

Lu Zhi (1496-1576)

Plum Blossoms

China, Ming dynasty, mid 16th century
Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper
Gift of Mrs. Frank Gerbode in memory of
Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Alexander, 1956
(2261.1)

The depiction of the plum tree in bloom was an established painting subject from the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) on, and its popularity inspired the creation of its own genre within the bird-and-flower tradition.

The dynamic diagonal composition of this painting serves to highlight the plum tree's gnarled angles, the branches serving as platforms on which the delicate pink blossoms alight. The blossoming plum is meant to symbolize perseverance in adversity, as the tree flowers in winter's coldest months.

Wang Guxiang (1501-1568)

Narcissus, Plum Blossom and Rock

China, Ming dynasty, mid 16th century

Fan painting; ink on gold ground

Purchase, 1957

(2303.1)

The rendering of a blooming narcissus plant in front of a drooping branch of flowering plum and a small garden rock creates a dainty garden scene. The artist juxtaposes the lighter, more deliberate lines of the narcissus with the relatively saturated ink tonalities and looser brushwork found in the blossoming plum and garden rock. In China the narcissus traditionally stands for the quality of patriotic loyalty found in an exemplary official, while the blossoming plum tree represents triumph over adversity.

Xue Wu (1564-1637)

Chrysanthemums

China, Ming dynasty, early 17th century

Fan painting; ink on gold ground

Gift of Jean-Pierre DuBosc, 1957

(2312.1)

Xue Wu was a famed courtesan as well as an artist. Here, she chooses to link the image of a flowering cluster of chrysanthemums with a short poem written in her own hand. Both the poem and the depiction of chrysanthemums, which represent fortitude and reclusion, are symbolic expressions of the artist's later years of solitary existence.

“A branch of light yellow after the freezing, at the fence they gently unfold; shine of setting sun. What would be better, the south mountain once more facing the wind? I have enough food to supply the years of seclusion.”

-Xue Wu,
translation by Bety Ecke

Dai Jin and Chen Jiru (1558-1639)

Prunes and Bamboo

China, Ming dynasty, early 17th century

Fan painting; ink on gold ground

Purchase, 1958

(2476.1)

This collaborative painting pairs the blossoming plum and bamboo plant, two of the most popular subjects in the bird-and-flower tradition. Both plants share a similar association with the virtues of purity and chastity.

Chen Hongshou (1598-1652)

Album of Eight Landscapes and Figures

China, Qing dynasty, ca. mid 17th century

Album; ink and colors on silk

Purchase, 1966

(3420.1)

These three leaves of an album are representative of the artist's skill and technical finesse. The depictions of sweetly accessible scenes in nature are perfectly suited to the intimate format of the picture album. This is further enforced by the choices of subject matter within each picture, straightforward illustrations of familiar auspicious motifs in which the brushstroke of the artist is concealed in order to closely portray likeness of form.

Chen Hongshou (1598-1652)
Album of Eight Landscapes and Figures

China, Qing dynasty, ca. mid 17th century
Album; ink and colors on silk

Purchase, 1966
(3420.1)

Chen Hongshou (1598-1652)
Album of Eight Landscapes and Figures

China, Qing dynasty, ca. mid 17th century

Album; ink and colors on silk

Purchase, 1966

(3420.1)

Xu Wei (1521-1593)

Twelve Plants and Calligraphy

China, Ming dynasty (1368-1644)

Handscroll; ink on paper

Gift of Martha Cooke Steadman Fund, 1960

(2710.1)

One of the more notorious artistic personalities of the later Ming dynasty, Xu Wei is known for the vibrant and expressive style present in this handscroll. The brushstrokes are purposefully exposed and the subject matter of flowers and fruit is reduced to a loose abstraction of form. It is easy to recognize the similarities between the artist's painting and calligraphy. Each plant rendered in this handscroll symbolizes a month out of the year, uniquely combining Xu Wei's distinctive brushwork with conventional seasonal motifs.

Sun Qi (active late 14th century)

The Golden Ornaments: Plum Blossom

China, Ming dynasty, late 14th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Hutchinson, 1985

(5366.1)

The artist utilizes the entire length of this hanging scroll to effectively display a branch of a plum tree laden with blossoms, an exuberant harbinger of the coming spring. The depiction of the blooming plum not only symbolizes renewal and perseverance through adversity, but also stands for vigorous longevity, in that the tree itself lives for a long time but continues to produce delicate blossoms.

Mao Qiling (1623-1716)

Strange Pines

China, Qing dynasty, late 17th-early 18th century

Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack K. Wakayama

in memory of Mr. Peter A. Griffing, 1973

(4143.1)

The pine tree has a long history in traditional Chinese iconography, and its lengthy lifespan makes it a natural symbol of longevity. The weathered appearance of these trees is conveyed by the artist's rendering of the gnarled limbs twisting and turning in space. Mao Qiling successfully creates the illusion of pines, despite their evident age, reaching vigorously beyond the edges of the scroll. This traditional association is also in harmony with the artist's comparison of these knotty pines to Daoist immortals.

Mei Qing (1623-1692)

Plum Blossoms

China, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period, 1692

Handscroll; ink on paper

Purchase, 1953

(1668.1)

Through the Qing dynasty, the blossoming plum tree continued to be a popular subject and retained its traditional iconographical association with the virtues of perseverance and purity. The artist utilizes this lengthy handscroll format to present a truncated depiction of the top of sprawling plum branches. This painting is an example of a familiar subject matter reduced to an abstraction of form that successfully conveys a sense of movement with its exposed brushwork and vibrant ink tonalities.

Wen Zhengming (1470-1559)

Seven Junipers

China, Ming dynasty, 1532

Handscroll; ink on paper

Gift of Mrs. Carter Galt, 1952

(1666.1)

One of the most renowned painters of the Ming dynasty, here Wen Zhenming depicts seven ancient juniper trees, planted on the grounds of a Daoist temple. The artist makes the most of the handscroll format by creating a dynamic and complex painting of meticulous calligraphic line with a range of layered ink tones. Compositionally, the trees expand in all directions beyond the page into space, their solid presence dominating the page. An evergreen tree, the juniper shares a symbolic association of vital longevity with the pine tree.

Sun Zhi (Active 1550-1580)
Peach Blossoms in a Jade Cave

China, Ming dynasty, 16th century
Fan painting; ink and color on paper
Gift of Mrs. Frances McWayne, 1968

(3542.1)