

Bird and Flower Painting of the Ming Dynasty

Bird-and-flower painting enjoys a history that reaches all the way back to the Tang dynasty (618-907). Painting techniques within this tradition range widely in style, encompassing a variety of brushwork approaches. Some works employ a loose calligraphic brushstroke that clearly displays the hand of the artist, encouraging the viewer to engage the painting viscerally, as the artist describes the subject in a bare suggestion of structure. Other pieces precisely delineate foliage and feather, and the hand of the artist is intentionally hidden, in order to render an astonishing likeness of form that seems to extend out from the page into space.

Art critics sought to elevate the ink monochrome style of literati bird-and flower painting as the untrammelled domain of scholar-amateur artists, and to relegate the colorful and more straightforward works of this tradition to the realm of professional artists. These definitions, while not strictly adhered to, were meant to distinguish scholar-amateur painters as the possessors of greater cultural capital, regardless of whether they actually lived off of the sale of their paintings. The more openly commercial realm of professional bird-and-flower painters was believed to lack the refined ideals held dear to the literati. However, in spite of their contrasting approaches to the depiction of nature, artists from both styles expressed in varying ways the allure and wonder of the natural world around them.

Regardless of style, by the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the depiction of flowers within the various formats used by Chinese painters had acquired a crystallized iconography. This commonality of convention created a shared symbolic vocabulary between the artists and their contemporary audience that continued on into the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

Exhibited in this gallery are bird-and-flower paintings in a range of formats and painting styles. These works serve as examples of the scope of painting styles found in this genre, from hanging scrolls and handscrolls to intimate album leaves and fan paintings. The artists range from notorious personalities of the Ming-dynasty literati painting style such as Xu Wei (1501-1568), to less famous artists like Wang Guxiang (1521-1593), who produced work that appealed to a broader audience.