

### 43. Gao Fenghan [Kao Feng-han] (1683-1748)

#### “Day Lily by Garden Rocks”

Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper  
131.0 x 45.5 cm. (51 1/2 x 17 7/8 in.)

#### Inscription:

“Every household festoons itself in honor of the daylily hall (the mother),  
among the various elegant ornaments this is the number one fragrance;  
I hope that this fine flower will bloom for a hundred years,  
so often come to this painting and help with a cup of wine.  
Nanfu (Gao Fenghan) using his left hand.”

#### Artist’s seals:

*Shizhinong* (“farmer of stones”); *Laofu*

#### Recent provenance:

Jean-Pierre Dubosc, Kamakura



Several garden rocks rise from a foreground bank, their bases enlivened by day lilies and by a rose bush with leaves of differing colors. The rocks are faceted, squared off to create compelling abstract forms. The individuality of the depiction of the rocks is matched by the idiosyncratic style of calligraphy with which the inscription was written. The artist was clearly one who was eager to challenge received authority and to establish the validity of his very special approach to aesthetic creativity.

Gao Fenghan was born in Jiaoxian, Shandong province. His early education, especially in literature and poetry, was received from his father, who served as a provincial education officer. Together with Zhang Yuan and another friend, Gao formed the Willow Dwelling Poetry Society, the members of which were strongly influenced by the poetry and theories of Wang Shizhen (1643-1711). Gao eventually met that eminent poet and scholar and in later years would visit his grave and pay his respects to him through posthumous portraits and poems. A prolific writer of poems himself, Gao estimated that he composed 2,366 verses between 1708 and 1744, and he lived four years beyond that. Gao was also famed for his calligraphy. The basic forms of Gao’s *xingcao* calligraphy were derived from such late seventeenth-century masters as Zheng Fu, but he transformed these models by writing with his left hand. While this became a necessity after 1737, when his right arm was disabled, Gao wrote with his left hand before that date to achieve the spontaneous and intuitive effects of that technique.

In 1701, the year of his marriage, Gao passed the district examination, but failed the provincial examination the following year. It was not until 1728, in Peking, that he passed a special examination and was appointed to office in Shexian, Anhui. During the intervening years he traveled frequently in Shantung, staying with friends and meeting many scholars and officials. By 1710 both Kao and his younger brother, Fengqi, were fairly accomplished painters. During a trip Kao made to Nanchang in 1709 he met the artist Shen Zongjing and

must have seen paintings by Zhu Da (1626-1705). However, Kao did not develop a serious interest in painting until the 1720s, by which time he was already well established as a poet and calligrapher. During his examination visit to Beijing in 1728, Gao met Gao Qipei, who painted fairly conventional landscapes with a brush but was better known for his paintings done with the balls of his fingers or the split end of a fingernail.

During the nine years that Gao Fenghan served as an official in Anhui, from 1729 until the summer of 1737, he traveled frequently to Suzhou, Nanjing, and Yangzhou, meeting many artists, poets, and scholars. Anhui had long been famed for the production of ink and ink stones and Gao Fenghan had formed a collection of more than one thousand ink stones during his sojourn there. He also collected seals; his collection of Chin and Han dynasty seals numbered over five thousand, and his examples from the Ming and Qing periods numbered about the same. Kao used a large number of seals on his own paintings and most were personally carved in his interpretation of the *miujuan* script of the Chin and Han periods. He also presented seals to such friends as Zheng Xie. Gao's interest in seal carving and in the script styles of the early dynasties ally him closely with the artists of Yangzhou.

The official career of Gao Fenghan was not markedly successful; his rank in 1735 was no higher than that with which he began, and it seems clear that his main interests lay in areas outside the official domain. When his superior wanted to recommend him for participation in the extraordinary examination of 1736, Gao refused, a rejection of special opportunity for advancement which may be related to his close friendship with the important official Lu Jianzeng (1690-1768). Lu was also from Shantung and, with the help of Kao's fellow poet Zhang Yuan, would later compile an anthology of poetry written by Shandong poets, including Gao Fenghan. Gao's official appointment, to Shexian in Anhui province, was made on the recommendation of Lu Jianzeng. Thus, when Gao was accused of accepting a 5,000 tael bribe in a murder case, Lu was also called to account. Lu told the provincial governor that "this is certainly calumny, for Kao is not that sort of man," and the accusation was later judged false. In 1736 Lu was appointed chief commissioner of the salt gabelle of the Liang-Huai region with headquarters in Yangzhou. As a powerful and influential official, one whose position related directly to the extremely lucrative salt business, Lu was welcomed wholeheartedly by such merchants as Ma Yueguan and Fang Tingzhang. Gao Fenghan, a close friend of Lu, was introduced to these merchants and also to such artists and scholars as Zheng Xie, Li Shan, Jin Nong, and Fang Zhenguan, the uncle of Fang Shishu. The elegance and seeming security of a life of low official but high social status in Yangzhou must have contrasted greatly with the unknown and uncontrollable world of officialdom, and Gao elected to remain in the south rather than pursue success via more examinations. However, when Gao's term of office ended in 1736 and Lu recommended him for a vacant position, a charge of power brokering (specifically used against officials who gathered cliques about themselves for their personal ends) was brought against Lu, with Gao also implicated; Lu was banished to the border regions for two years, while Gao was able to refute the charges against him. However, a paralysis of Kao's right arm prevented him from returning to office and he then moved to live in a Buddhist temple in Yangzhou. Thus reads the account left by Lu Jianzeng himself.

In later years, after his reinstatement as the chief salt-commissioner of Liang-Huai, Lu Jianzeng would be a very important patron who supported artists, employed scholars to work on a variety of literary projects, and established or improved educational academies. In

contrast to such direct support, Lu in his earlier years apparently recommended many of his friends for examinations, for offices, and for promotion; such enthusiastic support of his friends could well have been misconstrued as an attempt to establish a clique of officials owing primary allegiance to Lu himself rather than to Beijing. Another interpretation of the events of 1736 is suggested by the famous satirical novel, *Rulin waishi*, in which Lu appears in barely fictionalized guise as the major character Xun Mei. In the novel Xun Mei was suddenly arrested for accepting bribes and, in the words of the novel, “went from good fortune to disaster between dawn and dusk.” In the year 1768 Lu Jianzeng and two subordinate officials were accused of having received gifts valued at 900,000 taels from salt merchants who had illegally retained nine million taels of profit belonging to the government. Wu Jingzi author of the *Rulin waishi*, died in 1754 and could not have been referring to the later case (in which Lu was convicted of receiving only 16,000 taels). Moreover Wu Jingzi was a close friend of Lu Jianzeng and portrays him in the novel as a generous, open-handed patron of talented men; Wu is thus not likely to have defamed Lu Jianzeng as a corrupt official if there were not some basis in fact. Since Gao Fenghan was a protégé of Lu Jianzeng and was involved in the same case, some of the same ambiguity beclouds the end of Kao’s official career in 1737.

About the paralysis of Gao’s right arm, however, there is little doubt. In support of Gao’s own statements are those of such friends as Zheng Xie: “After being crippled, Gao used his left arm and his calligraphy and painting became even stranger.” Gao’s works became not only more eccentric but also more numerous; the years 1737 and 1738 were among the most prolific of his entire career. This suggests that his earlier practice in writing with his left hand had already given him sufficient training and control to paint with that hand at will; it also suggests that deprivation of his official position and of the support of Lu Chien-tseng left him more dependent on his painting than at any other point in his career. Kao also joined Li Shan and Zheng Xie as the only calligraphers who are known to have engaged in writing name-plaques for Yangzhou’s famous pleasure-boats decorated with paintings, and Ma Yueguan wrote that Kao even sold rare books that he had collected in more prosperous days. In 1741, after four restless years of shuttling between the Yangzhou and Suzhou areas, Gao wrote poems of farewell to his friends and supporters: the salt merchants Ma Yueguan, Ma Yuelu, and Wang Tingzhang, and the artists Zheng Xie and Jin Nong.

With his return to Shandong Gao Fenghan was reunited with his family, but his health did not improve and he was sick in bed for most of the following two years. In 1743 he prepared his coffin and wrote his own epitaph:

“Knowing this life, what need have we to learn about death?  
having seen the beginning, what need have we to see the end?  
Oh! Would that life could be arranged like this!”

Five years later, Gao Fenghan died at the age of sixty-five.

The paintings produced by Gao during the last twelve years of his life were all apparently done with his left hand. Several of his statements suggest that around 1739 he regained partial use of his right arm but decided to continue painting mainly with his left. As Gao explained in a letter to a friend: “When my right arm was paralyzed I suffered indescribable hardship. Recently I have tried using my left hand instead and there is an extremely different flavor, an irregularity, roughness, and awkwardness, that can never be attained with the right hand.” Many of Gao’s earliest paintings could indeed be characterized as regular, smooth,

and skillful, and early on he tried to mitigate the limitations of firm and rational control. The use of his left hand produced even more spontaneous images that utilized as well fortuitous developments occurring during the act of painting. That such paintings by Kao were valued by his peers is attested to by Zheng Xie: “Gao Fenghan’s left-handed works and Jin Nong’s calligraphy are requested from me by friends throughout the empire; short notes and long letters have all departed, and even of the fakes I have done there are no more to spare.”