

The Wind God and Thunder God, and the Twenty-Eight Attendants

Wind God and Thunder God

Standing in front of Sanjūsangendō's 1,001 Kannon figures is a line of 30 statues representing 28 guardian deities and two gods. All trace their origins to ancient India. At Sanjūsangendō, these divine beings are considered to be followers of the Thousand-armed Kannon and protectors of Buddhism. Rendered in a carving style that differs dramatically from the earlier Heian style of the Kannon figures, these are widely celebrated as masterpieces of Kamakura period (1185–1333) sculpture.

Two life-size gods are located at the far ends of the front row. The statue nearest the entrance is the Wind God (Fūjin), who kneels on a cloudy pedestal with a bloated wind bag slung weightlessly over his shoulders. The Wind God's original Sanskrit name is Vayu, meaning "breather of life." Appearing in the *Rig Veda*, he is associated with productivity and fecundity. In Japan, reverence for the Wind God is thought to derive from a general foreboding about the ineluctable power of nature. The same can be said of the Thunder God (Raijin), whose statue is ensconced on the far end of the front row. Also appearing in Indian scripture, the Thunder God probably traces its origins to the Hindu god of water, Varuna. Reflecting popular beliefs from Japan's middle ages, this representation of the Thunder God is surrounded by a swirling ring of drums that the god hits to generate resounding bellows of thunder.

Twenty-Eight Attendants

The twenty-eight deities that stand between the gods of thunder and wind are guardians of Kannon. Each represents a distinct spiritual role ranging from charity and wisdom to

strength and defense. The two most physically imposing are those located immediately adjacent to the Thunder God and Wind God: Missha Kongo on the left and Naraen Kengo on the right. Rippling with muscles and bearing fierce expressions, these deities are prepared to use their impressive size and strength to protect the Buddhist law and to frighten away ignorance. Also known as Kongō Rikishi (or Niō), the pair frequently guard the gates of temples throughout East Asia.

At Sanjūsangendō, visitors are encouraged to kneel before the statues and gaze up into their crystal eyes. Only then, it is claimed, can one feel the full power of both the deities and the exquisite works of art.