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6554 Shibata Zeshin (1807-1891)

A paper kakemono (hanging scroll) painted in lacquer with the autumn plant waremokō (burnet bloodwort).

Signed: Zeshin

Seal: Koma

Japan 19th century Edo/Meiji period

Dimensions:

Scroll: H. 119cm x W. 25.5cm (47" x 10¼")

Painting: H. 20cm x W. 17cm (8" x 6¾")

Tomobako outer lid:

Zeshin okina hitsu aki kusa no e: Painting of autumn grasses painted by old Zeshin

Tomobako inside lid:

Signed: Koma Chikushin kan

Seal: Shin

Tomobako label, top end:

Zeshin urushi-e shikishi hachi jyū nana gō: Lacquer painting by Zeshin, poem paper, No.87

Tomobako label, base:

Zeshin, kusa ****: Zeshin, grasses **** (illegible due to wear)

Outer cardboard box:

Zeshin aki kusa e, urushi e: lacquer painting of autumn grasses by Zeshin

Seal: illegible

Shibata Zeshin, generally considered the greatest lacquer-work artist in Japanese history, based his skills on technical brilliance. Early in his training under Koma Kansai II, he realised that he needed to study other forms of art to build on his technical skills. He travelled to Kyoto where he studied the painting style of the modern Shijo School. At the same time he studied poetry and old paintings and

spent a great deal of time with famous scholars such as Rai San'yo, which led to him being known firstly as a painter rather than a lacquer artist. Later in life this rich knowledge enabled him to create lacquer works which were marvelled at for their perfection and wit shown through “iki” (playful chic) and the feeling of rhythm typical of Japanese poetry. He developed several techniques of his own as well as reviving old ones, one of his greatest achievements was the revival of the fine seigai pattern, lost since the 17th century this technique involves combing through wet lacquer before it sets to create a pattern of thin waves.

His trademark techniques include seido-nuri and shitan-nuri, which imitated different materials such as ancient bronze, rosewood, rusty iron and shibuichi. Unusual methods such as scratching a design onto lacquer with a rat's tooth reveal him as an ambitious but also humorous artist who crossed the boundaries between materials and subjects with ease.

Combining his skills as a painter and lacquer artist he frequently painted urushi-e (lacquer paintings). An ingenious technician, Zeshin discovered how to prepare and apply a lacquer which was flexible and strong enough to withstand cracking when unrolled or fading when exposed to strong light. Few artists had the skill or patience to use his methods, and the urushi-e (lacquer picture) of the Meiji period is now associated with Zeshin's name. By 1878 Zeshin's persistence had resulted in a type of composition on paper using the togi-dashi-maki-e method. This type of lacquer design is usually accomplished by first outlining the design on a wooden core, next covering the entire surface with lacquer, and then rubbing the lacquer away in areas to leave the finished composition. On paper, however, this process requires the utmost care since the lacquer base is extremely sensitive and liable to damage.

In 1873 he participated for the first time at the World Exposition in Vienna where he exhibited a lacquer panel depicting Mount Fuji. Although undervalued in Japan until recently, he gained numerous followers in the West who not only collected his work during Zeshin's lifetime, but also travelled to Japan to meet him in person. Many western museums have his works among their collections and his status is also being steadily re-evaluated in Japan. He was chosen to be a member of the Art Committee of the Imperial Household and became a Court painter in 1890, a sign of the appreciation of his skill as an artist.

Works by the artist can be found in the collections of: British Museum, London; Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Ma; Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago, Ill.; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ma.; Stanford University Art Gallery and Museum, Ca.; Seattle Art Museum, Washington; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Royal Art History Museum, Brussels, Belgium and many others.

