Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754-1799)

長沢蘆雪

"Two Crows on Persimmon Branch"

殘柿雙鴉圖

Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper
98 x 28 cm. (38 1/2 x 11 in.)

Inscription:
"Painted by Rosetsu."

Artist's seals:
Hyokei; *Gyo*

Box inscription:
by Kunii Ōyo, dated mid-summer of 1917, authenticating the work "without room for doubt."

A branch sweeps across the surface of the painting, ending in an arc that softens the sharp diagonal with which it began its descent. Two delicately-colored persimmons define a rising pictorial diagonal from lower left to upper right and help provide pictorial balance for the two dark crows that dominate the upper part of the composition. Brushwork throughout is very assured, with faint calligraphic lines used for the branches and much darker and wetter washes creating the bodies of the birds with the utmost economy of means. The birds are distinguished one from the other by the different brush techniques used to create them, encouraging us to view them as a couple joined by their common interest in the ripe fruit but distinct in mood and personality. The combination of persimmons with the crows serves perfectly to evoke the slightly melancholic mood of autumn when the fruit ripens and attracts the foraging birds in moonlight.

Nagasawa Gyo, called Rosetsu, was born the son of Uesugi Hikoemon, a samurai who served first the Sasayama clan in Tanba and later the Yodo clan in the Yamashiro district.[1] On becoming a painter Rosetsu changed his family name to Nagasawa although his reasons are not known. Toward the end of the Anei era (1772-1780) Rosetsu began to study with Maruyama Ōkyo (1733-1795) and eventually came to be considered one of the master's best pupils, although his personality seems to have been much more individualistic than Ōkyo's other, rather numerous students.[2] According to Ōkyo's standard pedagogy, recorded in the *Manshi*, the annual journal of one of Ōkyo's patrons, Hirotsune (Yūjō) of the Enman-in, his pupils first studied drawing, observing things at close hand, learning about relative size and proportion, and even drawing their own hands and feet by observing them in a mirror. During the second stage they concentrated on the visual characteristics of more distant objects, and next they worked on brushwork, striving for a finished image that would seem to dissolve when viewed very close but look very realistic when seen from a distance. The fourth and last stage was most difficult of all, for the student was then called upon to create something original, without following any prototype, and it was surely in this aspect that Rosetsu stood out from his peers.[3]

According to the *Kinsei Meika Shogadan*, Rosetsu walked every morning from his home in Yodo to Ōkyo's studio at Shijō. On one cold morning, while passing a stream, Rosetsu saw a fish struggling to escape from the ice in which it was trapped but was unable to free it. On his way home, he saw the fish again, swimming in the melted water. When he reported the event to Ōkyo the next day, the master said that it was similar to how he had learned to paint—following a difficult period of study, he was then able to paint freely. Rosetsu is said to have been so impressed by this response that he adopted the name Gyo or "fish" for his seal. The young man seems in fact to have struggled very hard for his independence, and he is said (perhaps apocryphally) to have been expelled from Ōkyo's studio no fewer than three times; at the least Rosetsu's straight-forward and self-confident character may have created some tension in the studio, the direction of which was taken over by Goshun (see catalogue 25) on the death of Ōkyo. In 1782, at the age of twenty-eight, Rosetsu was listed as a painter in the *Heian Jinbutsushi*, the guide to important scholars, literati, calligraphers, and others active then in Kyoto, and this may be taken as token of his maturity as artist.

In the year 1787, Rosetsu accompanied the monk Gukai to his home temple of Muryō-ji in Kushimoto where he painted fusuma sliding doors, as well as at Sōdō-ji, Jōshū-ji, and Kōzan-ji before

Fig. 1. Matsumura Goshun: "Late Autumn," after *Goshun*, Osaka, 1982, pl. 66, p. 52.

Fig. 2. Nagasawa Rosetsu: "Crow on Dead Tree," after *Rosetsu, Nihon no Bijutsu*, no. 219, Tokyo, 1984, pl. 27, p. 23.

Fig. 3. Nagasawa Rosetsu: "White Dove on Old Branch," after *Rosetsu, Nihon no Bijutsu*, no. 219, Tokyo, 1984, pl. 58, p. 39.

returning to Kyoto. The following year Rosetsu assisted Ōkyo and other painters in refurbishing the imperial palace, some rooms of which had been damaged in a fire of 1788. Rosetsu was assigned the paintings in the Goryōsho, the most important room, while such elder colleagues as Komai Genki (1747-1797) and Hara Zaichu (1750-1837) were given less prestigious tasks, showing the high regard in which Rosetsu was held by Ōkyo. In 1789 Rosetsu traveled to Nara, in 1794 to Hiroshima, where he executed numbers of paintings for the Yasuda family with whom he stayed, and the following year he worked with other disciples of Ōkyo at Daijō-ji in Tajima. In 1792 Minagawa Kien (1734-1807) began to hold semi-annual exhibitions featuring new painting and calligraphy, and in 1798 Rosetsu is recorded as having submitted his version of the "Five Hundred Rakan." It was probably during this late period too that Rosetsu visited the Sanin district, where several of his votive paintings are still in the Izumo Shrine. During this late period Rosetsu had much sorrow in his personal life. His father died in 1790 and the next year his second daughter died at the age of two; one wife was divorced and the second died quite young, as did his last son, again at the age of two.

Sometime between late spring of the year 1792 and winter of 1794, the large *gyo* or "fish" seal of Rosetsu was broken, and in subsequent impressions the upper right line is missing. Some have speculated that the painter broke his seal intentionally as a manifestation of his declaration of complete freedom at age forty. If so, his joy was short-lived, for he died in Osaka during the year 1799 at age forty-five, of the effects of poison, according to some accounts.

"Two Crows on Persimmon Branch" is not dated by inscription but the birds manifest a rather quirky humor as well as a complete mastery of technique, suggesting a date of execution in the late 1780s or early 1790s, towards the end of Rosetsu's regrettably short career. A contemporaneous painting of a comparable subject was done by Goshun (figure 1), a *haiga* painting designed to complement the *haiku* by Matsuo Bashō inscribed above the image. Another painting by Rosetsu (figure 2) portrays a large crow painted in dark ink perched on a branch drawn in a broad, sweeping stroke of the brush, shaded just enough to give some sense of structure to the form. This work can be dated on the basis of style to the early Tenmei era (1781-89). His "White Dove on Old Branch"

(figure 3), a *fusuma* painting done in 1787 for Sodo-ji, is also related to the present painting in the disposition of the branch and the swift sure strokes of the brush that gave it form. As in his latest paintings (figure 4), Rosetsu here uses striking contrasts of light and dark to create dramatic accents and to focus viewer attention on his unique vision of life.

1. The most credible source for Rosetsu's life is the record left by Gichō, the abbot of Kōzan-ji in Tanabe, where Rosetsu stopped in 1787 during a trip he made to Kishu Wakayama.
2. One of Rosetsu's earliest dated paintings, his depiction in 1778 of famous scenic spots at Higashiyama, is very much dependent on the style of Okyo, suggesting that Rosetsu was already then his pupil.
3. Miyazawa Shinichi: *Rosetsu, Nihon no Bijutsu*, no. 219, Tokyo, 1984, pp. 74-75.

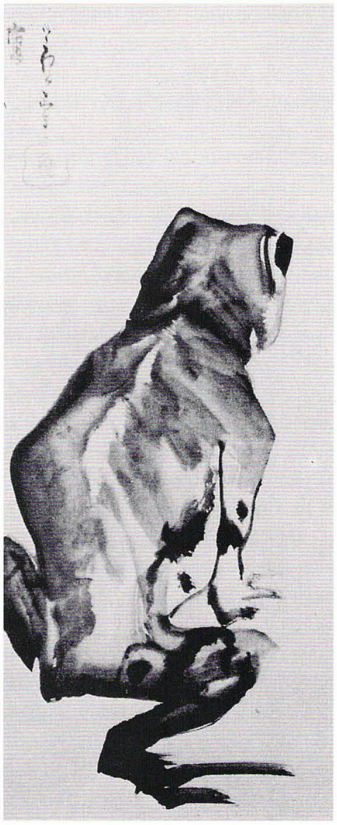

Fig. 4. Nagasawa Rosetsu: "Frog," after *Rosetsu, Nihon no Bijutsu*, no. 219, Tokyo, 1984, pl. 131, p. 79.