



Section from a hand scroll: The Tale of Saigyō

Kaida Uneme-no-suke Minamoto Sukeyasu (attributed to)

Not on display

Title/Description: Section from a hand scroll: The Tale of Saigyō

Artist/Maker: Kaida Uneme-no-suke Minamoto Sukeyasu (attributed to)

Born: 1500 c.

Object Type: Scroll painting

Materials: Fibre, Ink, Paper, Silk, Watercolour

Measurements: h. 298 x w. 673 mm

Accession Number: 688

Historic Period: Muromachi period (AD 1333-1568)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

Saigyō (1118-1190) was a famous Buddhist monk and Japanese poet. His extensive travels around Japan provided a rich resource for popular legends for later generations. His name before he entered the priesthood was Satō Norikiyo. He was from an affluent warrior family and served as an imperial guard to the Retired Emperor Toba. At the age of twenty-three, he renounced the world, leaving behind his wife and child. He travelled to many holy sites around Japan on pilgrimages and

composed many poems along the way.

A multi-volume 'picture handscroll of tales of Saigyō' (*Saigyō monogatari emaki*) first appeared as early as the 13th century. Several versions are known today, and dozens of complete or partial examples are extant.

This work, a section from a handscroll, now in the format of a hanging scroll, is said to belong to the so-called 'Uneme-bon' version. The original handscroll, of which the picture part was painted by Kaida Uneme-no-suke Minamoto Sukeyasu in 1500, is now lost. However, a celebrated copy created by the artist Tawaraya Sōtatsu (late 16th-early 17th centuries) and the calligrapher Karasumaru Mitsuhiro (1579-1638) gives us an idea of what the content was. Several complete sets of handscrolls that belong to the 'Uneme-bon' version can be found in important public and private collections in Japan. In addition, many sections of 'Uneme-bon' version handscrolls are extant.

The scene depicted here represents Saigyō's visit to Kumano, a sacred mountain site in the Kii peninsula. Among the three figures, the monk in grey attire is Saigyō. The other two are probably *shugen-ja* (a priest who is in ascetic training in a mountain). The design of this picture is very similar to the equivalent scene in Sōtatsu's work. In the latter, the picture depicting the scenes from Kumano has a long horizontal composition, and far away, in front of the three figures, is depicted the famous Nachi waterfall. But that part has been cut off in the current example.

Information on the original handscroll which included the current section is unknown. Copies in the 'Uneme-bon' lineage were created throughout the Edo period (1603-1868). Stylistically, the excellent current example exhibits highly skilled traditional renderings of motifs, such as the human figures, blue and green rocks and mountains and light blue horizontal mists. It is not easy to determine the production date of a copy because the copying skills of Edo-period artists were often incredibly high, in particular of those who undertook replication of classical works.

Akiko Yano, June 2022

Further Reading

Komatsu Shigemi et al., *Nihon emaki taisei vol. 26: Saigyō monogatari emaki*, Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1979.
