

## How far do we go?

# Compensation and Mounting Choices in the Treatment of Japanese Paintings

### ABSTRACT

Japanese paintings are usually executed on paper or silk, and mounted in a variety of formats such as hanging scrolls or folding screens. These paintings have often undergone multiple treatment campaigns prior to entering Western collections, due to the fragility of the materials used, and the kinetic nature of their formats. In some instances, a past heavy-handed treatment has become, as a result of time, an integral part of the painting. Treatment with modern day methods may result in returning the object to a more authentic and stable state, but it can also result in a drastic visual change. The “standards” for the removal of past infills and for loss compensation (including inpainting) of Japanese paintings in U.S. collections differ from standards used in Japan, but is one more ethical than the other or are both in fact quite arbitrary? Using specific examples of treatments from the Japanese collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, this presentation will explore the decision-making process behind the conservation and “remounting” of these complex works of art. Issues to be discussed include: decisions regarding changes in format, methods of loss compensation, the re-use of detailed inpainting from previous treatments, choices of mounting silks and whether to reuse or replace a mounting.

### INTRODUCTION

The current staff of the Asian Conservation studio at the MFA has a staff of 6 full-time conservators that specialize in all areas of Asian paintings and prints. Conservators work together as a team in the hands-on treatment, necessitated by the size and complexity of many of the objects. Because of the high cost associated with materials and treatment of this type of artwork, Asian Conservation studio staff work closely with curators and the museum administration in the planning of large MFA-organized touring exhibitions and other

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Fig. 1. Asian Conservation Studio at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

loans, and their related budgets, in order to facilitate major treatments. Despite the fact that the MFA has the oldest institutional Asian painting conservation studio in the U.S., because of the size of the collection of more than 5000 paintings, many have not been treated since arriving in Boston at the turn of the 20th century (fig. 1).

The most prevalent formats for Japanese paintings are the hanging scroll and folding screen. Other formats include sliding doors, or *fusuma*, albums, handscrolls, fans, and even lanterns and banners. Japanese painting formats share a common kinetic characteristic, in that they are rolled, folded, or opened and closed regularly. The complex structures of these formats are designed to enable this handling, but damage naturally results over time even under the best of circumstances. This necessitates regular and comprehensive treatment for the preservation of these types of paintings. It also means that the mountings and other materials attached to the paintings are rarely original, because most Japanese paintings extant today have received some kind of major treatment in the past.

Because Japanese scrolls and screens are made up of complex support layers applied to the painting and its mounting in specific configurations, conservation treatment entails rather invasive procedures of dismantling the painting (fig. 2), removal of linings and past infills and patches, application of new linings (fig. 3) and finally, remounting the painting into an appropriate format. The mounting of a Japanese painting is therefore physically and semi-permanently attached to the painting itself. The longevity and overall preservation of the painting is dependant on the materials and methods used to mount the painting into the appropriate format. The presentation and integrity of the painting is wholly dependant on the appropriate choice of format and mounting. This balance between condition and aesthetic governs many of the treatment choices, as the following examples will show.

#### FORMAT CHANGES

One of the unique characteristics of Japanese paintings is that they often undergo changes in format during their lifetime, for example changing from handscroll or album, to hanging scroll or screen, and sometimes back again.

This example of a rare painting by the artist Suzuki Harunobu, better known for his woodblock prints (fig. 4), is one of only six known paintings by the artist, and came into the MFA collection on a framed panel. Exposure to air and light in this format has resulted in the extreme darkening of the painting silk, as well as abrasion of the color. Invasive techniques that involved trimming losses in the original silk into regular geometrical shapes for ease of infilling further disfigured the appearance. Research confirmed the suspicion that it once was a hanging scroll, and it was returned it to this format, using an antique kimono *obi*, or sash, silk for part of the mounting. As another example of a change in format, this pair of hanging scrolls (fig. 5) were once two *fusuma*, or sliding door paintings from large Zen temple complex in Kyoto called Daitokuji. This theory was supported by museum documentation, and also from examination of the paper used for the painting, which is a type commonly used for screens and sliding doors, a short-fibered paper with a clay filler called *maniai*, and by the presence of repaired holes in areas of the painting where door pulls would have been inserted. Paintings of this kind were often remounted into hanging scroll format during the late 19th century for display in newly created museums in Japan, but this type of paper does not respond well to the rolled format and results in severe creasing and cracking.

Returning the paintings to a rigid door format was a positive step for the integrity of the paintings, as the continuity of the subject can better be seen without the border silks (fig. 6). The rigid format also resolved the creasing and cracking. Although the doors now take up much less display space, storage space needed to be adapted to accommodate the new flat format.



Fig. 2. Dismantling a hanging scroll



Fig. 3. Applying new linings



Fig. 4. Before and after treatment, Suzuki Harunobu, *Spring Outing on the Banks of the Sumida River*, Japanese, Edo period, Meiwa era (1764–1772), hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 32.7 x 54.8 cm, 11.7355 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Figs. 5. Before treatment, Kano Motonobu, *Tartars Hunting*, Japanese, Muromachi period, 16th century, pair of panels, ink, color and gold on paper, 170.8 x 95.9 cm, 11.4265, 11.4266 Fenollosa-Weld Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 6. After Treatment

#### LOSS COMPENSATION

Losses in silk paintings have in the past been treated with silk from other paintings, as is the case with this example from a 13th century set of paintings of the Buddha's disciples, or arhats (fig. 7). Lacking the benefit of light tables, rayon release papers, and the added treatment time gained from the use of facing methods to support the painting during debacking, loss compensation in the past commonly involved the attachment of rectangular strips of painting silk to the back of the losses, often overlapping the original by a large margin. Because of the difference in physical strength between the older and newer painting silk, and because of abrasion resulting from



Fig. 7. Example of rectangular silk patches, artist unknown, *Sixteen Rakan (The Eighth Rakan)*, Japanese, Kamakura period, 13th century, panel, ink, color and gold on silk, 82.6 x 43.4 cm, 11.6198 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

rolling and unrolling the scroll, the original is often worn away over time leaving only the silk patch.

When the infill silk does not match the weave and weight of the original, the result is a textural mismatch that is visually displeasing (fig. 8). The area on the upper right is the result of a large area of silk applied as a patch, and the effect in the areas of overlap, as well as the mismatch in the weave, is distracting and structurally unstable.

On this 13th century Buddhist panel painting (fig. 9), a number of rectangular patches have been applied from the back and have pushed through to the front due to the tension of the panel mounting. The largest of these overlaps a large area of the demon figure in the middle. In the center of



Fig. 8. Detail of a mismatched silk infill, artist unknown, *Sixteen Rakan (The Seventh Rakan)*, Japanese, Kamakura period, 13th century, panel, ink, color and gold on silk, 82.6 x 43.4 cm, 11.6195 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

this patch is a grey loss, which is where the patch has failed and fallen away, taking whatever original was attached to it, and revealing the grey toned lining paper. In another area on the same painting, the inpainting of crucial feature, the eyes, has been done on top of a silk patch (fig. 10). These patches will be left in place to preserve the eyes, in spite of the mismatch of the weave.

As silk production and weaving technology developed in Japan, increasingly finer silks were produced. Older paintings therefore are often characterized by a coarser, looser weave of silk than later paintings and as a result there developed an enormous variety of weaves and weights of painting silks over time. The Asian Conservation studio at the MFA stocks a wide variety of painting silks for use in conservation treatments. These silks are custom-woven in Japan, so the weave structure matches the original painting. The silk is then treated with electron beam emission radiation to deteriorate

the silk, so that the infill material more closely matches the original in strength as well as appearance. Infill sections of silk are cut to match the loss perfectly, and the infill is dropped in, jigsaw-puzzle fashion, with no overlap, so that the original painting and losses are all on the same plane (fig. 11). Due to the high cost of this material, and the reliance on the generosity of Japanese colleagues to share valuable stock, one of the ongoing projects at the MFA is to pursue alternative methods to irradiating silk in the U.S.

#### KEEP OR REMOVE?

Many older Japanese paintings have undergone multiple campaigns of treatment, and conservators are often confronted by evidence of past treatments. The most visually obvious example is large sections of detailed inpainting. The quality of the inpainting, the value of its presence in the composition, as well as the estimated age of the infill all are factors discussed with the MFA curators prior to commencing treatment. This 13th century painting of one of a set of four Deva kings (fig. 12) is an unusual panel painting on silk, and as a result of its constant exposure in a temple setting, the support silk has deteriorated and discolored dramatically. The importance of the painting was evident however, in the more than four campaigns of conservation treatment determined through initial examination. Each king is standing on a demon, and the face of this one is a complete recreation (fig. 13). Following discussions with the curator, it was decided to leave this infill in place, as its removal would create an unacceptable void in the face of the creature.

The use of certain combinations of materials in past conservation treatments sometimes creates the appearance of features in a painting that are not original, but their removal results in a blank void. In this example (fig. 14), the proper left shoulder of the figure is missing, but it has been re-formed by a dark silk patch and heavily inpainted. This view (fig. 15) shows the same area from the reverse, with the paper linings and surrounding silk patches partially



LEFT TO RIGHT

Fig. 9. Detail showing patches pushing through original from the reverse, Chomyo, *Four Guardian Kings (Komokuten, the Guardian of the West)*, Japanese, Kamakura period, 13th century, one of a set of four panels, ink, color and gold on silk, 148.7 x 72.3 cm, 11.4064 Fenollosa-Weld Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Fig. 10. Detail, eyes inpainted on top of misaligned silk patch. See figure 9 for artwork identification



Fig. 11. Detail of silk infilling technique.

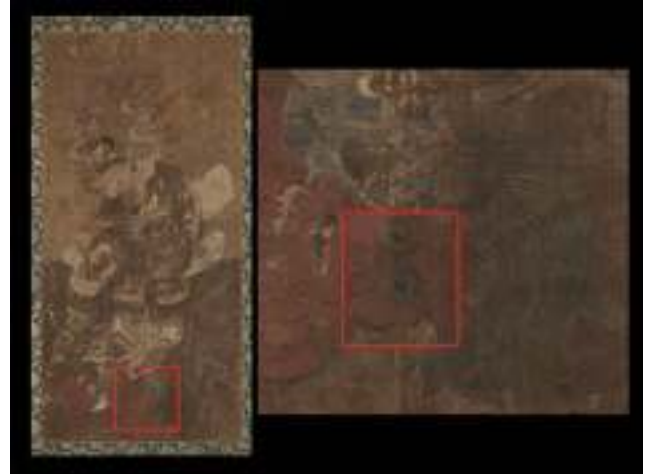


Fig. 13. Detail, Demon face infill. See figure 9 for artwork identification



Fig. 12. Chomyo, *Four Guardian Kings (Komokuten, the Guardian of the West)*. See figure 9 for artwork identification



Fig. 14. Shoulder detail from the front, red line denotes edge of dark silk patch. See figure 9 for artwork identification



Fig. 15. Shoulder detail from the reverse, red lines denotes back of original ink lines, green line denotes edge of dark silk patch. See figure 9 for artwork identification



Fig. 16. Overall image, before treatment (left) and after treatment (right), artist unknown, *Sonsho Mandala*, Japanese, Kamakura period, 14th century, hanging scroll, ink, color, and gold on silk, 90.6 x 56.7 cm, 05.200 Special Chinese and Japanese Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 17. Detail showing Buddha figure without old infill (upper left) and with the infill replaced (lower right). See figure 16 for artwork identification

removed. With the removal of the dark patch and the surrounding brown patches, the result will be a large blank area. The curator agreed in this case that this was an acceptable option to leaving the heavily inpainted infill with the speculative shape. New lines or other details will not be added, and the whole area will be toned to an unobtrusive background color.

This is an example of the reuse of a finely detailed past infill. The top center section of this 14th century mandala painting (fig. 16) has the depiction of a tiny Buddha figure, which was determined to be a later addition to compensate a large loss in all but the head and chest of the figure.



Fig. 18. Detail of upper section of figure, silk lining extends from the top of the painting to just above the shoulders of the figure, anonymous, *Miroku, the Buddha of the Future, and Two Attendants*, Japanese, Kamakura period, 13th century, panel, ink and color on silk, 110 x 56.1 cm, 06.1903 Special Chinese and Japanese Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Discussions with the curator led to the decision to reuse the infill (fig. 17).

Since many Japanese hanging scrolls in the MFA collection were at some time in the past mounted onto panels, one of the priorities in treatment is to return a panelized hanging scroll painting back into a hanging scroll whenever possible. The hanging scroll format requires a more invasive level of treatment, however, due to the need to eliminate any overlaps or localized unevenness that can cause abrasion in rolling and unrolling the scroll. In this example (fig. 18), returning this 14th century Buddhist painting mounted on a panel to a hanging scroll format had to be abandoned because removal of the detailed inpainting of the halo was deemed unacceptable. The area behind the head of this darkened painting has been lined almost entirely with one continuous section of silk, and then lined with an ink-toned paper. This method of lining a silk painting with silk is not uncommon, and was often a pragmatic choice when treatment time was limited, and large losses needed to be compensated. It is problematic, however, because adhesion between silk layers is not strong, and often compromises the stability of the weaker original silk. Therefore it is not a method used in current treatments, and whenever possible it is replaced with the previously mentioned silk infilling



Fig. 19. Halo of the figure, red lines denote position of original halo, yellow lines indicate position of inpainted halo. See figure 18 for artwork identification

techniques and paper linings. This treatment was complicated by the fact that significant sections of the halo were inpainted on top of the large section of infill silk. Partial removal of this large piece of silk might have compromised the many tiny, fragile islands of original silk adhered to it, if the attempt were made to preserve only the inpainted sections. In the opinion of the conservators, removal of the large infill with the inpainted lines was acceptable because enough of the original line remained to enable the viewer to discern the more oblong shape of the original halo (fig. 19). However, the curator was not comfortable with the loss of the existing, albeit recreated line. Because the large areas of overlap would have been detrimental to the stability of the painting in scroll format, the large infill section as well as the paper linings were left intact, and the painting was mounted onto a panel once again.

#### TONED LININGS

Another issue with this same painting is the extremely darkened appearance resulting from the application of a dark black/blue lining. One of the advantages of comprehensive conservation treatment is the opportunity to replace heavy, dark linings with one of a lighter, more complementary tone. The color of the paper lining that is first applied to a silk painting is one of the most important, and often overlooked, factors in the appearance of a Japanese painting. Because silk naturally discolors over time, and because of the fragmented nature of many older silk paintings, the color and tone of the new lining can greatly affect the appearance of the painting. This is an example of the extreme visual impact of a pale lining on a heavily damaged silk painting (fig. 20). This is an example of a more sympathetic color choice for a lining, in this image of a 14th century Buddhist painting after lining, partially infilled with silk, and prior to inpainting (fig. 21).

Occasionally, linings are toned with unusual colors. This is an example of an 18th century painting lined with a dark indigo-toned paper (fig. 22). Delamination of this lining from the silk painting was one of the major reasons for



Fig. 20. Example of strong visual impact of a pale lining on a darkened, heavily damaged silk painting, formerly attributed to, Kano Takanobu, *Battle Scenes*, Japanese, Edo period, first half of the 17th century, 61.4 x 45.6 cm, 11.4244 Fenollosa-Weld Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 21. Example of a toned lining, partially infilled and before inpainting, Artist Unknown, *Miroku, the Buddha of the Future*, Japanese, Kamakura-Nanbokuchō period, 14th century, hanging scroll, ink, color, and gold on silk, 113.5 x 57.3 cm, 1980.466 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur D. Canaday, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

treatment, so it was carefully removed (fig. 23). Curators and conservators all agreed that this unusual choice of color had a significant impact on the overall appearance of the painting, perhaps suggestive of a nighttime setting for the subject, and concluded that it must have been a deliberate choice. It was decided to replace the lining with a similarly toned blue paper.



LEFT TO RIGHT

Fig. 22. Detail to show tone of lining through silk (right), and overall image after treatment (left), Keisai Eisen, *Geisha*, Japanese, Edo period, about Tenpo 3–5 (1832–1834), hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 103.6 x 41.1 cm, 11.4662 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 23. Removal of blue fibers of first lining from the reverse of painting. See figure 22 for artwork identification

#### SELECTIVE REUSE OF OLD INFILLS

This next example combines several of the issues previously mentioned, such as format change and replacing or keeping old infills. This is a set of 8 *fusuma* sliding door paintings on paper, dating to the 18th century, that came into the MFA collection joined in pairs, and with a canvas border similar to what is sometimes used to line maps and other large paper objects in Western paper conservation (fig. 24).

The primary goal of the treatment was to divide the joined sections back into individual *fusuma*, and to mount them on newly made panels. Treatment also provided the opportunity to address areas of past inpainting. Some large patches had been taken from sections of another painting and included extraneous brushwork that did not blend with the original composition. Other losses had been inpainted with ink of a different tone and gloss from the original and did not match. Further, the curator agreed that in some areas the brush strokes were significantly weaker than the original, making it difficult to appreciate the strength of the original composition. Extensive discussions were necessary to resolve concern over the retention or removal of specific inpainted lines in the interest of preserving continuity of the composition.

In the lower left corner of the second panel, for instance, the brushstrokes under the claw are not original, and were painted on a large infill. It was thought that the weakness of these strokes distracted from the power of the sweeping curve above the claw, and the curator wanted it removed. However the curator wanted the outline of the “palm” of the claw preserved, including inpainted sections, which involved trimming the infill along the ink line. Likewise, a large part of the



Fig. 24. Before treatment, Soga Shohaku, *Dragon and Clouds*, Japanese, Edo period, 1763, set of eight panels, ink on paper, 169.7 x 139.1 x 1.9 cm, 11.7040.1, 11.7040.2; 11.7041.1, 11.7041.2; 11.7042.1, 11.7042.2; 11.7043.1, 11.7043.2 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

topmost talon is a past recreation, but this was also kept in the interest of preserving the totality of the composition. The blank infill area above the talon was replaced with a more sympathetic paper choice and tone (fig. 25). The result of these choices is shown in figure 26. In order to assist the curator in visualizing the different options for this treatment, many different tones of patch papers were prepared. Presenting these against the original painting aided discussions regarding which areas to preserve and which areas to remove (fig. 27).





Fig. 25. First two panels, before treatment (left), red boxes denote areas modified during treatment. See figure 24 for artwork identification



Fig. 26. First two panels, after treatment. See figure 24 for artwork identification



Fig. 27. Presentation of patch samples during consultation with curator

This case-by-case evaluation of what areas of past treatment to retain and remove differs from the current Japanese standards for conservation treatment of government designated paintings, which requires that *all* non-original elements of a painting be removed, and losses toned to a pale brown color with no attempt to match the surrounding area.

#### MOUNTING CHOICES

The choice of an appropriate scroll mounting for a Japanese hanging scroll is determined first by the period and subject matter of the painting. A 14th century Buddhist painting is mounted in a very different style from an 18th century painting of a courtesan, or a 15th century ink landscape painting. Although there are many guidelines, such as certain textile patterns and mounting proportions associated with specific genres of painting, conservators today also place equal importance on a mounting that complements the painting. Therefore by its very nature the selection process is highly subjective. It is also important to reiterate that the existence of a truly original scroll mounting is very rare, given that most Japanese paintings have been remounted and conserved at least once in their lifetime, and usually more often.

At the MFA, the overall mounting “style” of the collection is characterized by the fact that a large percentage of the paintings have not been remounted since arriving in Boston more than a hundred years ago. In contrast, a majority of comparable paintings in Japanese collections have been remounted at least once, and more likely 2 or 3 times during the same time period. As scrolls are remounted, they often take on the fashion of the time in which they are treated. Many of the paintings at the MFA appear to have been remounted just prior to departing Japan, and these mountings have silks and combinations of patterns available and popular during the turn of the 20th century. These mountings may not always complement the painting, and most certainly postdate the artwork. However, because this time period, the late 19th century, is significant to the MFA and the origins of its Japanese collection, consideration must be given to whether a mounting on a particular painting has value as a kind of time capsule. Some paintings have much older mountings that also can be worth preserving. Conservators therefore first try to assess if the current mounting on a scroll is appropriate, complementary and useable.

This 13th century painting (fig. 28) had a complementary selection of quality fabrics dating back to at least the 18th century for its mounting, and although worn and somewhat soiled, it blended nicely with the worn, somewhat soiled painting. Conservators decided choices from the museum stock could not improve the mounting in this case, and chose to reuse all the silks.

This is one of a pair of 15th century ink paintings of hawks (fig. 29). Although the overall appearance of the old mounting



Fig. 28. Before Treatment (left) and After Treatment (right), artist unknown, inscribed by, Osen Keisan, *Budai (Hotei)*, Japanese, Muromachi period, dated 1479, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 61.4 x 45.6 cm; 11.4244 Fenollosa-Weld Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 29. Before Treatment (left) and After Treatment (right), Soga Nichokuan, *Hawks*, Japanese, Edo period, 17th century, one of a pair of hanging scrolls, ink on paper, 116.2 x 54.8 cm, 11.6904, 11.6905 Fenollosa-Weld Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

complemented the painting in style as well as motif, due to the condition of one of the sections, together with the desire to expand the dimensions of the vertical borders for preservation reasons, conservators chose to replace the mounting with silks of similar patterns and colors. Silk fabrics are hand-dyed and toned in the studio using synthetic and natural dyes to adapt them to each individual painting.

This triptych of 18th century beauties was mounted in a paper mount, which was often the first mounting choice for this time period in order to put the paintings into a convenient format for sale (fig. 30). The paper mounting was in poor condition, and determined not to be an original mounting



Fig. 30. Before Treatment, Chobunsai Eishi, Inscribed by: Ota Nanpo, *Women and Willow, Women with Cherry, Women with Maple*, Japanese, Edo period, Kyowa era (1801–1804) to first half of Bunka (1804–1818) era, triptych of hanging scrolls, ink and color on silk, 95.3 x 32.8 cm, 11.7946, 11.7956, 11.7962 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 31. After Treatment. See figure 30 for artwork identification

because one of the three paintings, *Women and Maple*, was cropped and significantly darker than the others, suggesting it had at some point been separated from the other two. Conservators chose to approximate the simple appearance of the monochrome paper mounting using an unpatterned silk, upgraded with a finely woven gold brocade for the top and bottom border and highlighted with gold-toned fabric accent lines throughout (fig. 31).

The final two examples show mounting choices in the treatment of two 18th century paintings. Ongoing research by this author suggests that greater freedom in types of textiles used and the combinations thereof characterizes mounting



Fig. 32. Before Treatment (left) and After Treatment (right), Katsukawa Shunsho, *Shakkyo, the Lion dance*, Japanese, Edo period, Tenmei 7–8 (1787–1788), hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 82.5 x 32.5 cm, 11.7762 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 33. Before Treatment (left) and After Treatment (right), Katsushika Hokusai, *Woman from Ohara Carrying Bundles of Firewood*, Japanese, Edo period, late Bunka (1804–1818) or early Bunsei (1818–1830) era, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 90.7 x 33.5 cm, 11.7432 William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

styles of the Japanese Edo period, in keeping with the overall flourishing of the arts and concern with fashion. This 18th century painting depicting a dancer was mounted in fabrics that looked to be from the late 19th century, but the dark heavy borders constricted the vibrant appearance and dynamism of the subject (fig. 32). Given the strength of the image, however, finding a complementary alternative from museum stock proved challenging. Many long weeks of discussions and dye tests resulted in the new mounting, which visually

opens the painting, highlighting the many colors and drama of the composition.

The final painting in this discussion is of a rustic country beauty by the well-known artist Katsushika Hokusai (fig. 33). The mounting of poor quality, 19th century silks was badly degraded and did not complement the painting. In keeping with the simple, rustic look of the image, a slightly unusual combination of a roughly woven beige unpatterned silk for the top and bottom section, a plaid-patterned silk for the central surround, and a printed cotton chintz for the top and bottom narrow horizontal borders was chosen. It is common for the top and bottom horizontal borders to be reserved for the most valuable textile in a mounting, due to its proximity to the painting. This type of cotton chintz, even though it is not silk, was a type of fabric highly valued during the time period of the painting subject. This chintz was painstakingly salvaged from museum stock of textile scraps, lined with paper, and used for this border and matching hanging *futai* strips.

These are just a few examples of many complex discussions regarding loss compensation and mounting of Japanese paintings.

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