

Guardians of the Dead Amy Ong

Death dominates nature and eventually absorbs the entire natural world. Human beings experience only a temporal existence before dissolving into the arms of death, the earth, the heavens and the cosmos. Throughout the course of history, mankind has developed belief systems that both venerate and cower before death, manifested through the creation of apotropaic figures that guide spirits in the afterlife.

Both the menacing Chinese *lokapala* guardians and the intimidating statue of Emma-O demonstrate an unwavering mix of admiration and fear of the Underworld. Through the use of symbolism and detail, these statues reflect Chinese and Japanese cultural beliefs. The *lokapala*, dating back to the 8th century, depict superstitions of death by emphasizing physical prowess.¹ In contrast, the Japanese statue of Emma-O accentuates spiritual strength over death.

The *lokapala* capture Buddhist and Daoist ideals popularized by the Chinese Tang Dynasty.² As *Fang xiang* and *mingqi*, the *lokapala* are vessels of “qi” (the spirit or soul) and served as guardians against malicious spirits in the tombs of wealthy bureaucrats and royals.³ Their physical strength and wealthy patronage is visible through intricate dragon and elephant designs on their armor, more decorative than practical. Through their commanding stances and snarling facial expressions, these heavenly guardians assert physical dominance, evoking the belief that the fiercer the *lokapala* looked, the more effective they would be as protectors.⁴ Further relaying physical power, the *lokapala* trample a resting bull and dwarf, demons of ignorance, as well as pound their raised fists. A tinge of copper and forest jade envelop the *lokapala*. The artistic choice to incorporate the color jade refers to the healing properties of the jade stone, believed to promote balance and peace, ideals that the *lokapala* strove to achieve.⁵

The statue of Emma-O, from late 16th- and early 17th-century Momoyama Japan, is a fusion of Shintoism and Buddhism.⁶ Emma-O was welcomed into Japan in the 6th century from China with the expansion of Buddhist beliefs.⁷ As god of the afterlife and arbiter of the dead, the Japanese worshipped Emma-O in hopes that by pleasing him, they could gain a favorable reincarnation.⁸ Emma-O’s terrifying facial expression, braced teeth, and downcast eyes intimidate and command respect. Emma-O originally sat in lotus position on an elevated platform to magnify his power and tower over those being judged.⁹ Dressed in the regalia of a Chinese judge, his headdress features the Japanese character for “king” and his robes are embellished with swirling clouds of red, gold, and black, colors representative of good fortune, fire, and destruction. A *shaku*, or ritual baton of great rank and prestige, is clenched in his right hand, reaffirming the authority Emma-O sways over not just the dead, but also the living.

The *lokapala* and Emma-O have terrified and awed throughout the ages. The *lokapala*’s physical prowess and Emma-O’s spiritual strength have blessed humanity with insight about the mysterious inner workings of death that have forever altered mankind’s perception of the afterlife.

¹ Francesco Abbate, *Chinese Art 101 Full Color Illustrations* (London: Octopus Books Limited, 1972), 77.

² Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103.

³ Ibid, 103.

⁴ Abbate, 77.

⁵ Ibid, 77.

⁶ Paula Hartz, *Shinto: World Religions* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 39.

⁷ Ibid, 39.

⁸ Jeremy Roberts, *Japanese Mythology A to Z* (New York: Chelsea House, 2009), 35-36.

⁹ Michael Ashkenazi, “Emma-O,” *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras* (ABC-CLIO, 2013).