

ASIAN ART COLLECTION

Otagaki Rengetsu

Hanging Basket

ca. 1870

Ceramic

11 × 9¼ in. (27.9 × 23.5 cm)

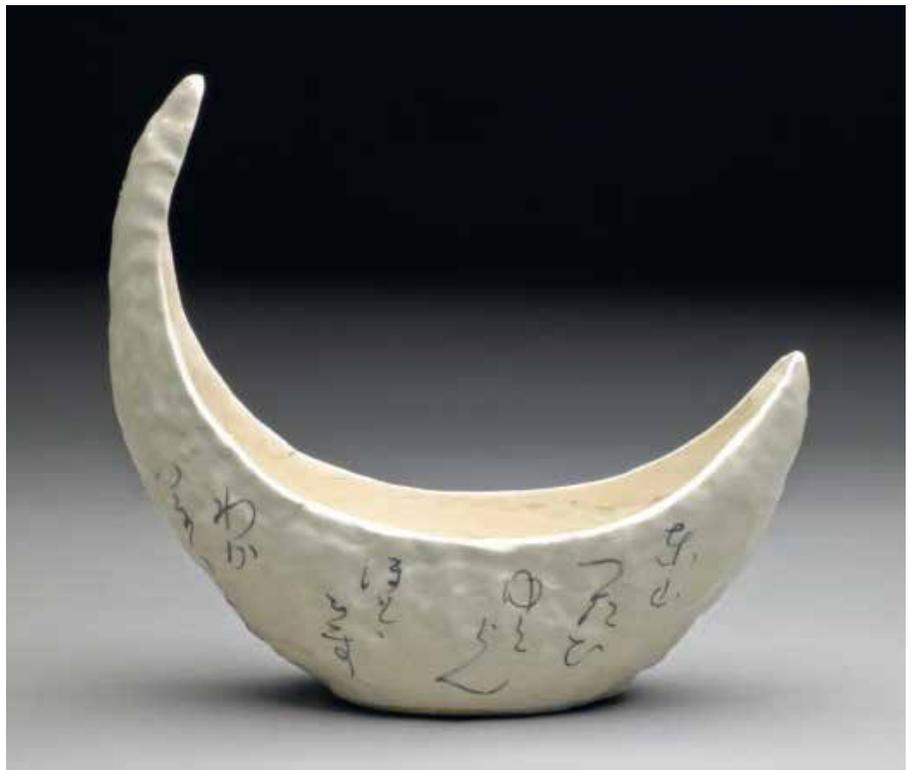
Museum purchase, funds provided by the Kathleen M. Axline Acquisition Endowment
2007.35

The famous Buddhist nun potter known as Otagaki Rengetsu was born in 1791 in the Sabongi pleasure district of Kyoto. Believed to be the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman and a courtesan, Rengetsu was adopted by Otagaki Hanzaemon Teruhisa and his wife Nawa soon after her birth. Teruhisa was a samurai working in Chion'in, and soon after Rengetsu's adoption he received the hereditary title of fudai. Historians speculate that Rengetsu's biological father arranged this title for Teruhisa in order to provide a good future for the baby and her new family. During her youth Rengetsu trained in martial arts, calligraphy, dance, needlework, and waka poetry at Kameoka Castle, where she resided for ten years as a lady-in-waiting.

As a teenager Rengetsu married Oka Tenzō; the marriage ended in divorce, but not before Rengetsu gave birth to and lost three infant children. Rengetsu married once again, to Ishikawa Jōjiro, who worked with her adoptive father in Chion'in and later inherited the title of fudai. During their marriage it is believed that they had one daughter, possibly two, and that Rengetsu may have been expecting when her second, beloved husband died of tuberculosis. After his tragic death she cut off her hair, vowing never to marry again.

As a result of the many misfortunes that had befallen Rengetsu, at the young age of thirty-three she changed the direction of her life by devoting herself to religion and, later, art. Both she and her adoptive father immersed themselves in Buddhism, and Rengetsu was ordained as a nun and acquired the name Lotus Moon. Together they lived in a hermitage in Chion'in called Makuzuan. Rengetsu remained there for approximately ten years. Following the death of her father and without a role at the temple, she left to create a new life in Okazaki, a thriving area northeast of Kyoto known for its literary arts. In her late forties or early fifties by that time, Rengetsu began experimenting with ceramics.

Rengetsu is noted for her poetry, calligraphy and glazed pottery. Her handmade ceramics exemplify an imperfect beauty. She is famous for the unique combination of pottery and



ASIAN ART COLLECTION

incised, handwritten waka poetry known as Rengetsu-yaki. During her lifetime, her fame for creating affordable and remarkable ceramics forced her to relocate often to avoid the pressure brought on by her artistic standing. In 1865 she settled at the Jinkoin Temple of Divine Light, where she had her most prolific period of producing pottery, calligraphy, poetry, and painting. In 1875 Otagaki Rengetsu passed away in the teahouse where she lived and worked in Jinkoin.

Signed and inscribed by Rengetsu, the poem reads:

Along the Higashima
mountain range
the nightingale flies
out of my hut
I hear her first song.

Intended as a planter for flowers, the basket is pierced at either end so it can be suspended in midair. The moon-shaped construction of the bold, creamy vessel not only implies the name of the artist, Lotus Moon, but also acts as a medium for her poetry, visually engaging the viewer on both sides through the vessel's design and her expressive poetic calligraphy.

