Oda Kaisen (1785-1862)

小田海僊

"Waterfall" 1841

瀑圖

Hanging scroll, ink on paper
175 x 93 cm.

Inscription:
"During late autumn of the year 1841, painted by Kaisen."

Artist's seals:
Kyokai and one other

In a dramatic and audacious composition, the artist left much of the central portion of the large painting blank, with the white paper ground left to represent the torrent of water flowing over a precipice above to thunder against the stark rocks below. Much surface richness is created by the contrast of forms and textures, which range from the wet and smooth washes above to the dark, strongly textured rock in the lower left and to the roiling, curvilinear frenzy of the splashing waves to the right. The curtailed view increases the visual impact of the scene and suggests that what appears is but a fraction of a more awesome whole.

Kaisen was born in Nagato, present day Shimonoseki in Yamaguchi province. No details of his early life are available but Kaisen must have learned something of pictorial design through the family business of textile dying. At the age of twenty-one, in 1806, Kaisen moved to Kyōto where he came into contact with the Nanga styles of Taiga (1723-1776; see cat. 30) and Buson (1716-1783) and with the relatively more realistic style of Ōkyo (1733-1795; see cat. 33); Kaisen then became a pupil of Matsumura Goshun (1752-1811; see cat. 34), whose Shijō school sought to combine the merits of those two lineages.

Early in the second decade of the 19th century, around the time of Goshun's death, Kaisen became a friend of Rai San'yō (1780-1832). From the beginning San'yō admired Kaisen's technical skills and the naturalism of his paintings but regretted their lack of spirit and graceful freedom, which, he held, could be learned via study of Chinese paintings. Like San'yō (and also like Kō Fuyō, 1722-1782 of the previous generation), Kaisen then adopted a Chinese-style name, Ō In (or Wang Ying in Chinese). Another name appearing on Kaisen's works is Ō Hyakkoku, Wang Po-ku in Chinese, which is one name of the very famous Chinese literatus Wang Chih-teng (1535-1612).

Under Rai San'yō's influence Kaisen turned more to landscape painting and, in company with the conservative masters Shunkin (1779-1846) and Chikuden (1777-1835), studied the Ming and Ch'ing dynasty paintings then available in Japan and also studied T'ang and Sung styles through reproductions. It was the potential for wider experience with more authentic modes that persuaded Kaisen to join San'yō on a trip to Kyūshū. The artist then advised his young wife: "I must journey to Kyūshū with San'yō in order to improve my brushwork and learn from the natural scenery as well as association with people; the trip will take about five years. You are still young and without child, so, if you wish, you are free to return to your parents and make a new marriage." The loyal woman replied: "This marriage was made by order of my parents. Now you want to make a long journey for study. If you become famous in the future, I will enjoy your success as well, so don't worry about me; I will care for our home during your absence." When Kaisen returned home, his wife presented him with the significant sum of 30 *ryō*, saying: "While you were gone I earned this money by sewing. Please use it to establish your own studio." Strongly moved, Kaisen accepted the proceeds of his wife's industry and frugality and set up as an independant master.

Throughout the 1820s and '30s Kaisen continued to paint and eventually became very famous. By the Kaei era (1848-1853) the couple was sufficiently well-off to build a new house, in which Kaisen painted while his wife cared for everything else.