

Planting Edo: *Pinus thunbergii*

Rachel Saunders

In February 2020, we opened our largest ever exhibition at the Harvard Art Museums, never anticipating that, a month later, the doors of the museums would close due to the pandemic. *Painting Edo: Japanese Art from the Feinberg Collection* features 120 paintings arranged as an immersive, in-person experience. At the onset of the closure, when I rushed about my office gathering books and papers, I expected to be away for only a few weeks, but as our exile from the galleries continued, we adapted to virtual close-looking through an online exhibition and Zoom events. What I hadn't realized was how significantly this new form of looking would alter my own vision of Edo painting.

One work that I came to see differently was *Old Pine* by the eighteenth-century painter Itō Jakuchū. It is by no means a fresh observation that artists of the Edo period (1618–1868) were extremely interested in the natural world. Jakuchū is celebrated today for the magical hyper-realism of his polychrome paintings of flowering plants, aquatic animals, and especially chickens, which he is said to have kept so that he could observe the complexity of their feathers daily. *Old Pine*, by contrast, is executed in gestural monochrome ink. The painting is modestly sized, but the radical proximity from which the tree is painted—so close that it cannot be contained within the picture plane—makes an encounter with it feel as overwhelming as standing beneath an enormous conifer.

Pines have a long history in East Asian art and are among the primary subjects of ink painting. In the vocabulary of this spare, highly intellectualized mode of painting, pines represent resilience, longevity, and the integrity of the upright scholar-gentleman. Identification of a painted tree as “a pine” is all that is sufficient to trigger these associations, since ink painting valorizes capturing the essence of a thing over mere verisimilitude. Jakuchū had clearly captured an individual arboreal essence, but it was not until a botanist's eye was turned upon it that the true level of Jakuchū's observation emerged.

With Zoom, the distance between the painted plants in the galleries and their living counterparts at the Arnold Arboretum melted away. This enabled a new privilege of simultaneously looking at living and painted plants with the Arboretum's Michael Dosmann and Ned Friedman. Our conversations led to a series of public virtual events. With this botanical view, the eccentrically angled branches, plated bark, and textured twigs of Jakuchū's “pine” resolve almost immediately into features of a “black pine,” or *Pinus thunbergii* (*kuromatsu* in Japan).

When we view the painting, a major limb—covered, dragon-like, in scaled bark—thrusts up from the bottom left-hand corner, only to disappear beyond the right-hand border. It curves back into the frame at the top right, from where an angular branch, brushed in several switch-back strokes, descends. This dramatically contorted form echoes the Japanese black pines growing at the Arnold Arboretum (see accession 11371), and so, too, does the orientation of the painted needles: spiky lateral marks from a wide brush that flare from axial twigs. But the precision of Jakuchū's observation is evident beyond these most prominent elements. A variety of lichen-like dots peppers the branches, the largest pressed from the side of an inked brush, and the smaller nubby marks from its tip. What I had read as an anomalous abundance of moss-like texture strokes, Ned's eye revealed as the closely observed characteristic texture of black pine twigs, formed by the unusual persistence of bracts, which can remain for up to two years after their sets of paired needles fall.

In an inscription brushed in 1755, Jakuchū wrote: “Flowers, birds, grasses, and insects each have their own innate spirit. Only after one has actually determined the true nature of this spirit through observation should painting begin.” *Old Pine* shows just how thoroughly Jakuchū took this dictate, not only in his obsessively observed and painstakingly detailed polychrome paintings but also, we can now see, in the spare and immediate genre of ink painting.

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