

Tanke Gessen (1721-1809)

丹家月僊

“Landscape of Poetry” 1786

山水詩図

Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper  
126.5 x 29.4 cm. (49 3/4 x 11 5/8 in.)

Artist's seals:

*Gessen; Jakusho Shujin*

Colophon by Daiten Kenjyo (1719-1801):

“The Tang poet Ren Fan travelled to Jinzi Peak at Mount Tiantai and inscribed a poem on the wall of a temple there, saying:

‘At the very top the new autumn produces cool evenings,  
cranes fly and dew from the pines drops on my clothes;  
Over the peak before me the moon shines on the whole river,  
on the blue-green hills a monk built a hut in the bamboo.’

However, (Ren) later returned from a hundred *li* to change the character “whole” (river) to “half,” which makes a good story about a poet. I came across this in reading the “Biography of Caitzi” and in response replied with a verse as follows:

‘When the rain ceases in groves of trees fresh sounds arise,  
the moon rises over the peak and half the window is bright,  
The mountain monk meditates where no one sees him,  
in a cold pine of a thousand feet a crane is startled.’

During the ninth month of the year 1786 of the Tenmei era, the Priest Gessen came from Gose and stayed here. He happened to open my anthology and saw this poem; enthusiastic about its beauty, he at once licked his brush and did this painting, joining the concepts of the two poems. Not using any models, in a flash it was finished, but is it not also elegant? Since it is finished, I record the affair at the top. The priest (Gessen) also wrote a verse, saying:

‘Half the river’ and ‘half the window’  
will be excellent circumstances for a thousand years;  
Relying on the work of red and green (pigments),  
I travel (in the painting) so I don’t have to memorize it.

So I also inscribe it here.

Recorded by Shochu.” Seal: *Jikujyo*

Colophon by Imei Shukei (1731-1808): “The priest Imei on reflection drew a bamboo grove so as to establish the idea of a hut in bamboo.”

Collector’s seals on far-right margin:

*Shu Getsu* “Pine Moon;” these may be the seals of Imei Shukei, who inscribed the painting on the far-left margin.

A scholar pauses on a riverside path to gaze up at the crane in a tall pine set against a steeply rising mountain. Above, nestled at the top of this peak, is a thatched house, its enclosure promising peace and protection as well as an exciting view down to the river below. The setting sun suggests that the time is late afternoon and that the scholar is nearly to his immediate destination. The Nanga style of the painting is close to that of Buson, the immediate teacher of Goshun, with whom Gessen, the present artist, studied while in Kyoto.

The circumstances under which this elegant and evocative painting was created are detailed in the long colophon added by the eminent Shokokuji monk Daiten Kenjyo (1719-1801). The bamboo grove appearing immediately behind the thatched house was, according to an inscription written on the far-left margin of the picture, painted by the monk Imei Shukei (1731-1808). The painting itself was done in 1786 when Gessen was visiting Daiten.

Tanke Genzui, *azana* Gyokusei, *go* Jakusho Shujin and Gessen, was born in Nagoya.<sup>1</sup> Entering the Pure land sect of Buddhism while relatively young, at Jokusho-ji in Ise Yamada, Gessen later travelled to Edo for advanced study. During his leisure time there he studied painting with Sakurai Sekkan (1715-90), a portrait painter and follower of the Sesshu-style of landscape painting. Sekkan gave lectures at Zojo-ji in Shiba, teaching the principles and theories of painting according to a fixed schedule. Tani Buncho (1763-1840) attended these, met Gessen, and on one occasion painted an ink bamboo painting that was praised by Sekkan. Gessen later moved to Kyoto, where he lived and worked as a monk in the Chion-in, being very well-treated there,

apparently because of his talent in painting. Becoming acquainted with a Kyoto aristocrat, Gessen was subsequently able to achieve his goal of becoming abbot of Jakusho-ji, his home temple. When Buncho next visited Kansai, he stayed with Gessen for several days, reporting later that Gessen talked incessantly about painting all night until dawn two days running, allowing him no rest at all.

In Kyoto Gessen also worked with Matsumura Goshun (1752-1811), a pupil of Buson, painting screens for the Myoho-in at the request of a monk-aristocrat named Masahito Ho Shinno (1768-1805). A dilettante who loved literature and art, Masahito knew many Kyoto artists, such as Okyo, Goshun, Ito Toshio, Ryokujo Shonin and others, and his salon was an important venue for cultural communication at the time. Gessen thus learned something from the style of Maruyama Okyo (1733-95) but was more strongly influenced by the work of Buson and the later Chinese paintings that he saw in the Chion-in and elsewhere in Kyoto.

Gessen came to be known as the “beggar monk” because of his practice of negotiating a very high—even exorbitant—price for his work before he began. Gessen himself lived a very humble life, wearing only a single layer of cotton in winter as well as summer, and all the money he earned from painting went to his temple, to rebuilding the main hall, the gate, and the monk’s hall, and to adding a library and more convenient road to the establishment. Any surplus, we are told, went to the poor, making Gessen a rare administrator indeed. When Gessen died at Jakusho-ji in 1809 at the age of eighty-eight, he was surrounded by the tangible fruits of his aesthetic as well as religious labors.

1. Yamanouchi Chozo: *Nihon Nangashi* (“History of Japanese Nanga”), Tokyo, 1981, pp. 328-29.