Encho Matsuri and Ghost Paintings

The highlight of the annual Encho Matsuri, a festival at Zenshoan Temple, is a display of ghost-themed paintings (*yurei-ga*) previously owned by Sanyutei Encho (1839–1900). A legendary performer of *rakugo* (traditional storytelling), Encho specialized in ghost stories and was an eager collector of hanging scrolls depicting wandering spirits. Why he collected these paintings is not entirely clear, but it could have been to illustrate his stories or otherwise use the art for inspiration. Alternatively, Encho may have been inspired by an Edo (present-day Tokyo) folk tradition in which participants would gather in a room, light 100 candles, and extinguish them one by one while telling spooky stories. Actual ghosts were then supposed to appear once the final candle had gone out. Encho is said to have hosted such gatherings himself, and perhaps tried to collect 100 ghost paintings to go with the number of stories told.

Encho, however, died before his collection could be completed, and the art passed to the wealthy Fujiura family, who had supported the *rakugo* master financially throughout his career. The Fujiuras continued to add to Encho's collection until 1906, when they donated 50 pieces to Zenshoan, the Buddhist temple where Encho was buried. The rest of the art was believed to have been lost when the Fujiura estate burned down in fires caused by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, but the recent discovery of one of the lost paintings suggests that the other half of Encho's collection may in fact have survived.

The paintings on display at the Encho Matsuri all depict ghosts as they are understood in Japan: beings that exist on the border of life and death because something is keeping them from passing into the afterlife. That something can be a grudge, but it could also be a family member or loved one to whom something was left unsaid. In this sense, the ghosts depicted are not necessarily scary; they simply stand for the vast range of feelings that humans are capable of expressing and leaving unexpressed.