
Title of Object

Early Spring Landscape

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Shūsei (Author: Inscribed by Sesshin Tōhaku)

Date of Object: Before 1459

Accession Number: 2015.79.51

Material/Medium: Ink and light color on paper

Department: Japanese and Korean Art

Culture: Japanese (Muromachi)

Country: Japan

File Created: 4/27/2016

Author of File: Mark Catron

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 7/22/2016

Tour Topics

Group 5 tour, Wabi sabi, artist/patron, beauty, architecture, imagination, nature, writing/calligraphy, Buddhism, Zen

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Take a close look at this ink painting and make sure you see what is there. What do you see? How would you describe this picture? Is this a landscape or is this a narrative painting...or is it something else entirely?

Do you think it realistically describes a real-life location? Why/why not? What do you see that makes you conclude one way or the other? Recite the poem:

South of the river, north of the river,

the snow is clearing.
Mountains spew forth rosy clouds,
springtime colors are fresh.
Travelers remove their shoes, though
the going still is rough.
Beside the open window, seated guests
enjoy the splendid view.
At the eaves, the wind in the pines
tunes its stringless lute.
But why is that leaf of a boat moored
beside the cliff?
Perhaps it is for wandering ten thousand
miles away.

Does the poem inform your impressions of the painting?

If you learn that the shigajiku is likely the creation of a monk in an urban temple (in Kyoto), how does that inform your impression?

Can you put yourself in this scene? What does it feel like?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

“Shigajiku”-classic form combining calligraphic poem and ink landscape painting on a hanging scroll. Imported from China with Zen and by the exchange of Japanese and Chinese monks. Very closely aligned with Zen Buddhism.

In many ways Shigajiku epitomizes Zen philosophy, as well as the themes of Wabi and Sabi:

austerity

solitude

simplicity

transience

detachment

tranquility

***A landscape of the mind or spirit

Blurs the line between the secular and the sacred.

“Suibokuga”-austere monochrome paintings executed in black ink and washes.

Art form closely associated with the tea ceremony and practiced by monks, priests and men of literati class.

In Japanese ink painting, the preparation and process itself involves an elaborate set of rituals. The ink is made from the soot of burned branches of pine trees found in pristine groves on remote mountain-sides near Nara and Suzuka; the pine is burned with sesame, rapeseed or other natural oils and then dried for many years. The ink is dried in a stick form and ground in preparation for painting on a “su-zuri” or ink stone before mixing with the purest water. The artist is required to prepare himself spiritually before embarking on the painting. The application of the ink, itself, is accomplished quickly, with flourish. Thus, the creation of the picture, itself, becomes a form of worshipful meditation.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Buddhism was introduced in Japan first in the 6th Century. Zen Buddhism (“Chan” in Chinese) was relatively unknown in Japan in the early medieval times until the exchanges of Japanese and Chinese monks; in the 13th Century the Yuan Mongols (Genghis Khan) invaded China and in about 1260 set up their own government (Kublai Khan), causing an exodus of refugees toward Japan. Among these refugees were Chan monks who were also painters, calligraphers and poets.

Zen is Buddhism without iconography, the celestial pantheon, Buddhas, or bodhisattvas. Individual search for the spontaneous flash of Enlightenment through meditation. This was a brand new Buddhism...now, the individual, without divine help, was to find the way to Enlightenment by meditation (both spontaneous and irrational in nature). Emphasizing “quietism, self-cultivation, the freeing of the mind from all intellectual and material dross so as to leave it open and receptive to flashes of blinding illumination when suddenly, for a moment, the truth is revealed.” Along with the philosophy came artistic tastes and aesthetic values.

Developing out of the intellectual climate associated with Zen were aesthetic values. Wabi emphasizes the pleasures in austerity and solitude; the beauty of simplicity; and the appreciation of transience and objects well-used and weathered over time. Sabi emphasizes the importance of detachment and tranquility, such as are experienced near the end of life. (“These two aesthetic concepts were fundamental to the performance of the tea ceremony, which developed in the 15th century out of the Zen practice of drinking strong tea in order to stay awake while meditating, and are clearly apparent in the literature and painting of the period.” Mason, p. 213)

These aesthetic hallmarks came to dominate the three highest Japanese art forms through the 15th Century: poetry, calligraphy and ink painting. Shigajiku was an integral part of this new aesthetic. This is not a landscape in the traditional sense, but a landscape of the mind, an idealized, natural form, created by a city-dwelling monk.

Zen’s greatest contribution was the blurring of the boundaries between the secular and sacred in both art and poetry.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Ink landscape painting in Japan grew out of the practice among Zen priests, in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, of depicting idyllic imaginary retreats located deep within misty mountains. Buddhist priests of the Song dynasty in China rendered such imaging, but the theme was adopted by Japanese monks who visited the mainland for Zen training. Such scenes, exchanged between like-minded gentlemen, provided a visual escape from the bureaucratic demands and turmoil of their daily lives. Many of these paintings are shigajiku (literally, poem-painting scroll) indicating that the large area of the paper or silk was left blank so that friends of the owner could inscribe the work with their sentiments about the scene depicted. Here, a poet known as Chōsetsushi reflects on the delights of distant travel:

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Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

History of Japanese Art, Mason, 2d Ed. 2005

Rio, Aaron; Mia Docent Lecture 10/22/15

Japanese Art: Collections from the Jackson and Mary Burke Collection, Miyeko Murase, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975