

View of West Lake by Shūgetsu Tōkan (1496)

West Lake in Hangzhou, China, has featured in Chinese legends, paintings, and literature since the Tang dynasty (618–907). Japanese visitors to China often went to Hangzhou during their travels, and the lake came to epitomize Chinese ideals of natural beauty that captured the imaginations of Japanese poets, painters, and aristocracy.

This hanging scroll dates to 1496 and is the earliest extant Japanese depiction of West Lake. It was painted by Shūgetsu Tōkan (dates unknown), who studied under renowned painter Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1502).

The inscription in the upper left corner of the hanging scroll reads, “This image of West Lake in Hangzhou was done on the third day of the third month of the ninth year of Hongzhi (1496) at the State Guesthouse in Beijing.” Shūgetsu likely sketched the lake when he visited it, then later referred to Chinese paintings of the lake to complete his work.

The names of different locations are written on the painting, such as “Six Bridges” underneath the line of bridges and “Lingyin Temple” above a small building nestled between the Northern and Southern Peaks in the center-back of the painting. It is a realistic, almost map-like depiction of the lake. This realism made the painting a credible reference for later Japanese painters, who attempted their own West Lake depictions during the Edo period (1603–1867).