4. Ito Jakuchu (1716-1800)

“Turtles and Pine”

Hanging scroll, ink on paper
104.5 x 31.0 cm. (41 1/8 x 12 1/4 in.)

Artist’s seal:
To Jokin-in; Jakuchu koji

Published:
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Despite having studied painting with Kano School masters in his twenties, Jakuchu soon left the formality of the school to pursue his own independent style of painting, largely influenced by Zen ink painting and Chinese landscapes. Although Jakuchu is famed for his detailed, brilliantly colored paintings, he was also extremely skillful when working in ink monochrome.

The striking diagonal elements of the composition here are enhanced by the rich variety of ink tones, from the deepest black of the pine needles to the pale grey of the turtle’s shells. Beyond the tonal variations, which lend depth and texture to the image, Jakuchu’s brushwork is also intriguing. The solid black patches of pine needles are kept from appearing flat by drawing them out at the edges in strokes of “flying white” in which the white of the paper is allowed to break through the ink. This technique also adds a gestural quality that provides movement to the image.

In contrast to the striking effect of the pine needles, Jakuchu uses pools of grey tones to create both the texture of the tree’s trunk and the patterns on the turtles’ shells. Jakuchu was a master at this grey-on-grey technique, and the clarity with which he is able to portray the rings on the turtles’ shells is yet another indication of his immense skill with a brush.

Turtles and pines are both symbols of long life in Japan, and here the adult turtle and youngster combine with the majestic pine to create an auspicious image of great power.