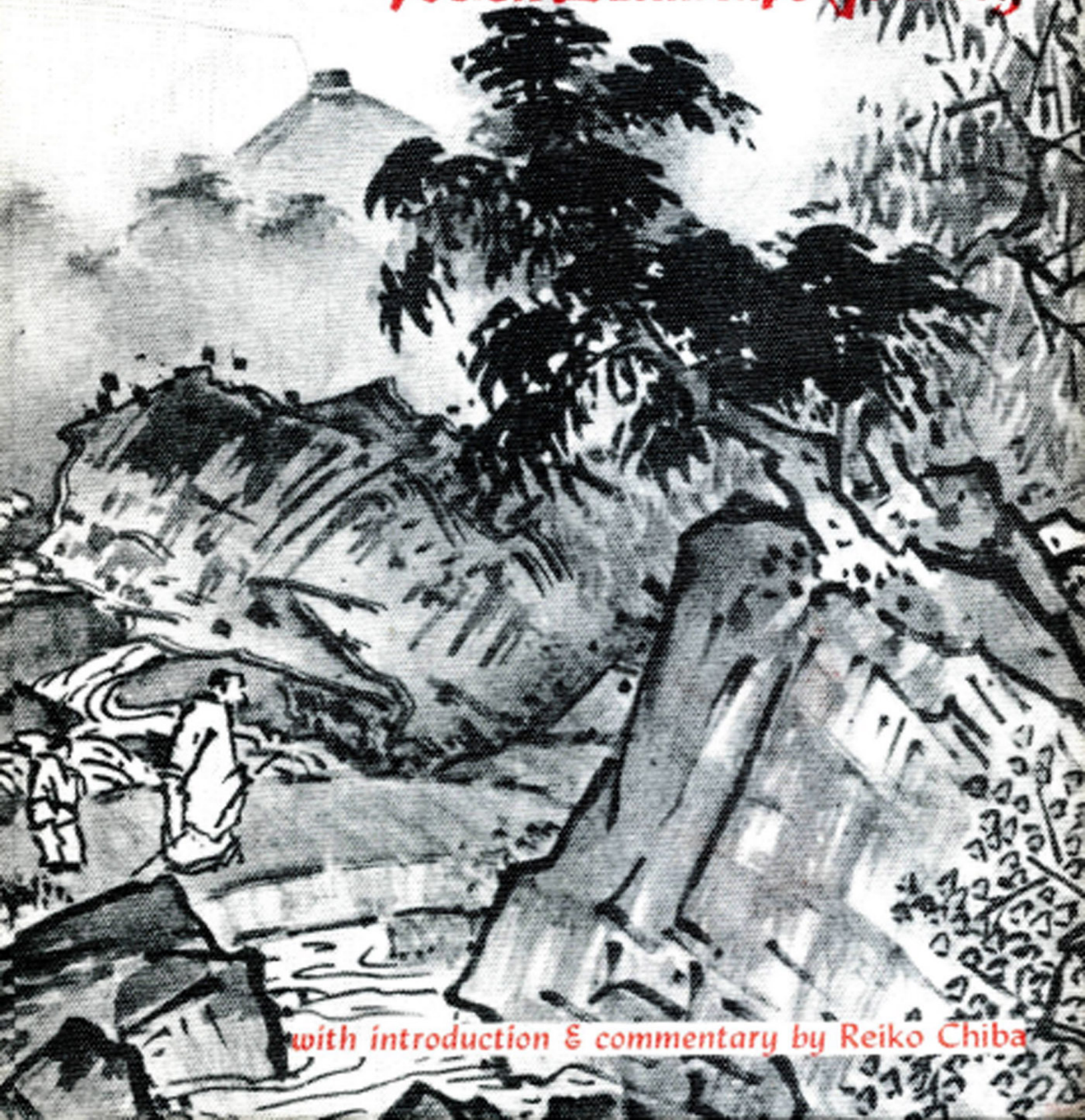


Sesshu's Long Scroll

A Zen Landscape Journey



with introduction & commentary by Reiko Chiba

SESSHU'S LONG SCROLL is the masterwork of the 15th-century artist whom Japan honors as her greatest. Famed not only as a painter but also as a Zen priest and a great traveler, Sesshu found inspiration for his wonderful landscapes both in China and Japan. This magnificent scroll, which pictures the procession of the seasons, is essentially religious painting with a strong atmosphere of Zen Buddhism. Nature, rather than man, is dominant, although the human touch is charmingly evident from time to time.

One can take this fascinating Zen landscape journey again and again, and always find new delights

Long Scroll
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INTRODUCTION

The Japanese value Sesshu as the greatest of all their artists, and the Long Landscape Scroll, here reproduced in its entirety, is his acknowledged masterpiece.

In considering Sesshu and his work, it is well to remember his concurrent role as a Zen priest. He was born in 1420 near Okayama, in the southern part of Japan's main island. Tradition says he was a rather unruly boy. His mother therefore must have felt a measure of relief in turning him over to the local Zen temple for training and discipline when he was about ten years old. Even the priests found him a bit hard to handle. The most famous myth concerning his youth records that after a particularly trying day his instructor was forced to punish him by tying him to a temple post. At the end of a few hours, Sesshu cried so bitterly that tears fell to his feet. Thereupon, with the tears as ink, he drew such a realistic rat in the dust that the rat came to life, gnawed the ropes, and set him free.

Sesshu, however, matured early and at the age of twenty advanced to the famous Sokoku-ji, a temple in Kyoto where he made rapid progress both as an artist and as a popular figure in the Zen denomination. A most important thing to remember about Sesshu is his versatility. He was a whole man in the sense that we in the West frequently associate with great Renaissance figures. Although a devout Zen Buddhist, he was in no sense a recluse or hermit. In addition to being a painter he was an accomplished poet and landscape gardener. While at the great Sokoku-ji he was selected to act as host and entertainer for visiting dignitaries. He was also a businessman, trusted with the purchase and evaluation of art objects and given considerable authority on one of the great contemporary trading expeditions to China. Sesshu enjoyed company and parties. He was an inveterate traveler, most famous in his day for his long journey to China but always restlessly on the move in Japan until the end of his long, full life at the age of eighty-six.

Although he admired, studied, and acknowledged his debt to Chinese masters, Sesshu was not a strict traditionalist. As he himself once said, not men, but mountains and rivers, were his teachers. Even in his own day he

became a legend and was the founder of an extensive school. His fame today is secure, and a major portion of Japanese painters have acknowledged him as master.

Sesshu's work exhibits the three traditional brush-writing techniques: *shin*, *gyo*, and *so*. *Shin* is distinguished by an angular quality, firm and decisive strokes, and attention to linear detail; *gyo*, by curving lines and rounded forms resulting from more rapid use of the brush; and *so*, by a cursive, comparatively indistinct quality that achieves its effects through suggestion rather than literal interpretation. The Long Landscape Scroll, although celebrated as a display of Sesshu's *shin* technique, occasionally introduces aspects of atmosphere and relative distance that illustrate *gyo* and *so*.

The Long Landscape Scroll was completed in 1486, roughly six years before Columbus discovered America. In this reproduction, to conform to Western conventions of book reading, the scroll is presented going from the end toward the beginning, and Sesshu's inscription, which in the original concludes the scroll, comes at the end of the book. If you wish to view the scroll as it was painted, you should start from the end of the book and come forward to the first part. Essentially, however, there is little difference as far as enjoyment of the painting is concerned. Each part seems to fall of itself into a natural composition, requiring no strict sequence for proper appreciation. The only actual element of continuity is a gentle and gradual change of seasons from spring to winter. The original, done in ink and faint color washes on paper, is approximately 51 by 1¼ feet in size. For those who desire to learn more about Sesshu and his art, the following books are recommended:

Covell, Jon Carter: *Under the Seal of Sesshu*. New York, 1941.

Grilli, Elise: *Sesshu Toyo*. Vol. I, Library of Japanese Art. Tokyo, Japan & Rutland, Vermont, 1957.

Tokyo National Museum. *Sesshu: Catalogue of Special Exhibition at the 450th Anniversary*. Tokyo, 1956.

*Sesshu's
Long
Scroll*



As we start our journey through the Long Landscape Scroll, the season is winter. This seems appropriate, for Sesshu, the painter's nom d'artiste means "snowy boat." One pleasant story is that Sesshu chose this name upon leaving China, since so many well-wishers showered him with farewell poems that his boat seemed to be covered with snow. Actually, however, he had assumed this name several years before his trip to China. In Japanese the word "Sesshu" suggests the landscapes of which he was so fond. Its syllables recall the names of former artists he admired.



The Long Landscape Scroll is done almost entirely in the shin technique, the style most associated with Sesshu. The lines are firm, strong, and frequently angular, as we can see in the mountains that form the background of the village through which we are passing and in the rocks and cliffs we shall soon observe. There is considerable linear detail. We

must keep in mind, while traveling through the scroll, that most of its inspiration comes from Chinese rather than Japanese landscapes. The stone wall, the temple, and the arched bridge (page 13) in the opening section are all typically Chinese. Probably because it is winter, we do not encounter anyone on the road. The first people we meet are the group of three resting comfortably inside the temple just above the arched bridge, where they themselves are in a position to see much of the same view that we admire. It is possible that Sesshu intended this group to represent a Zen priest with two of his disciples. Behind the temple, pine trees climb a snowy hill, and beyond them a few angular strokes suggest other buildings farther up. Large rocks rise in the foreground.



Having left the temple behind, we enter a somewhat desolate area of massive rocks and windswept trees whose background appears to be hidden by curtains of cloud. The varying types of brush-stroke skillfully depict

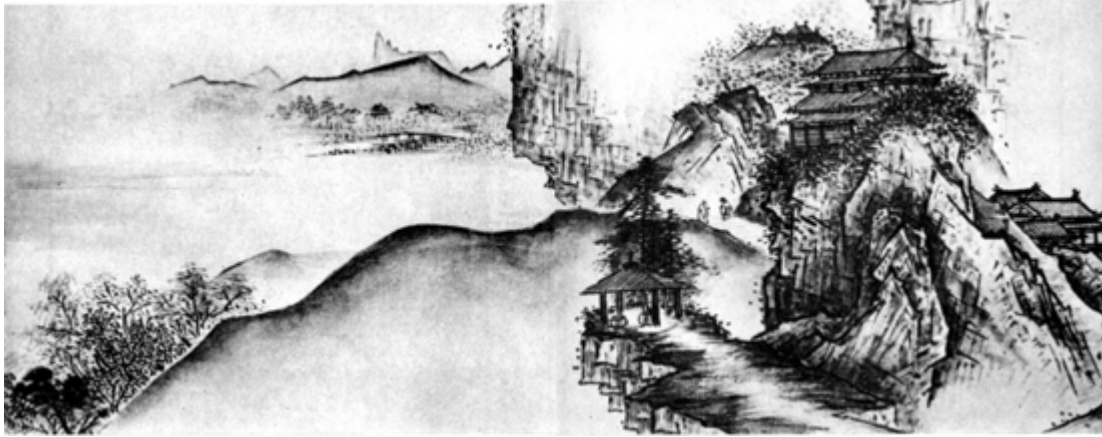
differences in foliage. When we next encounter humanity, the season has changed from winter to autumn. Two priests are lost in contemplation of the foliage. The lively scene showing people congregated in front of the inn, with its suggestion of harvest or festival time, is one of the most admired in the scroll. Sesshu was not an ascetic. He liked sake and often included wine-shops or inns in his paintings. The twisted flag (page 15), looking something like a figure eight, is actually a windblown banner advertising wine for sale. In the pine tree at the right of the village inn we see for the first time the use of the chrysanthemum pattern to create pine foliage: a technique for which Sesshu is particularly noted. Later in our journey we shall pass other pine trees painted in this style.



Moving along to the right, we meet a porter carrying a box and a cloth sack on a pole over his shoulder (page 16). This porter, sometimes accompanied by fellow-laborers, is frequently seen in Sesshus landscapes. Such human figures, however, are treated as types rather than individuals. Zen art in general treats human beings as part of the natural scenery itself and with no more emphasis than, it gives to rocks, trees, or rivers. The scene directly behind the porter, showing a pagoda at the top of a steep mountain, is much more Chinese than Japanese, as is the half-circle arched bridge which we next cross (page 17) and where we meet two more Zen priests with a disciple.



This autumn portion of the scroll is much the longest, and in the scene after the arched bridge (pages 18-20) a number of things appear that are typical of Sesshu: the rugged rocks done with powerful, decisive angular strokes in the foreground near the bridge; the several types of foliage between the bridge and the large inlet; the numerous boats of which Sesshu, as an enthusiastic traveler, was especially fond. If we look carefully, we can see at least seven varieties of foliage in this section, each done with a different but extremely ingenious brush technique. Pine trees in the distant background immediately before the extensive inlet (page 20) approach Sesshu's gyo style, in which the line is soft and rounded.



In the inlet itself (pages 21-22) we see a typical example of Sesshu's use of water. To the Chinese the word "landscape" implies mountains and water. The water involved is often a torrential or cascading mountain stream. In Sesshu's work, however, water is more generally a wide, comparatively calm expanse with an interesting use of white space, as in the case of this peaceful vista.

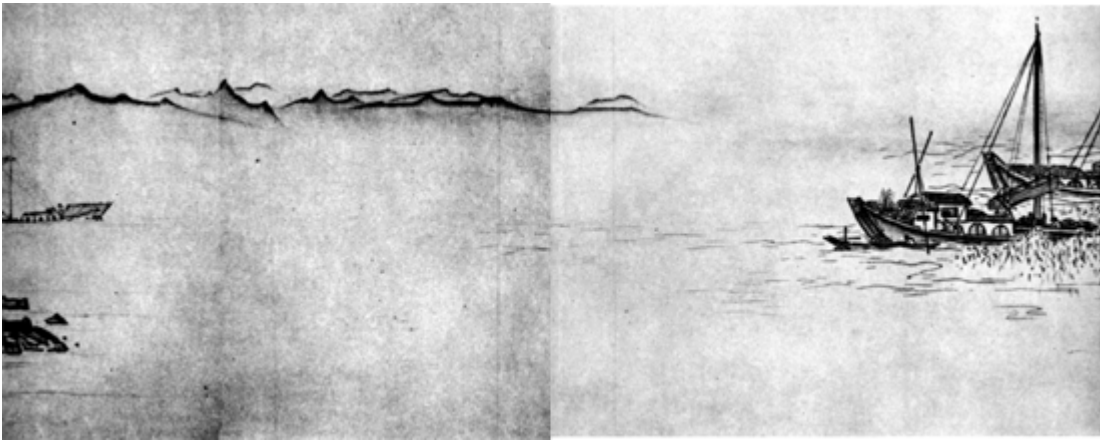


After crossing the inlet, we meet (page 23) two more Zen priests, possibly from the temple in the background. This is a most engaging scene since we, as the beholders, are so obviously asked to come inside, rest, and admire the splendid view from the little covered shelter in the left foreground. The succeeding rock and tree patterns (pages 24-27) are again very typical of Sesshu's style, particularly the cubical formation of the rocks crowned by the windblown pine grove. The magnificent pagoda, itself dwarfed by a precipitous mountain, is evidently another reminder of Sesshu's visit to Peking. This journey to China, which had such a great

influence on Sesshu, was made in 1468. He was in China approximately a year, and at the time that he painted this scroll he had to search back eighteen years into his memory.



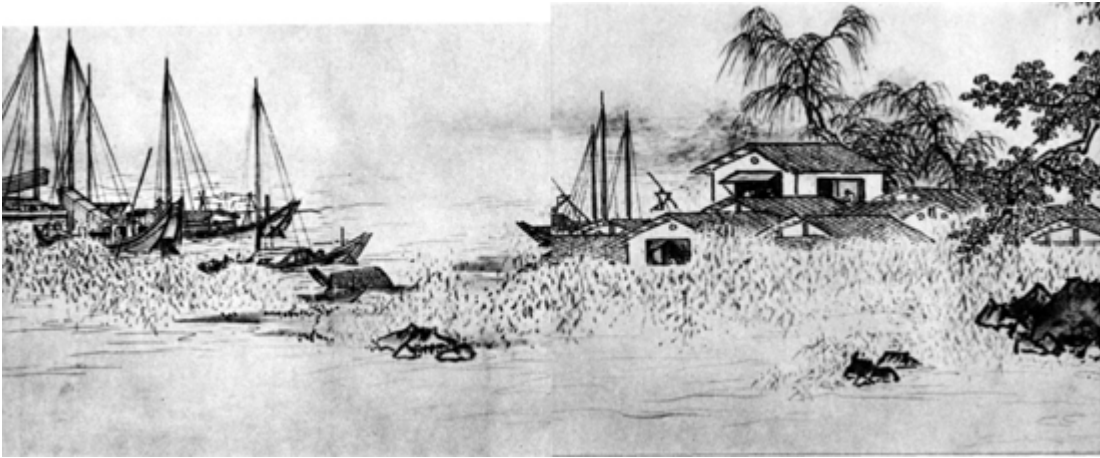
Coming now to boats in full sail, we have reached the summer season. In the foreground, quiet waves lap the rugged shore, while a tranquil expanse of water stretches away into a background of sharp-peaked mountains suggested by simple brush-strokes and masterly shading.



We are now traveling through another quiet interval in the scroll. We appear to be crossing a deep bay beyond which lies the open sea. With an amazing economy of brushstrokes, Sesshu suggests the quiet movement of the water and the panorama of distant mountains.

As we approach the shore, we come upon more evidence of Sesshus love of boats and a rather surprising amount of detail in the group at anchor, including rigging, indications of the type of cargo, and even laundry

hanging out to dry. The figures of people at work on the boats suggest the busy activity of a bright summer morning, while the rolling waves in the background create a counter-rhythm of their own. As we pass these resting sampans, we can admire the astonishing detail with which Sesshu has portrayed their structure.



Now we reach a cluster of tile-roofed buildings with graceful willow trees rising behind them. Windows are open to the summer air, and once again we see shop banners fluttering in the breeze. The people in the two-story building are perhaps travelers resting at an inn.



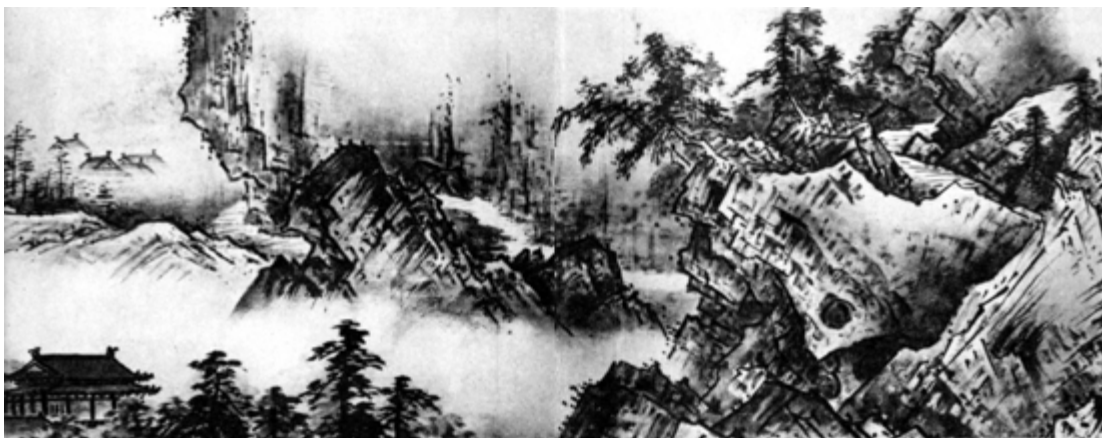
Rather abruptly, we find ourselves again in an area of angular rocks and sharp cliffs. Pine trees struggle to maintain a precarious foothold on a rock shelf that projects above a valley.

The summer season is rather a short one. At the moment we overtake another Zen priest and a student crossing a bridge, we are into the spring of

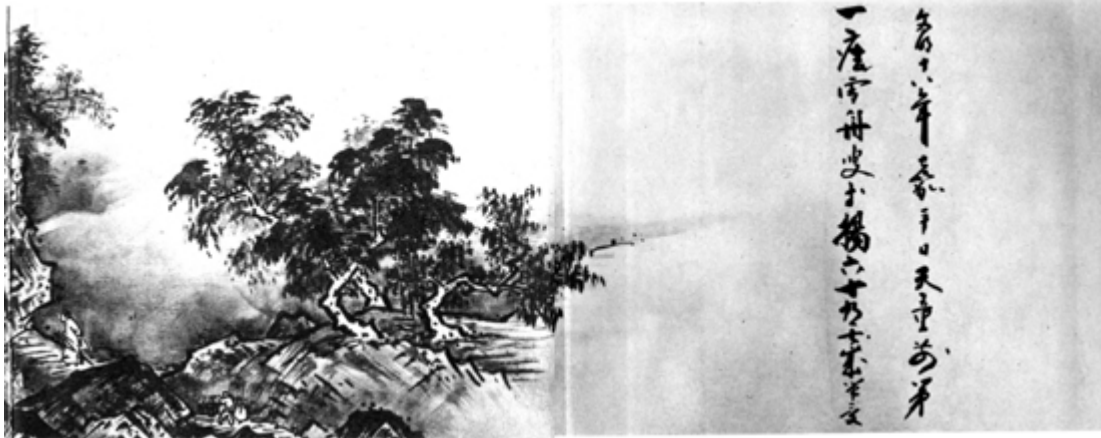
the year. Throughout the scroll it is well to keep in mind that this is essentially religious painting with an atmosphere of Zen Buddhism. Nature, and not man, is dominant. The rocks, the trees, the mountains, and the rivers preach the sermon that Sesshu intends the beholder to hear. There would seem to be, for example, in the houses that nestle below the spreading pine tree, an expression of man's great need for harmony with nature. It is not far-fetched to surmise such meanings in Sesshu's art.



As we approach the end of the scroll, the spring season is indicated by the mist that hangs over the valley and the remote mountains. A pine tree leans over a precipice, and temples rise in the foreground below. In the distance (page 36) other temples appear to float in the mist, and a road winds under overhanging cliffs. The final figures that we meet (page 38) are again a Buddhist priest in spiritual contemplation and a workaday porter carrying his burden. The spring scene commences as the winter season ended: with a view of rugged terrain, rocks, and trees.



The inscription in Sesshu's handwriting (page 30) reads: "Painted by the aged Toyo Sesshu, who formerly held the First Seat at Tendo Temple, on a peaceful day in his sixty-seventh year, or the eighteenth year of Bummei [1486]."



If, as Sesshu says in his inscription, this magnificent scroll was painted on a single peaceful day, it is indeed a miracle of art. It would seem more reasonable, however, to assume that this was simply forgivable poetic license. This exquisite scroll alone has served as a complete text of instruction for generations of Japanese artists. It is possible to come back to it again and again and with a fresh eye observe fascinating new details of composition previously overlooked. It has rightly taken its place as one of mankind's greatest works of art.



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