

Image 3



Li Bo viewing the waterfall

By Soami (approx. 1485–1525)

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Avery Brundage Collection, B62D11

What is this painting about?

Li Bo (701–762) was a famous Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty (618–906), whose reputation spread even to Japan. There, his poem “Viewing the Waterfall at Mount Lu,” became a popular painting theme. Li Bo’s poem reads:

Sunlight streaming on Incense Stone kindles violet smoke;
far off I watch the waterfall plunge to the long river,
flying waters descending straight three thousand feet,
till I think the Milky Way has tumbled from the ninth height of Heaven

(translated by Burton Watson)

Who was the artist?

Soami served as the keeper or curator of the shogun’s (military ruler’s) large collection of Chinese Zen paintings and other works of art. He had opportunities to study them first-hand. It was only after his retirement, however, that he began to paint, most likely as a way of making a living.

How would this painting be used in a tea gathering?

A painting such as this is hung in the alcove of the tearoom (the special area for displaying art in a traditional Japanese room) and is one of the first items viewed by the guests to the tea gathering. The host carefully selects the scroll so that it pairs well with the time of year, theme of the tea gathering, and interests of the guests. Upon entering the tearoom, the guests examine the scroll and other items in the alcove, which might include flowers of the season and an incense container. The host and guest discuss the theme of the scroll, any writing on it, and the identity of the artist. Often scrolls used in tea gatherings present bewildering ideas that require each participant to puzzle out its meaning.

What occasions might this painting be appropriate for?

A host might know that their guest has a love for Chinese poetry, or perhaps they have just returned from a sightseeing trip to China. Seeing the image of water may help the guests feel cool in the heat of the summer.

Discussion/Activity:

- 1) Compare this painting with the painting of Daruma (Image #1)
 - in two columns list adjectives describing each work; start by considering subject matter—who are the figures, what else is depicted besides the figure; then focus on how the image is painted—quickly, carefully, in detail, sketchily, etc.
 - How much time did each artist spend on the work? Look for their brushstrokes and try to guess how many strokes were used in each work.
 - What mood is conveyed in each—serious, refreshing, thoughtful?
 - How does each artist use the unpainted surface in his design?
- 2) Discussion: Does the painting accurately represent the poem? Discuss Soami's picture in comparison to the words of the poem. If you were to paint the poem, what might you do differently?
- 3) Write your own poems or narratives about any of the scrolls.