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**SHŌHAKU'S MASTERPIECE, *DRAGON AND CLOUDS*, RETURNS TO BOSTON
FOLLOWING TRIUMPHANT TOUR OF JAPAN**



Dragon and Clouds, 1763, Soga Shōhaku (Detail)

BOSTON, MA (February 4, 2014)—In March, the monumental painting *Dragon and Clouds* (1763), by the eccentric Japanese artist Soga Shōhaku (1730-1781), will return to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), after touring Japan as part of an exhibition of MFA Japanese masterpieces. The 35-foot-long work depicts a dragon swooping down through whirls of clouds and swishing its scaly tail in rich shades of ink. The work, comprised of eight paintings on sliding doors (*fusuma*), underwent major conservation treatment that spanned five years and involved five conservators. [*Return of the Dragon: Shōhaku's Dragon and Clouds*](#), to be held in the MFA's Asian Paintings Gallery from March 21–July 6, 2014, will display four works by

Shōhaku, including another set of sliding doors, *Hawk* (circa 1763), and two hanging scrolls from the late 1770s. Widely known for its unparalleled collection of over 20 works by Shōhaku—a native of Kyoto known for his unconventional techniques and irreverent humor—the MFA also celebrates the 55th anniversary of the Kyoto-Boston sister city relationship with the exhibition.

"Shōhaku presents one of the most popular subjects of Japanese ink painting in a manner that on one hand makes reference to revered images from the past, but on the other displays his unconventional use of brush and ink," said Anne Nishimura Morse, William and Helen Pounds Senior Curator of Japanese Art at the MFA. "We're thrilled to have this work on view in Boston, displaying this stunning piece closer to the way the artist intended."

Shōhaku's prolific career coincided with a remarkable time of creativity in Japanese Art—the Edo Period—when eccentricity enhanced rather than hindered a painter's reputation. Working almost exclusively in monochrome ink, Shōhaku portrayed idiosyncratic figures from traditional Buddhist and Taoist lore such as monks, recluses, dragons and birds. The artist brought this dynamism to the execution of *Dragon and Clouds*, as seen in the forceful gestural brushstrokes that sweep across the vast surface

of the painting. In recent decades, as Shōhaku's work has gained wide acclaim in Japan and abroad, the painter has served as inspiration for a number of contemporary artists, such as Yokoo Tadanori and Murakami Takashi.

When *Dragon and Clouds* first entered the MFA's collection in 1911, it was mounted in four sections on thick paper. However, recent research determined the work was originally comprised of eight paintings on *fusuma*. The piece would have been part of a larger set adorning the interior of a Buddhist temple hall, with the tail of the dragon possibly lining one interior wall and the head ornamenting the opposing wall. Four additional *fusuma* of a smaller size (now missing) would have flanked a central altar. To restore *Dragon and Clouds*, MFA conservators first separated and repaired the damaged paintings—minimizing soiling and discoloration as well as removing disfiguring repairs. They then prepared custom-made wooden lattice cores with multiple layers of handmade Japanese paper on each side of the *fusuma*. After years of conservation, the final weeks saw the paintings mounted on the modified *fusuma* panels and finished with a simplified lacquer wooden trim.



Hawk, circa 1763, Soga Shōhaku

The MFA conservation process also revealed a connection with *Hawk*, another pair of *fusuma* paintings by Shōhaku in the MFA's collection, which will also be on view in the exhibition. The overall proportions and paper type used for both sets of paintings were identical, and repaired sections of *Dragon and Clouds* contained similar brushwork and details as *Hawk*. This led MFA conservators to conclude that these had been taken from damaged sections of the originally much larger hawk composition, and that both sets of paintings must have come from the same temple building. Birds-of-prey were one of Shōhaku's favorite subjects, and *Hawk* is undoubtedly his most monumental example of this theme. Shōhaku's hawks show close attention to minute detail and an ambition to depict each bird as a unique individual. In the MFA's work, the hawk's pose—with its body oriented toward the center but its head averted to the right—captures the bird's state of wary vigilance. The sharp, incisive lines that define the hawk's contours contrast

to the freer, uninhibited lines used to depict the tree, rocks and grass. Also included in the exhibition will be Shōhaku's hanging scrolls *Dragon* (late 1770s) and *Tiger* (late 1770s).

In addition to the exhibition, the MFA will host a lecture [The Most Impressive Dragon at the MFA](#), on Wednesday April 9, from 7–8 pm. Exhibition curator Anne Nishimura Morse and Philip Meredith, Higashiyama Kaii Conservator of Japanese Paintings, Asian Conservation, discuss the artist, the MFA's unparalleled collection of his works, the role of dragons in Japanese culture and details of the conservation process. Tickets are \$10 for members, \$13 for non-members.

Dragon and Clouds traveled to Japan in 2012, visiting the Tokyo National Museum, Kyushu National Museum, Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts and Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts—the MFA's sister museum—as part of the exhibition, *Japanese Masterpieces from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. The exhibition received over a million visitors—making it one of the most popular in the world in 2012. The MFA has a long-standing history of Japanese art that dates to the 19th century. In 1890, the MFA became the first museum in America to establish a Japanese collection and appoint a curator specializing in Japanese art, Okakura Kakuzō (also known as Okakura Tenshin, 1862–1913). The works in the exhibition were donated to the Museum in 1911 by William Sturgis Bigelow (1850–1926), an MFA Trustee who spent many years collecting art in Japan during the 1880s.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), is recognized for the quality and scope of its encyclopedic collection, which includes an estimated 450,000 objects. The Museum's collection is made up of: Art of the Americas; Art of Europe; Contemporary Art; Art of Asia, Oceania, and Africa; Art of the Ancient World; Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; Textile and Fashion Arts; and Musical Instruments. Open seven days a week, the MFA's hours are Saturday through Tuesday, 10 a.m.–4:45 p.m.; and Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m.–9:45 p.m. Admission (which includes one repeat visit within 10 days) is \$25 for adults and \$23 for seniors and students age 18 and older, and includes entry to all galleries and special exhibitions. Admission is free for University Members and youths age 17 and younger on weekdays after 3 p.m., weekends, and Boston Public Schools holidays; otherwise \$10. Wednesday nights after 4 p.m. admission is by voluntary contribution (suggested donation \$25). MFA Members are always admitted for free. The Museum's mobile MFA Guide is available at ticket desks and the Sharf Visitor Center for \$5, members; \$6, non-members; and \$4, youths. The Museum is closed on New Year's Day, Patriots' Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For more information, visit mfa.org or call 617.267.9300. The MFA is located on the Avenue of the Arts at 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115.

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