

## 64. Tomioka Tessai (1836-1924)

### “Fish Market”

Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper  
85.9 x 57.5 cm. (33 7/8 x 22 5/8 in.)

#### Inscription:

“*Ken Kon* (the trigrams for Heaven and Earth). (The Emperor Shen Nong) established a market at noon, causing all the people beneath the heavens to gather all the goods beneath the heavens and exchange them before returning home, each having achieved their goals. This must have been done on the basis of the trigrams *shi-shi*.

This occurs in the chapter *jüi* of the *Yiqing* (“Book of Changes”). Note: Shen Nong taught the people living along the rivers and on the seacoast to catch fish and turtles, and he taught woodcutters in the mountains and valleys to gather firewood, and then to exchange these for what they have not. This, then, was the origin of markets. ‘Tetsu-gai.’”

#### Artist’s seals:

*Yo yo estu do-jin; Shin shin jo sui*



Just under one-hundred roughly-drawn figures fill the scene save for willows growing on an earthen bank in the lower right. Most of the men carry fish-baskets, or wheel fish-carts, identifying the scene as a very active fish market. The main action takes place in the upper middle ground, where the figures have gathered in a circle in order to bid on what is being offered at that moment. Above, the men are still arriving, below, they are already leaving, or turning to other pursuits. The simplified and forceful brushwork accords well with the subject, the strong and swift strokes suggesting the nature and character of these men who earn their living wresting their catch from flowing rivers and turbulent oceans.

Tomioka Tessai (1836-1924) can be held the last great proponent of the Nanga literati style.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Kyoto, the son of a wealthy dealer in priests’ robes. When the family fortunes declined, Tessai was sent to live at the Rokuson’o Shrine, where he studied Shinto as well as Buddhism, Confucianism, and classical Japanese literature. Although intending to become a scholar, Tessai also began painting by the mid-1820s; Kubota Setsuyo (act. mid-19<sup>th</sup> c.) and Osumi Nanko (act. mid-19<sup>th</sup> c.) are thought to have influenced the young artist and to have given him painting lessons. The most important early influence came from Otagaki Rengetsu (1791-1875), a talented poet-nun who hired Tessai as a personal assistant for her ceramic endeavors and later raised him to writing her calligraphy compositions on the wares.<sup>2</sup> In 1861 Tessai travelled to Nagasaki to seek the advice of Hidaka Tetsuo (1791-1871) and Kinoshita Itsuun (1799-1866), and, in 1868, thorough Rengetsu, Tessai met Tonomura Chokunyu (1814-1907), an important practitioner of literati painting in Kyoto. Tessai was also influenced by Yamanaka Shinten’o (1823-1885), a major calligrapher and painter and connoisseur of Chinese painting.<sup>3</sup> Basically, however, Tessai was self-taught as an artist, using the various classic and contemporary styles he came across to form his own, very idiosyncratic style.

Associated with those working for the imperial Restoration, Tessai fled to Nagasaki in 1859 in order to escape arrest, and while there began serious study of Nanga painting. From 1872 to 1882 he served as a Shinto priest, and in 1896 organized the Nihon Nangakai, “Nanga Society of Japan.” Tessai became a member of the Art Committee of the Imperial Household and, in 1919, of the Imperial Fine Arts Academy.

Enormously prolific, the ‘Picasso of the East,’ Tessai largely portrayed subjects taken from Chinese and Japanese classical literature and legend. His style was very individual, with strong and expressive brushwork and color applied in a free and bold fashion. The element of humor is often important in his paintings, and the effect, as here, is extremely attractive.

1. Laurance P. Roberts: *A Dictionary of Japanese Artists*, Weatherhill, Tokyo and New York, 1976, p. 181.

2. Morioka, Michiyo and Paul Berry: *Modern masters of Kyoto: The Transformation of Japanese Painting Traditions, Nibonga from the Griffith and Patricia Way Collection*, Seattle Art Museum, 1999, pp. 305-06. Also see this exhibition entry 29 for a porcelain tea caddy by Tessai.

3. *Ibid.*, Morioka.