



Tigers in a Bamboo Grove (Tigers at Play), mid-1630s, by Kano Tan'yū (Nanzen-ji, Kyoto)



Mid-1630s • Ink, color, and gold leaf on paper, set of four-panel sliding doors • Each door: 72 13/16 × 55 1/2 inches (185 × 141 cm) • Kano Tan'yū, Japanese, 1602–1674 • Nanzen-ji, Kyoto • Important Cultural Property

About the Artist

Tan'yū (1602–1674) was the most prolific artist of the Kano school. With his talent and the support he received from his well-connected father, he became the shoguns' first official painter-in-attendance and established an artist workshop in Edo (present-day Tokyo). During his life, Tan'yū was given many important commissions, making large-scale paintings for interiors of castles, palaces, and temples. His bold compositions of natural subjects and use of gold and bright colors brought light and exuberant energy to the images. Like many other Kano artists, Tan'yū admired Chinese paintings and made many sketches from them in order to learn from Chinese masters.



An interior view of Nanzen-ji showing the sliding doors

About This Work of Art

Two playful tigers dash into a lush bamboo forest. The black-spotted tiger turns his head to encourage the other to catch up. The mother tiger watches her cubs attentively from behind some rocks. The bamboo forest stands tall, topped with full, green leaves. Young, brown bamboo shoots break through the earth, signaling spring time. Wild orchids complement the tough stalks and spiky leaves of the bamboos. The scene was painted on paper and mounted on four-panel sliding doors. The paper was gilded and subjects were added in ink.

Nestled in the foothills of the Higashiyama (East Mountain) area of Kyoto is the impressive Nanzen-ji temple complex. Originally the site of an imperial villa built in 1274 by retired Emperor Kameyama (1249–1305; reigned 1259–1274), Nanzen-ji was converted into a Zen Buddhist temple in 1291. The temple buildings were destroyed during the civil wars of 1467–77 and were rebuilt starting in 1611 with the support of the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616; reigned 1603–1616). These sliding doors are one of two sets that decorated a room in the large and lavish residence of the abbot (head monk). The second set (seen in the photo at left) shows the tigers resting after a long day of play.

Let's Look

- What do you notice in the painting?
- Where are the tigers?
- What natural details do you notice?
- What material did Tan'yū use for the background?
- Why do you think he used gold?
- What would it be like to sit in a room with this painting on sliding doors?



Nanzen-ji, Kyoto
(Photograph by deepblue-photographer, Shutterstock)

Tigers and Bamboos

In Chinese art, the tiger was traditionally related to the four directions as the animal of the West, and was often paired with the dragon, which represented the East. Kano artists frequently depicted tigers with holy men, abbots, or monks, reflecting their mystic presence and association with Zen Buddhism. A tiger is said to be the only animal capable of navigating through thick bamboo forests, and the pairing of the two symbols is said to represent a harmonious and peaceful society. The bamboo alone stands for resilience and integrity, admired virtues of noble men.

The Kano School of Painting

The Kano school was the longest-lived and most influential school of painting in Japanese history. Founded by Kano Masanobu (1434–1530), the school flourished for over 400 years, attracting the patronage of the wealthiest and most powerful classes in Japan. Kano artists were influenced by traditional Chinese painting, with its focus on monochromatic ink landscapes and nature-related themes. Eventually expanding their repertoire, the Kano painters began experimenting with more innovative compositions, bold brushwork, and bright colors. Kano Tan'yū, the artist who painted these sliding doors, was named the shoguns' painter-in-residence at the age of fifteen and was commissioned to decorate the most prestigious castles and palaces.

Related Works of Art from the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Gambling Lions 1789–1800

Ink and color on gold paper; mounted as a pair of six-fold screens, framed
Hasegawa Setsurei
Japanese, active 1789 to 1800
Each screen 67 1/4 x 144 1/4 inches (170.8 x 366.4 cm)

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Baekeland in honor of Andrea M. Baldeck, M.D., and William M. Hollis, Jr., 2007-95-1a,b

Originally associated with Indian Buddhism as a symbol of power and protection, the lion later assumed a playful quality in East Asian art, often pictured frolicking in nature. On this screen, Hasegawa Setsurei has painted five dappled lions in blue, green, and white. Their full, curly manes and tails are rendered in gold and silver lines, and the creatures are set against a plain gold backdrop. The broad, flat background of gold leaf helps accentuate the colors and movements of the lions, who look more like kittens than kings of wild beasts. Instead of formidable guardians, here they are portrayed as auspicious symbols.



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