TANI BUNCHÔ (1763-1840)

Subject: Mount Tsukuba
Signed: Bunchô
Sealed: Bunchô ga in
Date: 1804-18 (Bunka era)
Dimensions: 77 1/8 x 145 5/8 (exclusive of mount)
Format: Six-fold screen
[other screen depicting Mount Fuji is in the collection of the museum at Utsunomiya Geijutsu Daigaku]
Media: Ink and color on gold leaf
Price: POR

This majestic and exceptionally tall screen by Tani Bunchô is a powerful image illustrating this artist’s creative leadership in an artistic movement called the Yamato-e Revivalist School (Fukko Yamato-e ha). Aimed at reviving the styles and themes of the traditional Yamato-e painting, focusing on the past models of the Tosa school, this aesthetic was also combined with the complexity of the literati (bunjinga) traditions. This screen was originally created as a pair of six-fold screens with the mate depicting the most celebrated site in Japan, Mount Fuji; that screen is in the collection of the Utsunomiya Geijutsu Daigaku (Utsunomiya Art University).

This screen of Mount Tsukuba with its expressive brushwork, strong use of ink and green pigment, and masterful use of negative space creates a scene that has a mystical appearance with deep recession in space. The signature on the screen dates it to the Bunka era (180418), when Bunchô was at the height of his popularity. Furthermore, it was mentioned in the diary of Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758-1829) the celebrated daimyô, financial reformer, chief senior councilor of the Tokugawa Shogunate, that Buncho painted a pair of screens of Mounts Tsukuba and Fuji before his very eyes. To date, these are the only known pair of screens by Bunchô of this subject and might be those so described.

Tani Bunchô was born as Tani Masayasu to a high-ranking Edô samurai family. His father was a noted poet. Bunchô was in the service of Matsudaira Sadanobu, head of the Tokugawa government from 1787-93, who gave him many painting commissions, and in whose service he traveled throughout Japan. He first studied Kanô painting at a young age with Kanô Bunrei (1706-82), then the Nanga style under Watanabe Gentai (1749-1822), Kitayama Kangan (1767-1801) and Kushiro Unsen (1759-1811). During his travels he met the patron Kimura Kenkadô, who became a life-long friend. Through him he met many artists from the Kansai area, including Uragami Gyokudô (1745-1820) and Yamamoto Baiitsu (1783-1856). He
studied many other styles of painting then current in Japan, including the Chinese and the Western style. His work is widely eclectic, and brought him many friends, fans and pupils. In the end he was mainly known as a Nanga artist, who brought the literati style from Kyoto and Osaka to the capital. Bunchô was also a prolific writer on painting history and theory. Two of his best-known books are “A Compilation of Japanese Painting” (Honchô gasan) from 1809 and “Bunchô Conversations on Paintings” (Bunchô gadan) from 1811. Bunchô’s paintings are found in prestigious museum collections around the world including Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Victoria & Albert Museum; Brooklyn Museum; Kobe Municipal Art Museum; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Tokyo National Museum; Osaka Municipal Art Museum; Freer Gallery of Art, Washington; Cleveland Museum of Art; British Museum; Miho Museum; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Bibliography:

Bunchô to sono monjin ni yoru moshae (Tokyo: Setagaya kuritsu kyôdo shiryôkan, 1993).


