

Medieval Japanese Ink Paintings

From the Burke Collections at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Over half a century of collecting Japanese art, Mary Griggs Burke (1916–2012) acquired nearly forty examples of early ink painting, including some of the finest in Western collections. When her collection of more than 1,000 works of art was divided between the Minneapolis Institute of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2015, each museum received roughly half of these treasures, carefully selected to complement the existing collections. The historic gifts have transformed these two American museums into significant repositories of early Japanese ink painting. This essay will examine Mary Burke's remarkable collection of early ink painting by considering three distinct groups of masterpieces.

Mary Burke bought her first ink painting in 1967, a decade after she began collecting. By that time, she and her husband Jackson Burke (1908–1975) had already assembled an array of Japanese works of art—ceramics, several dozen *ukiyo-e* paintings, Buddhist sculptures, Nanga paintings and calligraphy, a pair of poem cards from the hands of Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558–1637) and Tawaraya Sōtatsu (d. c.

1640), masterworks of screen painting by Ogata Kenzan (1663–1743) and Soga Shōhaku (1730–81)—and had constructed a 'mini-museum' for their display (see Murase, 2000, no. 83; Tsuji et al., 2005, no. 101; Carpenter, 2012, no. 61). Mary was studying and buying in earnest and had forged a lasting relationship with Miyeko Murase, then an assistant professor at Columbia University, who would become her most vital adviser and collaborator.

It was Professor Murase, Burke recalled later, who guided her toward her first ink paintings. Among three they located in the US and Japan in 1967, the most important was purchased from a dealer in New York: *Orchids, Bamboo, and Brambles*, a diptych of hanging scrolls by the Zen painter Gyokuen Bonpō (c. 1348–c. 1420), now in Minneapolis (Fig. 1) (see Nakamura, 1966; and Murase, 2000, no. 51). Bonpō was a lifelong practitioner of so-called 'ink orchids', of which more than a dozen reliably attributable examples are extant today, including several in American collections. Like the Burke scrolls, most of these are dated to Bonpō's later years, when he held several prominent positions



Fig. 1 *Orchids, Bamboo, and Brambles*

By Gyokuen Bonpō (c. 1348–c. 1420)

Pair of hanging scrolls, ink on paper, (right) 89.2 × 31.6 cm (left) 89.7 × 31.8 cm

Minneapolis Institute of Art

Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.79.4.1-2)

at Zen monasteries in Kyoto, including abbacies at Kenninji and Nanzenji, and provided inscriptions for numerous early poem-painting scrolls (*shigajiku*). In the lower outside corners of the Burke diptych, cleft rocks, defined by light grey brushstrokes in ‘flying white’, emanate tangles of wild orchids, spindly brambles and sprays of bamboo. The tension resolves as the orchids’ delicate leaves break free from the jumbled outside corners, ribboning up and away along an expanse of unmarked paper, each elegant frond bowing to a counterpart in the opposite scroll.

Bonpō’s approach owes much to two other well-known painters of ink orchids, the Chinese painter Xuechuang Puming (fl. mid-14th century) and Bonpō’s older Japanese contemporary Tesshū Tokusai (d. 1366), both of whose paintings Bonpō had many opportunities to study over the course of his life. His initial exposure was probably as a youth, when he studied Zen in Kyoto under the distinguished monk Shun’oku Myōha (1311–88), like Tesshū Tokusai a disciple of Musō Soseki (1275–1351). In his twenties, Bonpō made his way to Kamakura, where he studied poetry with another Musō disciple, Gidō Shūshin (1325–88), who sang Tokusai’s praises in his diary and in eulogies brushed on the late painter’s works (Shimizu and Wheelwright, 1976, no. 30).

Only a few years after she acquired the diptych, Burke turned her attention to Bonpō’s forerunner, purchasing three paintings related to Tesshū Tokusai: an attributed ink orchid on silk, now in Minneapolis, as well as a signed orchid on paper and a painting of geese and reeds in Tokusai’s style, both at the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 2) (see Nakamura, 1973; Murase, 2000, nos 44, 50). Lacking the wildly elongated orchid leaves seen in the later artist’s work, Tokusai’s ink orchids are more reminiscent of Xuechuang, an artist all but forgotten in China but whose paintings were highly prized in medieval Japan. Unlike Bonpō, Tokusai had actually been to China, where he spent a decade training at Chan monasteries and was exposed to paintings by the master. Tradition holds that he learned painting directly from Xuechuang, whose style he introduced to younger Japanese painters like Bonpō.

One year after she acquired Gyokuen Bonpō’s *Orchids*, Burke made another landmark acquisition with the purchase from the same New York dealer of a diptych, *Fenggan, Hanshan, and Shide*, by Reisai (fl. c. 1430–50) (Fig. 3). Reisai’s painting is a singularly hypnotic depiction of a quartet



Fig. 2 *Orchids, Bamboo, Briars, and Rocks*
By Tesshū Tokusai (d. 1366)
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 72 × 36.8 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.300.61)



Fig. 3 *Fenggan, Hanshan, and Shide*

By Reisai (fl. c. 1430–50)

Pair of hanging scrolls, ink and colour on paper, (right) 96.2 × 34.6 cm, (left) 96.3 × 34.5 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.300.46a, b)



Fig. 4 *Monju*
 By Kichizan Minchō (1352–1431)
 Hanging scroll, ink and gold on paper, 82.7 × 35.6 cm
 Minneapolis Institute of Art
 Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary
 and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.79.1)

of Chinese figures pictured often in Zen painting—Fenggan, his pet tiger, Hanshan and Shide, who are said to have lived at Guoqingsi on Mt Tiantai in the Tang dynasty (618–907) (see Ann Yonemura in Shimizu and Wheelwright, 1976, no. 5; and in Levine and Lippit, 2007, no. 17). In the right scroll of the Burke pair, the elder Fenggan sits on a flat rock at the edge of a precipice, facing away from us. Resting at his side is his sleeping tiger, barely visible at the right edge of the paper. Fenggan looks out over the edge of the cliff toward a mysterious swathe of rising mist, described masterfully with light touches of highly diluted ink. In the left scroll, the younger duo of Hanshan and Shide are pictured standing at the edge of the same rocky cliff. Hanshan, facing away and wearing similar dark robes, is the compositional counterpart to the figure of Fenggan in the opposite scroll, while Shide turns toward us, his mouth open in laughter. The pair points knowingly back to the right, a gesture that together with the mirrored compositions and the figures' sightlines bespeaks the presence of a now-missing central scroll.

The Burke diptych, now at the Metropolitan, is one of only eight works by Reisai that survive today and the only one outside Japan. From these works and a smattering of later documentary material, scholars surmise that Reisai got his start by the 1430s—perhaps in the area of Kamakura, where he is known to have made a copy of a painting of the *Death of the Buddha* at the monastery Engakuji—before making his way to Kyoto. There he seems to have secured an affiliation with an atelier of painters that had developed at the end of the 14th century at the Zen monastery Tōfukuji. Reisai and his colleagues were not high-ranking priests like Tesshū Tokusai and Gyokuen Bonpō, for whom painting was an avocation, but rather semi-professional painters charged with producing a variety of paintings necessary for Tōfukuji and other monasteries in the region whose commissions they also received (see Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum of Art, 1998). The Burke diptych was long attributed to Kichizan Minchō (1352–1431), the painter at the centre of the early Tōfukuji atelier, but traces of effaced seals and a signature consistent with those of Reisai, first discovered by Shimada Shūjirō in the 1960s, allow the diptych to be placed within a group of four ink paintings produced by Reisai at Tōfukuji, probably in the 1460s (see Yamashita Yūji in *ibid.*, pp. 110–17).

Like her purchase of Bonpō's *Orchids*, Burke's early acquisition of Reisai's *Fenggan, Hanshan, and Shide*



Fig. 5 *Wagtails*

By Kenkō Shōkei (fl. c. 1470–after 1523)

Pair of hanging scrolls, ink on paper, (right) 38.3 × 57.9 cm, (left) 38.3 × 57.8 cm

Minneapolis Institute of Art

Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.79.3.1-2)

initiated a series of related purchases in the late 1960s and early '70s. In 1970 in Japan, she bought *Oxherding* by Sekkyakushi (fl. mid-15th century), Reissai's contemporary and a fellow follower of Minchō at Tōfukuji. The painting depicts a herdboys wearing a short, well-used robe, guiding an ox down a sloping path, its sides described by broad strokes of ink wash punctuated by clusters of dots to suggest clumps of grass or moss. The branch of a pine tree entering at upper right provides the only other indication of a setting. All of this is secondary to the ox, depicted by the painter with utmost care using a combination of light and dark washes to suggest the animal's bulk and countless fine lines for the whorls and tufts of his woolly body and coiling tail. This work, now at the Metropolitan Museum, is one of three paintings of oxen and herdboys in American collections attributed to the relatively obscure Sekkyakushi, thought to have been active at Tōfukuji as early as the late 1410s through the middle of the century (see Ann Yonemura in Shimizu and Wheelwright, 1976, no. 4).

Burke capped this series of acquisitions of works by Tōfukuji painters with her purchase in Japan in 1972 of a picture of the bodhisattva Monju by Kichizan Minchō (Fig. 4). Minchō portrays the bodhisattva of wisdom in half-length, holding a sacred text in his

hands. His long hair is partially lifted up and secured with a crown, while the rest falls over his shoulders. Stray wisps of hair, delineated in fine lines over areas of wash, frame the bodhisattva's youthful face. The only motifs rendered in anything other than ink are the crown and earring, which Minchō highlights in gold paint, an intimation perhaps of his training in traditional Buddhist painting. Although it has heretofore received only minimal scholarly attention, *Monju* is a rare early work by one of medieval Japan's foremost ink painters (see Murase, 1975, no. 29; Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum of Art, 1998, p. 145).

One category of medieval ink painting that Burke acquired early and to which she returned time and again over the decades was what specialists now call *Kantō suibokuga*—ink paintings by artists active in the eastern Kantō region centred on Kamakura, in the late 15th and 16th century. From 1968 to 1972 alone, she bought eight ink paintings by now relatively well-known Kantō painters who were then only beginning to gain attention from scholars in Japan, namely Kenkō Shōkei (fl. c. 1470–after 1523), Shikibu Terutada (fl. mid-16th century), and Sesson Shūkei (c. 1504–c. 1589), among others.

The historical development of ink painting in the

Kantō region pivots on a journey to Kyoto in 1478 made by Kenkō Shōkei, a young painter and monk from Kamakura (see Aizawa and Hashimoto, 2007; and Rio, 2015). In the capital, Shōkei befriended monks and painters in the circle of the shogun and probably gained access to the shogunal collection of Chinese paintings. He returned to Kamakura in 1480

armed with fluency in several Chinese painting styles then in vogue in the capital, styles previously unknown or simply not favoured in Kantō. In *Wagtails*, a late work in Minneapolis, Shōkei demonstrates mastery of the 'boneless' method, generally associated in Japan with the Chinese painter Muqi Fachang (c. 1210–after 1269), here informed also by later Muqi-style



Fig. 6 *Landscapes of the Four Seasons*

By Keison (fl. mid-16th century)

Hanging scroll, ink on paper, (right) 97.3 × 49.7 cm, (left) 97.4 × 49.8 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.300.53a, b)

paintings Shōkei may have encountered in Kyoto (Fig. 5). Shōkei is better known, however, for his landscapes informed by the style of the Chinese painter Xia Gui (fl. 1195–1224), examples of which both the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Metropolitan Museum owned prior to the Burke gifts (see Ishida, 2002, no. 19; and Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum, 1986, no. 19). The impact of Shōkei's landscapes on painting in Kantō is reflected in the many-faceted rock forms, heavy contour lines, and compositional formula seen in *Landscapes of the Four Seasons*, among the most compelling works by Shōkei's 16th century follower Keison (fl. mid-16th century) and one of the first Kantō ink paintings Burke acquired (Fig. 6), now at the Metropolitan Museum (see Aizawa and Hashimoto, 2007, nos. 15, 16).

The best-known painter from late medieval eastern Japan, however, is undoubtedly Sesson Shūkei, three of whose paintings Mary Burke had purchased by 1971 (see Murase, 2000, nos 68–70). His *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove* is an ebullient take on the age-old theme (Fig. 7). This relatively early work and another small landscape from the Burke Collection join a pair of folding screens of frolicsome gibbons and a single landscape screen already in the Metropolitan's collection. Sesson's *Landscape with Pavilion*, a meticulous early work derived from the work of Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) Chinese academy painters, came to Minneapolis (Fig. 8). Already in the museum's collection were two delicious examples of Sesson's sometimes peculiar reinterpretation of the style of Muqi: a pair of screens depicting flocks of egrets cavorting in plum and willow trees and a hanging scroll of sparrows cavorting on a wildly corkscrewing bamboo (see Aizawa and Hashimoto, 2007, 322; and Ishida, 2002, no. 21). In this way, Burke's *Landscape* completes a trio of paintings in Minneapolis that collectively illustrate Sesson's lifelong study and reinterpretation of Southern Song Chinese painting.

'Although I was and still am most deeply moved by Muromachi ink paintings,' Mary Burke wrote in 1985, 'their number in the collection is small because of their rarity and their value to the Japanese' (Tokyo National Museum, 1985). This number was slight, however, only relative to the numbers of other kinds of Japanese art in her extensive collection, for at that time she had already acquired nearly three dozen examples from the 14th to the 16th century, including all of the paintings highlighted here. Even as ink paintings of this calibre became increasingly



Fig. 7 *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove*
By Sesson Shūkei (c. 1504–c. 1589)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour
on paper, 102.4 × 51.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Mary Griggs Burke Collection,
Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation,
2015 (2015.300.50)



Fig. 8 *Landscape with Pavilion*
By Sesson Shūkei (c. 1504–c. 1589)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour
on silk, 39.9 × 51.1 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art
Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift
of the Mary and Jackson Burke
Foundation, 2015 (2016.79.2)

difficult to find in subsequent years, Burke continued to acquire outstanding examples. Although they comprise a relatively modest portion of her own collection and of the momentous gifts to Minneapolis Institute of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the impact of Burke's ink paintings on both collections is perhaps greater than any other area in which she collected.

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'Gifts of Japanese and Korean Art from the Mary Griggs Burke Collection,' featuring 170 masterpieces from among the more than 700 donated to the Minneapolis Institute of Art by the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, is showing until 8 May 2016.

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