

About the Artist

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Sesshū: A Japanese Ink Master



SESSHŪ TŌYŌ

lived from 1420 to 1506, and is thought to be among the greatest Japanese landscape painters to have ever lived.

Although he is certainly not the only Japanese artist to have done so,

Master Sesshū is famous for having worked with a highly limited selection of materials. He painted many of his most beloved scrolls using only one cake of ink: black.

Sesshū probably *chose* to paint with just one color, but we still describe this constraint as **EXTERNAL** because it does not dictate the precise outcome of his artwork. (A direct constraint might appear if, for example, a noblewoman commanded Sesshū to paint her portrait and described in detail the expression that she wished her likeness to display.)

A second important aspect of Sesshū's artistry is its craftsmanship. He is but one in a long line of masters and apprentices, many of whom are still remembered today for their skillful command of ink and brush. As we explore his work, you will notice that Sesshū painted lines of varying thickness, and mixed his black ink with water to create many shades of grey.



Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan.

HERE, YOU WILL DISCOVER just two of Master Sesshū's many beautiful landscapes. Both are from the collection of the National Museum in Tokyo. If you are reading this article online, click on each image for a larger view.

The landscapes can easily speak for themselves, allowing you to see firsthand the work of a classical master. But in case you are wondering where to begin, I have found an expert who is ready to help.



In the first scene, the viewer can “follow the measured steps of the travelers,” explains Joan Stanley-Baker in *Japanese Art*. “They wend their way from the stone path, lower left, around the foreground boulder, past pavilions tucked beneath the road, to the rocky promontory and pavilion on the left where they will gaze past the jutting peaks on the lake.”

THE SECOND SCENE REVEALS

another mountainous landscape, now in winter. Notice another small traveler who climbs the worn stairs in the foreground.

At this point, some readers might be thinking that both scenes look rather haphazard—that the view would be improved if some of those scraggly trees weren’t in the way. But as Paul Varley argues in *Japanese Culture*, the poets and painters of Japan “have most characteristically depicted nature...in particularistic glimpses.” In other words, he explains, a Chinese artist working in the same era

may have admired a mountain...for its enduring, fixed quality, but the typical Japanese artist (of the fifteenth century or any other age) has been more interested in a mountain for its changing aspects: for example, how it looks when covered with snow or when partly obscured by mists or clouds.

Without needing to fuss over which color inks to employ, Sesshū freed his mind to observe every detail of the ever-changing world around him.

Does this mean that any painter who uses more than one color is a maximalist and will produce bad art? Of course not—there are many other external constraints within which those artists may thrive. Rather, the sublime illustrations of Master Sesshū are reminders that a true external constraint has the power not to muffle an artist’s creative ability, but to sharpen it.

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