

Aoki Shukuya (1737-1802)

“Wang Xizhi Gazing at Geese (Kyoto)”

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk
106.5 x 54.7 cm. (41 3/4 x 21 1/2 in.)

Inscription:

“Painted by Yo Shukuya of Heian Kyoto.”

Artist’s seals:

Yo Shunmei; Yo Shukuya

In the foreground a servant boy carries a tray of tea utensils over a bridge while looking at two geese swimming in the river. A figure group dominates the middle ground, a seated scholar with writing brush in hand being most prominent with a woman holding fly-whisk standing to his left, a boy grinding ink to his right, and across the table an old woman with additional fans on which the scholar will write. Banana palms, symbols of ease and plenty, rise in front of an elaborate garden rock, its surface of blue-green coloring intended to call to mind the glorious gardens of past ages. The drawing and placement of forms is very assured, identifying the artist as a painter of significant talent.

The calligrapher Wang Xizhi (321-79) was the most famous calligrapher in Chinese history. The graceful strokes of his brush were held to have been influenced by his study of the curving necks of geese swimming in front of him as he wrote. The image here thus evokes a continuous tradition that had been in force for almost 1,500 years, evolving in Chinese and then Japan.

The artist Aoki (originally Yo) Shunmei (Toshiaki), called Shukuya, was born in Ise, perhaps of Korean parents surnamed Yo. His elder cousin Tanju (1727-95), who was later adopted by the Nakagawa family in Kyoto, sometimes called himself Kan Tenju, the “Kan” surname being derived from the Japanese name for Korea, Kankoku. Shukuya was adopted by the Aoki family in Kyoto, and was probably introduced by Tanju to his close friend Ike Taiga (1723-76), who became Shukuya’s teacher and exerted profound influence over the later course of his life.

Like Tanju, Shukuya maintained contacts in Matsuzaka, where they both were born. The writer Hosoi Hansai wrote in the preface to Tenju’s *Kishizukamei* that he had met Tenju and

青木夙夜

王羲之觀鵞鳥圖

Shukuya in Edo, where they may have gone on business on behalf of the shop Tamaruya in Matsuzaka. The avid collecting and publishing activities of the cousins may in fact have led to a decline in the business. Shukuya’s fame as a painter continued to grow, however, and in the 1782 edition of the Heian *Jinbutsu-shi*, his name appears together with those of Ko Fuyo (1722-84), a close friend of Taiga, and Ike Gyokuran (1728-84), Taiga’s wife.

Following the death of Gyokuran in 1784, Shukuya and other pupils established a memorial hall named the Taigado in the area of Sorinji where Taiga had lived. Shukuya became the first master of the hall, calling himself Taigado 2nd, and, according to Tanomura Chikuden (1777-1835), “...He closed his gate and did not go out, supporting himself as a writer. He did not clear away the grass and tree-leaves and the steps and courtyard were left unswept. For more than ten years he was cut off from others as though by a screen and few people saw his face...”

Chikuden judged Shukuya’s landscape style to have been based mainly on that of Wen Zhengming (1470-1555) and praised the grace and elegance of his precisely applied color and controlled brushwork, concluding “...He profoundly achieved the ancient standards. He said himself that ‘for even a single rock or patch of water I need from five to ten days to complete it; silk and paper (from those seeking paintings) pile up on my desk, for unless I have an idea or become inspired I dare not work. I cannot live the life of selling mountains as practiced by the ancients.’ Thus, his extant works are very rare.” The present work is thus a fine example of Shukuya’s careful and very precise method of painting.