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## Hanabusa Itchō: Head of the Studio

**A** MYSTICAL LION-DOG, or *karajishi* (literally, “Chinese lion”), stares out at the viewer with a quizzical, slightly menacing gaze from one of a pair of six-panel folding screens (opposite). Outlined in abbreviated, jagged curves of black ink, and given dimensionality with flat sweeps of gray dotted by round voids edged with bouncy, stitchlike strokes, the creature stands on a gold-leaf ground that both surrounds and shines through it. Auspicious symbols of power, paintings of *karajishi* were commonly commissioned by the various elites for temples, castles, and samurai mansions. For many of the major painting masters, the subject offered an opportunity to express both the force of their brush and the particularities of their style.<sup>1</sup> Once back from exile, Itchō made *karajishi* one of his special emblems, drawing on the bold expressiveness of the subject to help him carve out a position as one of the preeminent painters of the realm late in his career.

Humorous in the ambiguity of its gaze, this lion-dog is a detail from the unsigned reverse of the work legendarily said to be Itchō’s best-paid commission. Nine different lions wrestle and gambol on the gold-leafed backs of this pair of screens (figs. 35a, b). The fronts, painted with labor-intensive detail in heavy pigments and signed with the two names used post-exile, Hanabusa Itchō and Hokusōdō, present a variation on a traditional iconographical pattern in which a full day’s perfor-

mance of *bugaku* dances is presented simultaneously (figs. 35c, d). The Bakufu appropriated this ancient courtly dance as a stately and elegant symbol of the government’s legitimacy, and thus this minor painting genre enjoyed popularity among the samurai elite during the Edo period. It is my contention that Itchō painted this set of screens, front and back, to honor his relationship with one of his most special patrons, probably in 1713. With the intricate brushwork in the pageant of *bugaku* dancers complementing the expansive and powerful flourishes in the *karajishi*, these screens, now known as *Bugaku Dances*, in many ways epitomize Itchō’s adroitness at branding himself on his return from exile. As a painter who soon became the head of a flourishing studio, he had to create recognizable markers. Yet, as we can see from his best work, he did not create simplistic emblems. By the humorous ambiguity that he managed to express in the countenance of this *karajishi*, for instance, Itchō successfully negotiated a delicate balance between seemingly contradictory needs: to create a distinct school style, and at the same time answer the market’s demand for the standard painterly repertoire.

Evidence suggests that Itchō consciously capitalized on the notoriety of his exile and what must have seemed a miraculous return. To advance his fame (whether consciously or not), upon his return to Edo late in 1709, he dropped his many pre-exile names and adopted the sobriquet Hanabusa Itchō. Until his death early in 1724, he signed his works with that name, either alone or in combination with

Hanabusa Itchō. *Karajishi* (Chinese Lion), detail of fig. 35b.