

gregg baker  
asian art



7719 Nakahara Nantenbō (1839-1925)

A kakemono (hanging scroll) painted with a single stroke depicting Nantenbō's staff with calligraphy

Ink on silk

Inscribed: liuru mo Nantembo, ii zaru mo Nantembo (Enlightened, Nanten's staff; not enlightened, Nanten's staff)

Signed: \*Hachiju o Nantembo Tōjū sho (Written by Nantenbo, Tōjū, an old man of eighty years old)

Seals:

Left, upper: Hakugaikutsu

Left, lower: Tōjū

Right: Nantenbo

Japan 20th century \*1918

Dimensions:

Scroll: H. 208cm x W. 59cm (82" x 23¼")

Painting: H. 132.5cm x W. 40cm (52¼" x 16")

Nakahara Nantenbō (1839-1925). Priest name: Tōjū Zenchū. Gō (art name) Hakugaikutsu. Born in Nagasaki to a samurai family he entered the priesthood at the age of 11. He received his first strict Zen training at Empuku-ji, Kyoto and in 1857 at the age of 18 he managed to unravel the first koan (Zen dictum) he had been set. After this accomplishment he devoted himself to more koan practice visiting various temples seeking to receive koan tasks from noted masters with whom he tested his understanding.

In 1859 he met Razan Genma (1815-1867) head priest of Bairin-ji, Kurume and decided to return to his native Kyushu along with Genma to further his studies. There he went through many years of meditation finally reaching enlightenment at 26. This accomplishment earned him the position as the head of Daijo-ji, Tokuyama prefecture in 1869.

During his travels in the mountains of Kyushu in 1873 he discovered an ancient nanten (barberry) bush

and asked permission to cut a branch from it while promising the owner that this nanten bō (staff) would resound for countless generations and that in his hand will become an instrument of the dharma. Should the owner not agree the bush would eventually simply wither and die. From this point on Nantenbō always carried this staff using it to encourage disciples and challenge less enlightened priests with dharma battles, beating them with his staff and chasing them from their temples if they lacked true understanding. It resulted in a great deal of notoriety and gave him the sobriquet Nantenbō (barberry staff).

Nantenbō was a zealous reformer of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism and a tireless teacher known for his exacting standards and impatience with mediocrity. In his determination to restore Zen to its former purity and brilliance, he emulated the severe methods of legendary Zen masters from the distant past. His unshakable sense of right and wrong and fearless devotion to Zen often led to passionate disputes, especially when challenging those above him such as the governing priests of Myōshin-ji, the head temple for his branch of the Rinzai sect.

The uncompromising determination of Nantenbō in the face of conflict attracted the attention of the famous samurai swordsman Yamaoka Tesshū (1836-1888) and important military generals of the Imperial Japanese Army such as Count Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912) and Viscount Kodama Kentarō (1852-1906). Nantenbō guided them and helped them to complete their personal Zen training and meditation studies.

Nantenbō was given his most prestigious appointment in 1891 as head of Zuigan-ji, Matsushima. Unfortunately this appointment came to a sudden end when Nantenbō was unjustly blamed for the accidental damage of an ancient statue of the famous 17th century warrior Date Masamune. Shocked and disheartened he resigned and went into self-imposed seclusion in the nearby dilapidated temple of Daibai-ji where he remained for the next two years. This period helped him reach a greater level of maturity through quiet introspection. He abandoned the use of his cherished staff and although his Zen spirit remained fierce, he ceased the zealous rampages of his younger years. In 1902 he moved to Kaisei-ji, Nishinomiya where he spent his later years.

Nantenbō produced more than 100,000 paintings and works of calligraphy during

the last thirty years of his life. He created a vibrant and explosive style in both painting and calligraphy which marks him as a genius of Zen painting. Nantenbō's use of the brush was a form of Zen practice and an opportunity for concentration. He preached that the execution of calligraphy should be made with total concentration of one's magnified spirit and that when writing a large character it should be written speedily and in one breath so as not to lose any of its potential power.

Works by the artist can be found in the collections of: Freer and Sackler, the Smithsonian's Museum of Modern Art, Washington D.C.; the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; Gitter-Yelen, New Orleans Museum of Art.

