

Itō Jakuchū's *Colorful Realm of Living Beings*



no. 3

What? *Colorful Realm of Living Beings*, a thirty-scroll set of paintings by Itō Jakuchū, is one of Japan's most renowned cultural treasures. This extraordinary work, which has never before been displayed in its entirety outside of Japan, is on view at the National Gallery of Art for one month only. Created over a span of some ten years (c. 1757–1766), the series presents a range of subjects from the natural world—birds, fish, insects, reptiles, flowers, and plants.

Who? Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800) lived during Japan's peaceful Edo period. Born into a wealthy family of merchants that operated a wholesale food-stuffs business in Kyoto, Jakuchū retired from the family business in 1755 to pursue the study of Zen Buddhism and the practice of painting. His innovative and experimental style was influenced by the study of Chinese painting at Zen temples, the patterns and designs of Kyoto textiles, natural history collections, and direct observation of nature.

How? Jakuchū painted *Colorful Realm* on silk, carefully mixing, matching, shading, and layering his pigments (on both the front and back) to create remarkable coloristic effects as well as an impression of spatial depth.

In *Mandarin Ducks in Snow* (no. 3), Jakuchū splattered shell-white pigment on both the front and back of the silk to give the impression of snow falling at different depths of field.

On some of the scrolls, such as *Peonies and Small Birds* (no. 22), Jakuchū painted almost the entire surface. Other scrolls include open areas that suggest water, sky, and land (nos. 1, 7, 17).

Where? Jakuchū donated *Colorful Realm*, along with his *Śākyamuni Triptych* (no. 31) to Shōkokuji, a major Zen monastery in Kyoto. Here at the National Gallery, all of the works are displayed in one room, as they might have been at Shōkokuji—with “living beings” gathering around the Buddha to listen to his sermon and symbolizing the harmony of all living creatures in nature.



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Explore *Colorful Realm*

1 Begin by surveying all thirty works

Walk around the room and look for these living creatures

butterfly duck sparrow rooster hen

peacock cockatoo goose crane parrot fish

pheasant songbird snake lizard frog

spider dragonfly grasshopper octopus

and these flowers and plants

peony plum blossom sunflower hydrangea

pine tree hibiscus lotus peach blossom

rose chrysanthemum maple tree nandina berry

2 Find connections

After you have gained a general sense of all the subjects included in the thirty scrolls, look again to discover connections between the individual scrolls. Find scrolls that share something in common: the same season, a similar setting, or the same type of animal or plant.



no. 1



no. 27



no. 21



no. 14

Illustration details

Mandarin Ducks in Snow (no. 3), 1759; *Peonies and Butterflies* (no. 1), c. 1757; *Fish* (no. 27), c. 1765–1766; *Roses and Small Bird* (no. 21), c. 1761–1765; *Nandina and Rooster* (no. 14), c. 1761–1765

from Itō Jakuchū, *Colorful Realm of Living Beings*, set of 30 vertical hanging scrolls, c. 1757–1766, Sannomaru Shōzōkan (The Museum of the Imperial Collections), The Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo

Itō Jakuchū, *Śākyamuni Triptych* (no. 31), showing *The Buddha Śākyamuni*, c. first half of the 1760s, set of three hanging scrolls, Jōtenkaku Museum, Shōkokuji Monastery, Kyoto

3 Take time to look closely at one painting

Select the scroll that most intrigues you.

**Record your first impressions:
What caught your eye and drew your
attention to this painting?**

**Explore with your senses: If you could
step into the painting, what might you hear?
Smell? Taste? Touch?**

**Choose an animal in the painting
and imagine what the world looks
like from its perspective. What might it
be thinking and feeling?**

**If this scene were to come alive,
what would happen next?**

Make a sketch of your favorite detail.

**old pond —
frog jumps in
sound of the water**

Matsuo Bashō
(Japanese poet,
1644–1694)

**Calm, indifferent
as if nothing's transpired —
the goose, the willow.**

Kobayashi Issa
(Japanese poet,
1762–1826)

**butterfly —
what's it dreaming
fanning its wings?**

Chiyo-ni
(Japanese poet,
1703–1775)

4 Write a haiku

Haiku is a Japanese poetry form, with roots more than one thousand years old. Poet Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) described haiku as “verbal sketching” — little works of art that capture something observed. Use the words and ideas gathered in the bubbles on the previous page to write a haiku inspired by the painting you explored.

Suggestions for writing haiku

Form A haiku has three short lines. For balance, the second line is typically longer than the other two. Traditional Japanese haiku have three parts with five, seven, and five syllables, making seventeen syllables in all. Because the English and Japanese languages are very different in structure, the equivalent length in English would be about ten to fourteen syllables (or six to twelve words). The length of a haiku in any language should be one breath long.

Here and now Haiku attempt to capture one moment in time, based on direct observation of something in front of you. Therefore, they are written in the present tense. Like a snapshot or a quick sketch, a haiku should feel spontaneous and capture the essence of something you have experienced.

Connecting with nature Haiku is a way of looking at the world, connecting with nature. Writing haiku requires slowing down, looking at what is around you, and appreciating the small moments in life. Haiku should awaken the senses—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, feeling—and often suggests a particular season.

Sharing with others Haiku is about letting an object or event touch you and then sharing that experience with others. The poet and reader play a collaborative role. A poet doesn't need to describe everything—haiku should be understated, leaving something for the reader to wonder. A good haiku inspires readers to think about what the poet observed and to experience it through their own imaginations.

Colorful Realm: Japanese Bird-and-Flower

Paintings by Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800)

National Gallery of Art | March 30–April 29, 2012

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, The Imperial Household Agency, and Nikkei Inc., in association with the Embassy of Japan.

It has been made possible through the generous support of Toyota, Nikkei Inc., Airbus, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, and The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art. Additional sponsorship from Japan has been provided by Daikin Industries, Ltd., Ito En, Ltd., Mitsubishi Corporation, and Panasonic Corporation.

It is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

April is National Poetry Month, and visitors are invited to submit original haiku inspired by the *Colorful Realm of Living Beings* for publication online at www.nga.gov/jakuchu. Submission deadline is May 1, 2012.