



Recumbent Bull

c. 1775

Soga Shōhaku

(Japanese, 1730–1781)

*Ink on paper mounted
as a hanging scroll*

52 1/4 x 21 inches (132.7 x 53.3 cm)

In this hanging scroll painting, master ink painter Soga Shōhaku (so-gah shoh-hah-ku), whose signature appears at the upper right, has portrayed a bull reclining with his legs tucked under his enormous body and wagging his thin tail. Although the bull is portrayed from the unusual viewpoint of the back, we can sense the animal's gentle and passive nature. Shōhaku emphasizes the aged, worn character of the bull with his uneven ears, broken horn, and rough, dry edges of the coat around his neck. One of the twelve signs of the Asian zodiac, the bull or ox is regarded as a contemplative, humble, and hard-working animal.

Artists in China, Japan, and Korea have created paintings using only black ink for hundreds of years. In this work, Shōhaku shows his mastery at ink painting, carefully controlling the *sumi*, or black ink. *Sumi* is made by combining burned remains of plant matter with glue to form sticks, which the painter then grinds against a small stone and mixes with varying amounts of water to create deep black to pale gray tones. The painter can also vary the size of the brush and the amount of ink it holds, creating full, dense brushstrokes or dry, wispy lines. The paper absorbs the ink quickly. Here, Shōhaku uses rich, dark ink and just a few sweeping brushstrokes—you can count them—to create the bull's shape. A much paler gray wash gives a sense of the atmosphere around the bull.

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