

### 63. Murata Kokoku (1831-1912)

#### “Peonies by Garden Rock” 1875

Hanging scroll, ink on paper  
172.7 x 91.1 cm. (48 1/2 x 16 1/4 in.)

Inscription:

“Beauty at dawn disperses far distant, to the dew on the Golden Hand;  
fragrance at dusk stimulates wind at the Jade Hall.

During the second month of the year 1875 in the Meiji era, I followed the ideas of various masters of the Ming period at an inn in Namikoshi. Murata-shuku, called Kokoku.”

Artist’s seals:

*Den-shuku no ink; Kokoku* and two others



The couplet here is part of the poem “Peonies” written by the Tang poet Han Zong. The Golden Hand was a huge structure built by Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty to collect dew from heaven, which he believed would prolong life.

A garden rock rises amidst foreground grasses with peonies directly behind. The strong forms are executed with a wide range of ink tonality, from wet to dry and from light to dark. The expert use of brush and ink constitute one of the main pleasures of the painting, to which are added the auspicious connotations of the subject.

Paul Berry proves a succinct account of the life of this interesting artist.<sup>1</sup> “Murata Kokoku had a prominent career with a wide network of friendships he established during his many travels within Japan and abroad. He first received training in painting from his father, the Hakata artist Murata Toho (n.d.). In 1846 Kokoku travelled to Kyoto to study literati painting with Nukina Kaioku (1778-1863), and poetry with Yanagawa Segan (1789-1858). Kokoku returned to Kyushu in 1854 to study with Hidaka Tetsuo (1791-1871) in Nagasaki. At that time he became acquainted with Kinoshita Itsuun (1817-1863) and other major literati figures in Nagasaki, including the visiting Chinese artist Xu Yuting (b. 1824). Subsequently, he traveled to China three times to view sights made famous in Chinese painting. He met with many artists, and studied with some of them, including the popular Shanghai artist Hu Gongshou (1823-1886), who had taught other Japanese artists, especially Yasuda Rozan (1830-1883).

Kokoku established his home in Kyoto sometime in the late Edo or early Meiji period, quickly becoming one of the key literati in Kyoto. Perhaps because of his travels in China, he became noted for his connoisseurship, inscribing large numbers of painting boxes. Kokoku was among the forty-three artists invited to attend the 1880 opening of the Kyoto Prefecture Painting School (Kyoto-fu Ga Gakko). From 1881 he frequently received awards for his submissions to various juried exhibitions.”

1. Paul Berry: *Unexplored Avenues of Japanese Painting: the Hakutakuan Collection*, Otsu City Museum of History, 2001, cat. 66, p. 177.