WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES

National Museum of Asian Art: Masterpieces

Twenty paintings from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art: scrolls, screens and fans, and a handful of oils



The Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art in Washington brings together the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. A painting there may be a hanging scroll, a handscroll, an album leaf, a fan or a folding screen. The format settles a good deal before brushwork comes into it at all: whether the image stands in angled panels, keeps a curved edge or fills only part of a larger mounting.

Most of the twenty works chosen here are Japanese. They run from Kanō Eitoku's gold-ground screens and Kanō Tan'yū's spare brushwork to Hokusai's breaking wave and Kunisada's courtesan under her net. Ogata Kōrin, Ogata Kenzan, Hiroshige, Hanabusa Itchō and Mori Sosen are among the others. Gold, silver and imitation gold all appear in their materials. The rest of the selection is a mixed group: a small Chinese fan landscape whose attribution is unresolved, Whistler's quietly tonal views of river and shore, and Fantin-Latour's portrait of him.

Artline chose these works from documented museum holdings, independently of the museum. Being in the collection does not mean a work is on view. Dates and attributions keep the qualifications given in the linked records.

Explore this selection in Artline

See the selected works alongside books and events from their period, or compare when the artists lived. The books and events provide context, not evidence of direct influence. Works without confirmed dates remain in this guide.

Artworks in context Who lived when?

artlines.org/guides/national-museum-asian-art

The selection · 20

1. Breaking Waves
   Katsushika Hokusai · 1847
2. Mount Fuji and Enoshima
   Katsushika Hokusai · c. 1825-1831
3. Rats and Rice Bales
   Katsushika Hokusai · 1843
4. Branch of Medlars
   Kano Tan'yū · 17th century
5. Peddler and Child Looking at the Moon
   Hanabusa Itchō · 1615-1868
6. Arashiyama in Snow
   Andō Hiroshige · 19th century
7. Bird and Bamboo
   Kano Tan'yū · 17th century
8. Bodhidharma
   Kano Tan'yū · 17th century
9. Courtesan beneath a Mosquito Net
   Kunisada · 1855
10. Grape Vines
    Kanō Eitoku · 1568-1615
11. Hollyhocks
    Ogata Kōrin · 1615-1868
12. Landscape with Pavilions
    Attributed to Ma Yuan (date conflict) · 16th century
13. Peacock
    Mori Sosen · 1786
14. Running Water and Autumn Plants
    Ogata Kōrin · 1658-1868
15. Snow-Covered Grasses and Pine
    Ogata Kenzan · 1690-1868
16. Low Tide
    James Abbott McNeill Whistler · 1883-1884
17. Battersea
    James Abbott McNeill Whistler · 1870-1875
18. Bognor
    James Abbott McNeill Whistler · 1871-1876
19. Portrait of Whistler
    Henri Fantin-Latour · 1865
20. Emperor Minghuang and Yang Guifei
    Kanō Eitoku · 16th century

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Breaking Waves

Katsushika Hokusai

1847 · Ink and colour on silk · National Museum of Asian Art



Katsushika Hokusai. Breaking Waves. Katsushika Hokusai; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1905.276. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Foam curls above dark water beside the rocks, its fine edges set against the heavier mass beneath. The scroll is narrow and more than a metre high. Hokusai has the wave rise and break inside that upright strip, so its movement climbs the picture instead of running across it. This is a single painting in ink and colour on silk, not a printed impression.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1905.276

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Mount Fuji and Enoshima

Katsushika Hokusai

c. 1825-1831 · Ink and colour on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Katsushika Hokusai. Mount Fuji and Enoshima. Katsushika Hokusai; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1904.175-176. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Here Hokusai works on a folding screen. Low water and distant land stretch across its panels towards Fuji. When the screen stands, the panels meet at angles, so the long view to the mountain turns at every fold. A photograph that lays the screen out flat straightens all of that.

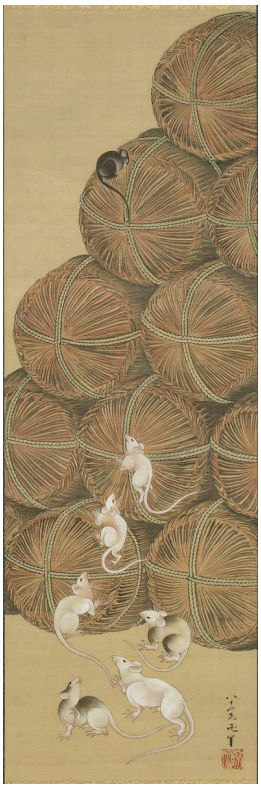
Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1904.175-176

03 / 20

Rats and Rice Bales

Katsushika Hokusai

1843 · Ink and colour on silk · National Museum of Asian Art



Katsushika Hokusai. Rats and rice bales. Katsushika Hokusai; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1904.132. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Small rats scatter round heavy, stacked bales of rice. They break up the bulk of the straw but never stray far from it. Hokusai uses one kind of mark for straw and another for fur, and the painting depends on that difference: small, soft, scurrying bodies against a weight that does not move.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1904.132

04 / 20

Branch of Medlars

Kano Tan'yū

17th century · Ink and colour on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Kano Tan'yū. A branch of medlars. Kano Tan'yū; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1904.122. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Of Tan'yū's paintings here, this is the only one with colour. Stems, leaves and fruit all grow from one continuous curve of branch, and he tells the parts apart by varying the width and weight of his strokes. Each kind of stroke does a single job, so he needs very few. The unpainted paper leaves every difference exposed. A misjudged stroke would have nowhere to hide.

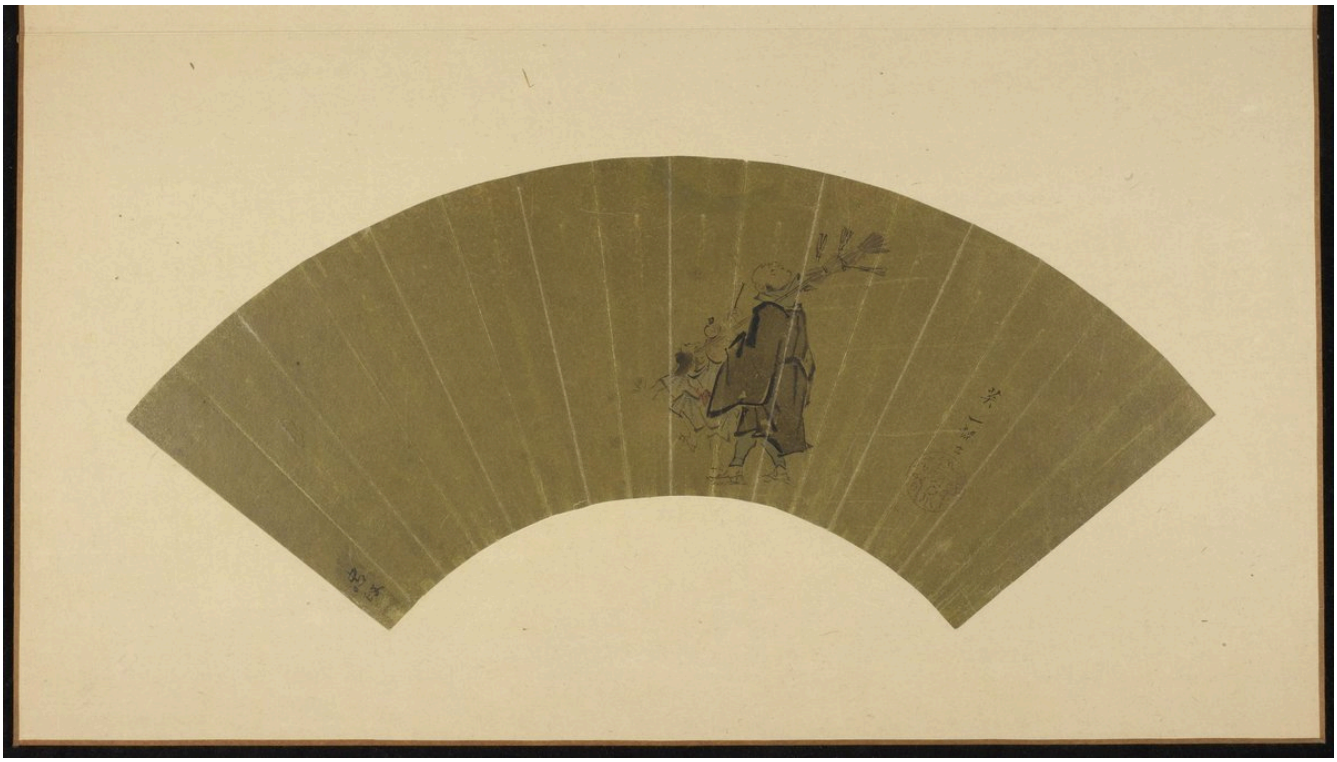
Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1904.122

05 / 20

Peddler and Child Looking at the Moon

Hanabusa Itchō

1615-1868 · Ink and colour on imitation gold · National Museum of Asian Art



Hanabusa Itchō. A peddler and a child looking at the moon. Hanabusa Itchō; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1907.657. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

A peddler and a child look up together towards the moon of the title. Hanabusa Itchō gathers the two small figures into the curve of a fan and leaves a broad space open above them, which is where their gaze goes. They exchange no detailed expressions. Looking up together is what makes them companions. The record specifies imitation gold as the ground, not the gold of Eitoku's screens.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1907.657

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Arashiyama in Snow

Andō Hiroshige

19th century · Ink and colour on silk · National Museum of Asian Art



Andō Hiroshige. Arashiyama in Snow. Andō Hiroshige; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1903.291. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Dark branches hold their shape against pale snow, and that contrast gives the winter landscape nearly all its structure. Hiroshige adds little else. His view on silk is compact and fills only part of a taller mounting, so the scroll as a whole is larger than the picture it carries.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1903.291

07 / 20

Bird and Bamboo

Kano Tan'yū

17th century · Ink on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Kano Tan'yū. Bird on a bamboo branch. Kano Tan'yū; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1904.367. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Tan'yū leaves out colour here and works in ink alone. The bird takes up only a small part of a tall field, but with bare paper all round it, it is the first thing you notice. Bamboo stems and leaves give it a setting without crowding it.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1904.367

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Bodhidharma

Kano Tan'yū

17th century · Ink on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Kano Tan'yū. Bodhidharma. Kano Tan'yū; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1904.368. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Tan'yū gives a person the same economy he gave the medlar and the bird. Bodhidharma sits low in a long, pale field, and a handful of dark strokes sets down his head and robe. Most of the surface stays blank. Because the figure is placed so low, the empty space gathers above him, and that small, dense body holds the whole sheet.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1904.368

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Courtesan beneath a Mosquito Net

Kunisada

1855 · Ink and colour on silk · National Museum of Asian Art



Kunisada. Courtesan beneath a Mosquito Net. Kunisada; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Purchase — Harold P. Stern Memorial Fund; F1995.17. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

A hanging green net encloses the woman but leaves her visible. Kunisada fits the net, her patterned clothing and her bending pose into the length of the scroll, and keeps the writing to a separate area above. We see her partly through the mesh, so the net is more than furniture. It frames her, and it also stands between her and whoever is looking.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1995.17

10 / 20

Grape Vines

Kanō Eitoku

1568-1615 · Colour and gold on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Kanō Eitoku. Grape vines 葡萄図屏風. Kanō Eitoku; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1903.242. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Dark stems carry scattered leaves and bunches of grapes across the gold ground. The vine bends easily enough to cross the joins between the screen's panels. Gold and dark paint respond differently to the light around them. As that light changes, the screen can look different even though its branches stay exactly where they are.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1903.242

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Hollyhocks

Ogata Kōrin

1615-1868 · Ink on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Ogata Kōrin. Hollyhocks. Ogata Kōrin; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1904.335. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Leaves and blossoms stand apart from one another, linked by the flowering stem and very little else. Kōrin leaves the gaps unfilled and lets each ink mark keep its own character against the paper. In Tan'yū's medlar branch everything grows from one continuous curve. This plant is held together much more loosely.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1904.335

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Landscape with Pavilions

Attributed to Ma Yuan (date conflict)

16th century · Ink on silk · National Museum of Asian Art



Ma Yuan. Landscape: pavilions on a mountain side; a stream below. Ma Yuan; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1909.245c. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

The qualification in the heading matters. The museum record names Ma Yuan but dates the painting to the sixteenth century, centuries after he was active. As they stand, the name and the date cannot both be right, and it remains open who painted the fan and when. What can be described is a small ink landscape on silk, a fan painting mounted as an album leaf. Dark branches and other foreground forms lead back towards pale water and distance, with the pavilions of the title. It is the only Chinese painting in the selection.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1909.245c

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Peacock

Mori Sosen

1786 · Colour and ink on silk · National Museum of Asian Art



Mori Sosen. Peacock. Mori Sosen; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1898.6. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Tan'yū's bird is a small presence in a tall field. Mori Sosen's peacock is the opposite: its long tail spreads through much of the lower part of the picture. Sosen changes the character of his small marks between feather and leaf, so the plumage separates from the plants nearby. Followed on its own, the tail turns into pattern. Sosen keeps it attached to a standing bird that bears its own weight.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1898.6

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Running Water and Autumn Plants

Ogata Kōrin

1658-1868 · Colour, ink, and silver on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Ogata Kōrin. Running water, autumn grasses and flowers. Ogata Kōrin; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1905.232. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Bands of water run across the broad screen, broken by autumn plants at unequal distances, so the current keeps moving and never settles into a fixed repeat. The materials are colour, ink and silver, a long way from the plain ink of Kōrin's Hollyhocks. Like the gold in Eitoku's Grape Vines, the silver depends on the light in the room. A reproduction can record its colour but cannot show that it is metal, or how it responds as the light changes.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1905.232

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Snow-Covered Grasses and Pine

Ogata Kenzan

1690-1868 · Ink and colour on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Ogata Kenzan. Snow-laden grasses and Snow-laden pine branches. Ogata Kenzan; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1897.31a-b. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Like Itchō's peddler and the landscape attributed to Ma Yuan, these are fan paintings, but here there is a pair. Two fan-shaped paintings are mounted together, each keeping its curved edges, and Kenzan arranges snow and dark foliage to follow those curves. They are catalogued as related parts of one object, and side by side they invite a comparison between the snow-covered grasses and the pine.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1897.31a-b

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Low Tide

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

1883-1884 · Oil on wood panel · National Museum of Asian Art



James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Low Tide. James Abbott McNeill Whistler; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1902.156a-b. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

With the tide out, exposed shore fills a broad area beneath boats and waterfront structures. The tide sets the picture's proportions: a wide, quiet stretch of ground in front and the busier band beyond. Whistler holds the two together with restrained blues and browns, so the working boats and buildings never break away into separate incidents. It is the only Whistler here painted on a wood panel and not on canvas.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1902.156a-b

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Battersea

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

1870-1875 · Oil on canvas · National Museum of Asian Art



James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Nocturne: Blue and Silver--Battersea Reach. James Abbott McNeill Whistler; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1902.97a-b. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Boats and shore forms have to be picked out from closely related green-blue tones. Few objects get a firm outline. Whistler gives just enough to place the scene on the river at Battersea, and spacing and slight changes of tone do the rest. The broad frame belongs to the object, not to the painted view.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1902.97a-b

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Bognor

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

1871-1876 · Oil on canvas · National Museum of Asian Art



James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Nocturne: Blue and Silver--Bognor. James Abbott McNeill Whistler; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1906.103a-b. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

Thin horizontal divisions separate shore, sea and sky, and the beach stays open. Small figures and boats give it scale, but they are kept modest, and nothing at the centre competes with the bands of space between them.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1906.103a-b

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Portrait of Whistler

Henri Fantin-Latour

1865 · Oil on canvas mounted on aluminum panel · National Museum of Asian Art



Henri Fantin-Latour. Portrait of Whistler. Henri Fantin-Latour; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1906.276a-b. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

The portrait is earlier than any of Whistler's own paintings in this selection, so the painter appears here first as a sitter. Fantin-Latour gives him few surroundings, and none of the brushes or palette that might announce his profession. Dark clothing and a dark background bring the turned face forward, and the face carries almost the whole picture. The canvas is mounted on an aluminium panel.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1906.276a-b

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Emperor Minghuang and Yang Guifei

Kanō Eitoku

16th century · Ink, colour, and gold on paper · National Museum of Asian Art



Kanō Eitoku. The Chinese Emperor Minghuang and his concubine Yang Guifei, with attendants on a terrace. Kanō Eitoku; Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1900.10. CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression. · CC0 1.0

These Japanese screens show the Chinese emperor Minghuang with Yang Guifei in an idealised palace. Across the gold ground, the architecture divides their company into a series of connected spaces. In Grape Vines Eitoku's gold carried a vine. Here it sets off buildings and a court. The story is Chinese, but the screens present it as it circulated and was reinterpreted in Japan, so the court they show is seen at one remove.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: F1900.10

Formats, dates and names

A reproduction may show a whole screen, the painted area alone or a scroll with its mounting, and each choice changes the apparent proportions. Several catalogue dates are broad period ranges, some spanning more than a century. They mark the period an object is assigned to, not an artist's lifetime, and are best read as outer limits. The headings sometimes drop the long vowel mark in Kanō, as in Kano Tan'yū. It is the same name.

Further reading

The Spirit of Japanese Art

Yoné Noguchi · Read free · English

Yoné Noguchi's essays introduce Japanese painters through the judgements and enthusiasms of an early twentieth-century writer. They tell you as much about how that period looked at Japanese art as they do about the painters.

Along the Riverbank: Chinese Paintings from the C. C. Wang Family Collection

Maxwell K. Hearn and Wen C. Fong (1999) · Free PDF and online reading from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A Metropolitan Museum catalogue of Chinese paintings from another collection, the C. C. Wang family's. Its detailed entries show how format, inscription and attribution are weighed when a painting is studied. That makes it useful background for the fan landscape attributed to Ma Yuan, whose attribution is unresolved and which is the one Chinese work in this selection.

Museum website · Official collection guide

Sources and visitor information checked: 2026-10-12

Artline · National Museum of Asian Art: Masterpieces