 8. Fujin, Wind God. Picture of the Kanzeon Raijin Gate at the Kinryuzan Sensoji Temple in Edo (Edo Kinryuzan Sensoji Kanzeon Raijinmon no zu). Late 1820s. Print.

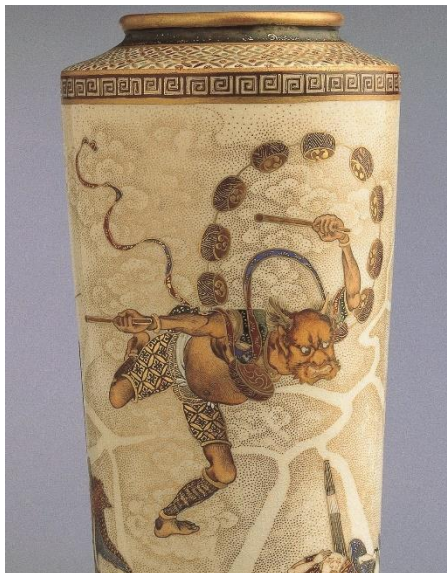


Fig. 9. Raijin with drums on an earthenware vase. Meiji period, 19th century.



Fig. 10. Japanese fireman's coat depicting Raijin on the back. 19th century.



Fig. 11. Gansu Sheng: Tun-huang cave #285: det.: monster mask and thunder god: west ceiling slope. Gansu Sheng (China), China.

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