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Morita Shiryū (1912-1999)

Ryū (dragon)

Aluminum flake pigment in polyvinyl acetate medium and yellow alkyd varnish on paper and wood panel

Signed, titled and dated 1965 on a label affixed to the reverse, framed

with frame H. 161cm x W. 82.5cm (63½" x 32½")

painting H. 157.5 cm x W. 80cm (62¾" x 31½")

Morita Shiryū was born in Toyooka, Hyogo Prefecture and studied sho (calligraphy) under the influential and ground-breaking calligrapher Ueda Sōkyū (1899-1968). Sōkyū was a charismatic teacher introducing his talented pupils to avant-garde sho and its definition as the art of the line.

Having received numerous awards from important Japanese exhibitions such as the 1937 Inten (Japan Art Institute Exhibition) where he won the Tokusen silver award, Shiryū became more and more fascinated with the performance involved in the writing of sho and the similarities between the expressive calligraphic line and what was developing within the Abstract Expressionist art scene of the West. In 1948 he launched the magazine Shonobi (beauty of calligraphy) under the leadership of his master Ueda Sōkyū with the intention of promoting avant-garde sho.

The notion of abstraction had been part of the practice of East Asian calligraphy for many centuries, and Shiryū often wrote about the interplay between traditional Japanese calligraphy and abstract art in the West. These observations were catalogued in a second journal entitled Bokubi which was first edited and published by Shiryū in 1951 and featured an image of a calligraphic painting by Franz Kline on its cover. Distributed internationally, the journal became extremely influential within the Western art world, causing a further interest in the Japanese aesthetic followed by an array of collaborations and international exhibitions with European artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement such as Pierre Alechinsky (b.1927) and Georges Mathieu (1921-1912), and American artists Mark Tobey (1890-1976) and Franz Kline (1910-1962). With the help of such innovative publications and the possibility of international exposure, modern Japanese calligraphers such as Shiryū and fellow like-minded artist Inoue Yūichi soon became an international

sensation.

In 1952, five disciples of Ueda Shoukyū including Shiryū co-founded the legendary Bokujinkai (Society of Ink People). He joined forces with Inoue Yūichi (1916-1985), Eguchi Sōgen (1919-), Sekiya Yoshimichi (b.1920) and Nakamura Bokushi (dates unknown) and together they further advocated the emancipation of the calligraphic line away from its traditional form and experimented using unorthodox materials. The beauty of the line itself is held as a self-evident attribute and the execution of the writing becomes the focus. Shiryū placed the performance of a piece at the centre of his definition of calligraphy. The kanji character is written in one defining moment with confident strokes. The calligrapher penetrates to a deeper level of understanding and the character is understood in a different, more profound way.

In terms of style and format, Morita Shiryū's works are groundbreaking. He preferred to use an oversized brush, working quickly across the surface. Whilst works such as the example presented here may appear to be executed using the rather slow process of Japanese lacquer, in actuality the metallic silver paint is applied swiftly onto the surface and later covered with a coat of fast drying yellow varnish achieving a similar effect. Shiryū's vigorous style often results in abstract forms which no longer appear to be recognisable characters yet they retain their original essence enhanced with a new vitality.

Works by the artist can be found in the collections of: Art Institute of Chicago, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Cincinnati Art Museum, Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri

Selected solo exhibitions:

1963 Sho Modern Calligraphy, Mi Chou Gallery, New York

1964 Yamada Gallery, Kyoto

1965 Olaf Hudtwalcker Gallery, Frankfurt

1970 - 1990 Morita Shiryū, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (exhibition toured the world)

1986 Morita Shiryū, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto

1990 Ein Japanischer Schreibmeister, Klingspor-Museum, Offenbach am Main, Germany

1992 Shiryū Morita and Bokubi, Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art, Kobe

2013 Modernist Sho Calligraphy - Paintings by Shiryū Morita, John Molloy Gallery, New York

Selected group exhibitions:

- 1937 2nd Inten Exhibition, Tokyo – Tokusen silver Award
- 1938 Nichiman Calligraphy Exhibition, Tokyo - Ministry of Education Award
- 1953 Japanese Architecture and Calligraphy, Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 1954 Japanese and American abstraction, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
- Abstract Japanese Calligraphy, Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 1958 Carnegie International Exhibitions, Pittsburgh
- Modern Abstract Japanese Calligraphy, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Abstract Painting Exhibition, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
- 1959 São Paulo Art Biennial, São Paulo
- 1960 Japanese calligraphy, Freiburg, Germany
- 1961 São Paulo Art Biennial, São Paulo
- Carnegie International Exhibitions, Pittsburgh
- 1962 Contemporary Japanese Plastic Arts, Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
- 1963 Tendency of Contemporary Japanese Painting, National Museum of Modern Art, Sydney
- Modern Trends, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
- 1964 Contemporary Japanese Painting, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1966 Japanese Art Today, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
- 1992 Calligraphy and Painting: The Passionate Age: 1945-1969, O Art Museum, Tokyo
- 1994 Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama and  
Guggenheim SoHo, New York
- 2002 Writepainting: Marks in a Japanese Vein, Museum of Fine Arts, Gifu
- For a pair of panels by the artist treated in a similar manner see: The Collection-Kyoto Municipal Museum of  
Art 1993, p.266, no.30. For a large four-fold screen see: Beyond Golden Clouds Japanese screens from The Art  
Institute of Chicago and the Saint Louis Art Museum, pp. 196/197.