

僧人山居



A Scholar's Retreat in the Autumn Mountains

Kushiro Unsen

Not on display

Title/Description: A Scholar's Retreat in the Autumn Mountains

Artist/Maker: Kushiro Unsen (Artist)

Born: 1805 c.

Object Type: Scroll painting

Materials: Ink, Paper, Silk, Watercolour

Technique: Painting

Measurements: h. 1378 x w. 337 mm

Accession Number: 910

Historic Period: Edo period (AD 1600-1868)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

Kushiro Unsen (1759-1811) was a literati artist (*bunjin*) working in the Nanga or 'Southern Painting' style. Using ink and colours on satin, Unsen has painted a rural retreat set within a mountainous landscape. The loose, looping brushwork used to depict the rolling hillside is energetic and dynamic, however this effect has been tempered by washes of translucent ink that produce soft and shadowy forms. A restricted palette of brown, pale blue and grey informs the viewer that the season is autumn.

The mountain peaks in the upper section of the composition are heaped one upon the other, creating a diagonal ascent from right to left. Sheltered beneath them are two rural dwellings with thatched roofs, and in the bottom left corner a stooped figure has paused on a path that leads across an arched stone bridge. The course of a river is indicated by the placement of large grey boulders that chart its progress from the building at the centre of the painting to the bridge in the bottom right.

The eyes of the viewer are invited to zigzag back and forth, following the incline of the path, the boldly painted grey outcrops of rock, and the mountain peaks with their hemp-fibre striations. The path at the bottom of the painting delineates the foreground from the middle ground, while the middle ground and background are separated by a blank space suggestive of mountain mist. Mountain-shaped daubs of ink connote distant peaks, giving the painting a sense of recession that is lacking elsewhere in the composition.

The artist's signature 'Unsen shōjin sha' 雲仙聖人画 is brushed in black ink in the top left corner followed by a red square 'Taishū' 太史 seal.

Japan's scholar-amateurs admired the expressive and intuitive brushwork of the 'Southern School' of Chinese landscape painting. The Nanga movement occurred at a time when the transmission of foreign goods and ideas was tightly controlled by the ruling Tokugawa Shogunate. During this period of isolationism (J. *sakoku*), all traded goods had to enter Japan through Dejima, a manmade island situated in the Bay of Nagasaki. As travel bans prevented Japanese people from visiting China, Nanga artists partially received their education in Chinese painting from imported illustrated books and copies of paintings.

Unsen was born in Hizen, Shimabara (Nagasaki prefecture), and had the opportunity to study the Chinese language and Chinese painting techniques directly from exiled Ming loyalists, and Qing-dynasty artists who were resident in Nagasaki. [2] Unsen was part of a large artistic network that brought him into contact with like-minded painters and poets, such as Rai San'yō, Uragami Shunkin, Yamamoto Baiitsu, and Kimura Kankadō. [3]

Vanessa Tothill, June 2020

[1] Steven Hooper, ed., *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection: Catalogue* (Newhaven; Norwich: Yale University Press in association with University of East Anglia, 1997) vol. 3, cat. no. 127, p. 175.

[2] Joshua A. Fogel, 'Sino-Japanese Relations: The Long View' in *Articulating the Sinosphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 37.

[3] Fogel, p. 37.

Further Reading

Addiss, Stephen, *Nanga Paintings* (London: Robert G Sawers, 1975)

Addiss, Stephen, *Zenga and Nanga: Paintings by Japanese Monks and Scholars. Selections from the Kurt and Millie Gitter Collection* (New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 1976)

Cahill, James, *Scholar Painters of Japan: the Nanga School* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1972)

Fogel, Joshua A., 'Sino-Japanese Relations: The Long View' in *Articulating the Sinosphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009)

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Mason, Penelope, *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd edn (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005)

Murase, Miyeko, Japanese Art: Selections form the Mary and Jackson Burke Collection (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975)

Rosenfield, John M. and Miyeko Murase, Unrivalled Splendour: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 2012)

Watson, William, ed., The Great Japan Exhibition: Art of the Edo Period 1600-1868 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson in association with Royal Academy of Arts, 1981)
