Ch’ien Hsüan’s Pear Blossoms:
The Tradition of Flower Painting
and Poetry from Sung to Yüan

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Among the flower paintings by Ch’ien Hsüan (ca. 1235–before 1307) are several accompanied by the artist’s poems. In Pear Blossoms, a handscroll in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ch’ien’s poem follows an image of six clusters of flowers growing from a stark, knobby branch (Figures 6, 7). This work, which according to a fifteenth-century colophon dates from Ch’ien’s old age, is not only one of the most visually appealing of his flower paintings, but is also one in which the interaction of poetry and painting achieves a richness and complexity of meaning new in Chinese art. The relationship between words and images in Ch’ien’s landscape painting is the subject of two recent studies; a similar and equally important relationship in his flower painting has not yet been analyzed. Focusing on the Metropolitan Museum handscroll and the tradition to which it belongs, this article will explore some of the issues raised by Ch’ien Hsüan’s works in the flower genre that combine the arts of poetry and painting.

Active in the late Southern Sung (1127–1279) and early Yüan (1279–1368) dynasties, Ch’ien Hsüan was heir to ancient traditions of poetry and painting that deal with the subject of flowers. With their synaesthetic appeal to the senses of sight, smell, and touch, flowers offered Chinese poets and painters subjects of almost unlimited symbolic and metaphorical potential. Beginning with the Book of Odes (Shih-ching) (seventh century B.C.) and Songs of Ch’u (Ch’u-t’zu) (third century B.C.), and continuing in “palace-style poems” (kung-t’i shih) of the Six Dynasties (317–589), flowers in Chinese poetry are frequently symbols of beautiful women, and floral imagery often has unmistakably erotic overtones. Flowers are equally common, however, as symbols of scholarly purity, reclusion, and nobility.

In painting, flowers and other plants emerged as independent subjects in the works of the Six Dynasties artists Ku K’ai-chih (ca. 344–406) and Chang Seng-yu (active 500–550). Also in the Six Dynasties, a Chinese glossary is given at the end of the article, following the Chinese of the passages quoted as extracts in the text and identified by lowercase letters. The calligraphy is by Feng Minghui. Translations, unless otherwise attributed, are by the author.


1. Emperor Sung Hui-tsung (1082–1135), *Five-Colored Parakeet*, before 1126. Section of a handscroll, ink and colors on silk, 53.3 × 125.1 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Maria Antoinette Evans Fund, 33.364 (photo: courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

painters combined images of flowers and birds to create the extremely durable genre of *hua-niao hua*, or “bird and flower painting.” During the tenth century, Huang Ch’u-an (903–968) of the Shu kingdom and Hsü Hsi (active 960–ca. 975) of the Southern T’ang kingdom brought flower painting to a new perfection. Judging from the entries in the *Painting Catalogue of the Hsüan-ho Era* (Hsiuan-ho hua-p’u) (preface dated 1120), in which bird and flower paintings far outnumber those of any other category, by the late Northern Sung (960–1127) flowers were the most popular of all subjects in Chinese painting.

Although floral imagery appears in pre-Sung illustrations of narrative poems and Buddhist texts, it was not until the twelfth century that artists began to combine lyric poetry and flower painting in a single work. This alliance of words and images reflects a pervasive Sung interest in using poetry as a source of enrichment for pictorial art. Comments by Kuo Hsi (ca. 1001–ca. 1090) on lines of poetry he found well suited to depiction in painting, discussions by the poet Su Shih (1037–1101) and members of his circle concerning the convertibility of the two arts, and the examination system of Emperor Sung Hui-tsung (1082–1135) in the painting academy, which tested students’ ability to translate lines of poetry into painting with sensitivity and originality—all are late Northern Sung examples of artists’ fascination with the interplay of poetry and painting. The confluence of the two arts became increasingly subtle when Hui-tsung began to write poems on or directly adjacent to his paintings. In the twelfth century, Emperor Sung Kao-tsung (1107–87) and other imperial artists introduced the fashion of having silk fans inscribed on one side with a quatrain and decorated on the other with corresponding painted images. With these works, in which painting and poetry were combined in a single creative process, Chinese art entered a period of new complexity.

The most popular forms for flower painting in the Southern Sung were fans and album leaves, where artists focused on a single blossom or flowering branch. These Southern Sung flower paintings, much like the famous “one-cornered” landscapes of


5. For flower paintings in this tradition see Yonezawa Yoshiro, *Flower and Bird Painting of the Sung Dynasty* (Tokyo, 1956).
the Ma-Hsia school, concentrate on a limited, highly selective vision of the natural world. In his study of Southern Sung lyric poetry, Shuen-fu Lin points out a striking similarity between this phenomenon in painting and a major shift of focus in Chinese lyric poetry, specifically in yung-wu tz'u, or “songs on objects,” of the Southern Sung. Lin’s analysis shows that, when writing in this genre, the Southern Sung poet “shrinks from the vast world of his lived experience and concentrates his creative vision on one tangible object.”

The fascination with individual objects selected from nature in Southern Sung flower painting makes Shuen-fu Lin’s theories of yung-wu poetry of particular value in understanding the traditions that lie behind Ch’ien Hs’ien’s art. The basic meaning of the word *wu* in the term yung-wu is “anything that can be perceived by the mind”; but the conventions of the yung-wu genre are such that its themes are limited to small objects from nature: flowers, birds, or insects, never human beings, landscapes, or events. In light of this definition, many Southern Sung flower paintings are clearly pictorial equivalents of yung-wu poems. But not all the poems that appear on these paintings fall into this category. It is the entire work, in which poetry and painting merge to create a single semantic and expressive unit, that corresponds to the yung-wu aesthetic articulated by Shuen-fu Lin.

Hui-tsung frequently inscribed poems on his paintings. Several of his works in the bird and flower genre provide important evidence of the relationship between poetry and painting in the late Northern Sung. Hui-tsung’s *Five-Colored Parakeet* (Figure 1) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, depicts a bird perched on a fragile branch. This jewel-like image of the emperor’s exotic pet is painted with astonishing attention to minute details of feathers, eyes, and feet. Like Hui-tsung’s *Finches and Bamboo* in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, this is a work of “super realism.” Preceding the painting, Hui-tsung writes a preface and an eight-line poem that belongs to the yung-wu category:

The five-colored parakeet came from Ling-piao. Reared in the imperial enclosure he has become docile and is lovable. He flits and sings as he pleases, moving to and fro in the garden. In mid-spring, when apricots blossom everywhere, he flies to the top of a branch. He is noble and placid, and possesses a dignity peculiarly his own. As I gaze upon him he seems to present a sight superior to a picture. Therefore I compose this verse:

Heaven produced the parakeet, this strange bird, From far away he came to the imperial precinct. His body is complete with five colors and his nature rare. Blessed is he, uttering many a fine speech, his tone most beautiful. When flying high, to be envied is he, his feathers elegant. When walking about, contented is he, fed with choice grain. His yellow breast and purple feet are truly perfect, Thus I compose a new verse and sing as I stroll.

Hui-tsung’s poem, like his richly detailed painting, describes the form and appearance of the bird, its feathers, voice, and bearing. Although the emperor attributes to the parakeet human qualities of nobility and dignity, he does not attempt to endow it with the capacity to experience human feelings; and whatever symbolic qualities the bird may have—as an image of freedom or naturalness—they remain so general as to have little meaning. The poem is primarily descriptive and the painting that illustrates it attempts to capture a convincing image of the avian subject.

Although his laboriously naturalistic painting style may have differed radically from the sketchy ink-play of late Northern Sung literati painters, Hui-tsung’s combination of painting and poetry is artistically consonant with statements made by Su Shih and his


7. Ibid., p. 10.


circle concerning the convertibility of words and images. Although these artists and poets frequently discounted the value of “form-likeness” in painting and saw poetry as a way to express meaning beyond what could be conveyed pictorially, they recognized the descriptive power shared by the two arts. For example, when Ch'ao Pu-chih (1053–1111) responded to a poem Su Shih had written for a painting of a goose, he wrote, “Why should I look at the painting? / When I see the poem, the goose is really there.” What Ch'ao praises is Su Shih's skillful poetic evocation of the bird's living presence. Although the painting Su wrote about is lost, the relationship between it and his poem must have been similar to the relationship between Hui-tsung's meticulously depicted parakeet and the descriptive preface and poem that accompany it.

Many of the Southern Sung flower paintings in the form of fans or album leaves were accompanied by quatrains in the calligraphy of various imperial writers. Only in rare cases, however, have the original pairings of poetry and painting been preserved. The earliest known example is the silk fan (Figures 2, 3) excavated from the tomb of the Ming prince Chu Tan (d. 1389). In its original form this collaborative work consisted of an anonymous artist's painting of a butterfly hovering over an autumn mallow and a poem in the calligraphy of Kao-tsung. The two pieces of silk were pasted back to back to form a round, hand-held fan. During the Yüan dynasty the two sides of the fan were separated and mounted side by side in a short handscroll. Kao-tsung's calligraphy, in four lines of cursive script, is in gold. According to a colophon by Feng Tzu-chen (1257–after 1327), this is a work of Kao-tsung's late years, done after the emperor had retired to the Te-shou palace in 1162. The poem is not Kao-tsung's own composition, but is a modified version of a quatrain by Liu Ch'ang (1019–68), a Northern Sung scholar-official, poet, and antiquarian:

White dew has just passed hurrying away the eighth month,
Purple corolla and red leaves share chilly loneliness.
The yellow blossom, neglected, there is no one to see:
Alone, it naturally inclines its heart toward the sunset.

Although the quatrain is not a popular yung-wu form, Kao-tsung's revision of Liu's poem can be considered a yung-wu poem. Lacking the preface or title that usually establishes a context for a Chinese quatrain, the poem depends on the painted image to make clear its subject, the autumn mallow (ch'i-ku'i), a plant valued both for its medicinal potency and for the beauty of its large yellow blossoms. Because the mallow always grows facing the sun, a proverbial saying from the Huai-nan tsu (second century b.c.), a text composed at the court of the prince of Huai-nan, states, “The relationship between a sage and the Way is like the relationship between a mallow and the sun.” But read in the context of Chinese poetic tradition, the poem on the fan is not about a sage but about a court beauty. Recognition of this fundamental metaphor is essential to interpretation of both the painting and the poem.

The first line of the quatrain establishes a temporal setting: “white dew” (pai-lu) is one of the twenty-four climatic periods of the lunar year, beginning on either the eighth or ninth day of the ninth month. Endowed by the poet with the capacity to experience human feelings, the personified flower suffers “chilly loneliness” and neglect. These are precisely the feelings conventionally attributed to abandoned beauties in poems of the kuei-yüan, or “inner-chamber resentment,” genre in which poets write in the personae of

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13. Writing quatrains on fans seems to have been a craze at the Southern Sung court. Emperor Sung Hsiao-tsung (reigned 1163–90) was so fond of these four-line poems that to please him Hung Mai (1123–1202) compiled the T'ang-jen wan-shou ch'ien-ch'ü [Ten Thousand Quatrains by T'ang Poets]. See Yoshikawa Kojirō, Sung Poetry, trans. Burton Watson (Cambridge, Mass., 1967) p. 163.
15. Ibid., p. 29.
18. Quoted in Ch'ien Meng-lev et al., eds., Ku-chin t'u-shu, LXV, p. 876.
lonely ladies pining for thoughtless lovers. In the last line, Kao-tsung adapts a cliché found in many Chinese poems on the theme of the mallow: “it inclines its heart to the sun.” Here it is a setting sun, and the suggestion of crepuscular light adds to the melancholy of the poem. Though not mentioned in the poem, the butterfly seen in the painting makes more poignant by its very presence the absence of a sympathetic human observer.

In the anonymous painting paired with Kao-tsung’s calligraphy, the artist uses gold and purple pigments for the mallow blossoms and silver, now darkened to a dirty gray, for the butterfly hovering above. With consummate skill, the artist foreshortens the long, serrated leaves and the uppermost blossom to create a convincing illusion of objects existing in real space. Contours of the petals are soft and wavy; they fold and turn back on themselves with great naturalness, and the gold striations on the petals delineate the living plant’s veins. The butterfly, its gossamer wings painted with utmost delicacy, is an entomological portrait of impeccable accuracy.

When we compare the relationship between poetry and painting in Hui-tsung’s Five-Colored Parakeet with that in Kao-tsung’s fan, which dates from no earlier than 1162, we discover a significant difference. Hui-tsung’s poem, in its detailed evocation of the parakeet’s form, is highly descriptive; his painting illustrates the accompanying poem but adds to it no metaphorical dimension. We feel, as Ch’ao Pu-chih felt regarding Su Shih’s poem describing a goose and the corresponding painting, that reading Hui-tsung’s poem we do not need to see his painting. In the Kao-tsung fan, a more complex relationship prevails between poetry and painting. No less concerned with naturalism than is Hui-tsung in his bird painting, the artist of the fan carries the viewer close to the yellow blossoms and skillfully evokes their sensuous presence as real objects. But with the addition of the quatrain, which not only describes the flowers but also
introduces levels of personification and metaphor, the fan is no longer merely a combination of verbal and pictorial description: through the interaction of poetry and painting the autumn mallow has become an emblem of human feeling.

*Layers of Icy Silk* (Figure 4) by Ma Lin (active ca. 1210–40), in the Palace Museum, Peking, develops further what might be called the lady/flower theme. The earliest dated work by this Southern Sung court academician, the painting depicts two fragile branches of blossoming plum against a blank background. At the top of the scroll, in her familiar standard script (k'ai-shu), is a quatrain by Yang Mei-tzu (1162–1232), consort of Emperor Sung Li-tsun, and her seal for the year 1216. Four characters in the lower left, also by Yang, read “layers of icy silk” (ts'eng-tieh ping-hsiao), a reference to a type of thin white cloth. This inscription is a clue to the meaning of both the painting and the poem, translated here:

Like a chilled butterfly resting in the corolla,
Embracing the rouge heart, remembering former fragrance.
Blossoming to the tip of the cold branch, it is most lovable:
This must be the makeup that adorned the Han palace.6

The collaborative work of Ma Lin and Yang Mei-tzu belongs to a tradition Susan Bush calls the “cult of the plum.” A favorite subject for painters and poets, admired by both courtiers and recluses, the prunus, also known as the Japanese apricot, was the


21. Written with the “silk” radical, as in the four-character inscription, the word hsiao means “plain silk.” Because this character can sometimes be interchanged with a homophone written with the “wood” radical that means “tip of a branch,” some Western translators have interpreted the phrase ts'eng-tieh ping-hsiao as “layers of icy tips” (see Max Loehr, “Chinese Paintings with Sung-dated Inscriptions,” *Ars Orientalis* 4 [1961] p. 264). However, the compound ping-hsiao clearly refers to a type of thin white silk (see Morohashi Tetsuji, *Dai kan-ya jiten* [Great Chinese–Japanese Dictionary] [Tokyo, 1955–60] II, p. 1223), and the translation “layers of icy silk” seems to be a more meaningful title for the painting. I am grateful to Ch'en Pao-chen and T'ang Hai-t'ao, both of Princeton University, for helping me with this point.

object of deep affection in Southern Sung culture. Its popularity can be judged by the many twelfth- and thirteenth-century treatises on plum blossoms, including Plum Catalogue (Mei-p’u) by Fan Ch’eng-ta (1126–93), Plum Classifications (Mei-p’in) by Chang Tzu (1153–ca. 1212), and Manual of Plum Likenesses (Mei-hua hsi-shen p’u) by Sung Po-jen (active 1225–65), in which poetic commentaries accompany illustrations of the stages of the plum blossom’s growth.

Because the plum braves late winter snows to bloom earlier than other flowers, it symbolizes the moral strength of a virtuous man. The poet Yang Wan-li (1124–89) summarizes this view of the plum in his lines “The flowering plum in the grove is like a recluse / Full of the spirit of open space, free from the spirit of worldly dust.” Though deeply compelling as a symbol of the lofty recluse, the plum also suggested other meanings to Southern Sung artists and poets. The yeh-mei, or “wild plum,” symbolizes the hermit, but the kung-mei, or “palace plum,” represents a court beauty.

When looking at Ma Lin’s hanging scroll, the viewer familiar with the poetic conventions of the plum theme decodes a sequence of words and an image, beginning with the inscription “layers of icy silk.” The “icy silk” is as white as the plum blossoms themselves, which in their delicacy and fragrance symbolize a lady’s beauty. These already complex layers of meaning in the inscription function as a preface to the poem. We noted that in the Kao-tsung fan the butterfly in the painting is not mentioned in the accompanying poem; in the Ma Lin–Yang Mei-tzu hanging scroll this feature is reversed: the insect, which does not appear in the painting, is conjured up by the first line of the poem. The image of a butterfly resting in a corolla, literally the “floral chamber” (hua-fang), is a yin-yang combination that hints at the union of male and female lovers.

Several other expressions in Yang Mei-tzu’s quatrains underscore the feminine identity of the plum blossoms. The “rouge heart” (t’an-hsin) refers to the center of the blossoms. Because the word t’an appears frequently in other contexts with the word k’ou, or “mouth,” to describe a lady’s painted red lips, Yang Mei-tzu’s use of the wordstrengthens the metaphorical connection between flower and lady. “Makeup that adorned the Han palace” (Han-kung chuang) is a metonymic expression for a palace lady: “Han palace” can refer to the imperial palace of any dynasty, and “makeup” (chuang) stands for the woman who wears it.

Yang Mei-tzu’s quatrains reflects a further movement away from the descriptive techniques used in Hui-tsung’s poem about the parakeet. Although the poem on the Kao-tsung fan goes beyond simple description to personify its subject, the mallows remain the focus of the poem. In the Yang Mei-tzu quatrains, however, the floral subject is meaningful only to the extent that it stimulates human feelings. The voice heard in the poem is that of a male lover who, coming upon the blossoms, recalls a past amorous encounter. “Resting in the corolla,” the butterfly transforms the flowers into an image of remembered intimacy.

The painting that corresponds to this highly suggestive poetic meditation is chaste and refined. Thin, spidery branches, one growing upward, one downward, form a textured tracery that supports and contrasts with the white plum blossoms. Differing in size from buds to fully opened blossoms, some turned toward, some away from the viewer, the flowers grow in closely bunched layers—the “layers of icy silk” in Yang Mei-tzu’s inscription. Instead of focusing on one or two blossoms, the viewer savors the overall pattern of understated floral beauty, moving back and forth freely between poetic and painted statements. In contrast to the mallows pressed close to the viewer in the Kao-tsung fan, Ma Lin’s plum blossoms appear remote and inaccessible. Nevertheless, as a court academician whose art was shaped by representational standards de rigueur in his profession, Ma Lin paints the plum blossoms as tangible objects existing in three-dimensional space. Though it is restrained, elegant, and cool, his painting aims above all at representational accuracy.

Ma Lin’s hanging scroll and the Kao-tsung fan, separated in time by some fifty years, are representative flower paintings from the Southern Sung academic tradition. Collaborative efforts that combine

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25. See Frankel’s discussion of the palace-plum theme, The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady, chap. 1.
the calligraphy of imperial writers and the painting of court artists, both explore the popular theme of flowers seen as symbols of beautiful women. The name of the fan painter is unknown, and although we know something of Ma Lin’s life and career, both artists remain anonymous as personalities; their paintings, though marvels of skill and sensitivity, are institutional works that tell us almost nothing about the artists’ private worlds of ideas and feelings.26

Outside the imperial court, scholar-painters of the Southern Sung continued to pursue aesthetic goals that had been articulated in the late Northern Sung by Su Shih and his like-minded associates, who saw painting as a reflection of the artist’s mind and a revelation of his personality. For Su Shih and his friends, painting was not merely a record of sensory experience but also an expression of a superior man’s deeply held values—the wen or broad humanistic culture of China’s educated elite.

In her indispensable discussion of subject matter in the literati tradition, Susan Bush notes that Sung scholar-painters tended to focus on a single object, one type of flower or tree removed from its natural setting, thus inviting the viewer to contemplate the meaning of a given image and to question the artist’s reasons for choosing to paint it.27 Literary and historical traditions gave certain subjects, especially bamboo, orchid, chrysanthemum, and plum, special significance as symbols of scholarly values, and paintings of flowers or plants could be statements of high moral aspiration. Moreover, these subjects frequently were interpreted as images of the men who painted them. This is exemplified in Su Shih’s remarks on the bamboo painting of Wen T’ung (1019–79).28 Su said that people who saw his friend’s bamboo would realize that it was bending but unyielding, just like Wen T’ung himself. Poems and colophons on paintings of botanical subjects document similar interpretations dating to the Southern Sung. When he inscribed a bamboo painting by Su Shih, the philosopher Chu Hsi (1130–1200) wrote that “when people look at this painting they will still be able to see him in their minds.”29

The pronouncements of the Northern Sung literati painters and their artistic heirs in the Southern Sung suggest that in bamboo and flower painting these scholarly artists found vehicles for self-expression more direct than in landscape painting and better suited to their amateur techniques. Among extant paintings by Southern Sung scholar-painters who specialized in flowers, those by Chao Meng-chien (1199–before 1267), a member of the Sung imperial family, presage most directly the art of Ch’ien Hsüan. Chao’s long handscroll in The Metropolitan Museum of Art depicts a panorama of narcissi in bloom (Figure 5). The scroll is painted in the pai-miao, or “plain drawing,” manner favored by Sung literati artists and closest of all painting modes to calligraphy, the premier art of the scholar.30 In Chao’s hands this painting technique creates a seemingly endless variety of ink outlines and washes. Waving gracefully above the pond, the plants seem far removed from the realm of tangible objects depicted by Hui-tsung and Ma Lin.

Shortly after Chao Meng-chien’s death, his handscroll took on new meaning. Colophons and poems of the late thirteenth century attached to the painting reveal that viewers of Chao’s ethereal narcissi saw the plants not only as reflections of the artist’s lofty character but also as symbols of China before her defeat by the Mongols in 1279.31 It was in this historical context, in which flowers could be seen as images of both a man and an entire nation, that Ch’ien Hsüan began his career as an artist.

Ch’ien Hsüan was in his early forties when the Mongols swept into southern China. By 1279, for the first time in history, the entire nation was brought under

the control of foreign conquerors. Like all men of his education and social class, Ch'ien was profoundly affected by this catastrophic defeat.

During the years immediately preceding the Mongol conquest, Ch'ien Hsüan had established himself as a promising scholar who could look forward with confidence to a secure future in the Southern Sung civil bureaucracy. He had also won a place for himself in distinguished literary circles at the Southern Sung capital of Hangchow. As portrayed in the memoirs of scholarly gentlemen who knew its stunning lakeside scenery, lavish mansions, and superb gardens, mid-thirteenth-century Hangchow was a city of elegant diversions, where "hardly a day passed without a romp or amusement." Ch'ien Hsüan knew the city well. In a nostalgic poem of his later years, Ch'ien wrote, "Do not laugh at me, young lords of the capital; / I also scattered gold there to enjoy my youth." Although Hangchow escaped destruction when the dynasty fell, the patterns of life for educated men who had lived in the area were drastically disrupted. Scholars who, under a native Chinese dynasty, would have sought official employment suddenly found

5. Chao Meng-chien (1199–before 1267). Narcissi, undated. Section of a handscroll, ink on paper, 33.2 × 372.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973.120.4

themselves the subjects of an alien regime deeply suspicious of China’s literati elite. Later, when the Mongols attempted to recruit Chinese scholars into the vast bureaucracy needed to govern the empire, the thought of serving their conquerors led many Chinese to give up their status as scholars and turn to painting, fortune-telling, medicine, and other unorthodox professions formerly scorned by fastidious literati. Eremitism, a tradition of great importance in Chinese culture, became widespread, as men who saw themselves as i-min, or “leftover subjects,” of the Sung retreated from active involvement with the world.

For Ch’ien Hsüan, life as an i-min brought about a profound change of status. Although he had completed several volumes of classical scholarship while still a young man, not long after the fall of the Southern Sung Ch’ien renounced scholarly life, burned his books, and began a career as a professional painter in his native city of Wu-hsing, Chekiang province. His abdication as a scholar seems to have been motivated by more than his desire to avoid government service. On a painting titled Making Enemies of Books Ch’ien inscribed a poem expressing contempt for useless literati, the traditional guardians of Chinese culture, who had spectacularly failed to protect the nation from the Mongol threat. He also refused to register as the head of a ju-hu, a “Confucian household,” a status the Mongols accorded men of learning, exempting them from certain taxes and corvée obligations.

As a professional painter, Ch’ien Hsüan was obliged to market his works in teashops and bookstores. When forgeries jeopardized his livelihood, he changed the manner in which he signed his paintings and altered his style, thus, he hoped, putting the forgers to shame. Ch’ien Hsüan’s career was also threatened by his alcoholism. His addiction to wine was not simply an excessive fondness for the convivial imbibing enjoyed by all Chinese literati; according to his friend Chao Meng-fu (1254–1322), Ch’ien’s drinking brought on frequent spells of trembling that left him unable to paint. Nevertheless, Ch’ien Hsüan endured. Contrasting Ch’ien’s life with that of men who chose to serve in government, the poet Chang Yü (1337–85) wrote, “Who could imagine that Mr. Ch’ien alone chose hardship to express his virtue, serving as a craftsman-painter until his hair turned white?”

As a professional artist Ch’ien Hsüan specialized in landscapes and flower painting. In his landscapes, often painted in the archaic “blue-green” style, er-

6, 7. Ch’ien Hsüan (ca. 1235–after 1307), *Pear Blossoms*, undated. Section of a handscroll, ink and colors on paper, 31.1 × 95.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1977-79

emitic retreat is a recurring theme. Poems Ch’ien Hsüan inscribed on these images of secluded dwellings express his own longing for escape from a distasteful world. Th pneumonia created, like his landscapes, for a public audience, Ch’ien’s flower paintings and the poems he inscribed on them are also imbued with his private melancholy. Seen in their art-historical context, Ch’ien’s works, along with those of Chao Meng-fu, herald an irrevocable change in Chinese painting, as brush and ink become the means through which artists “write out their feelings” in pictorial form. In Ch’ien’s Pear Blossoms, both the relationship between words and image and the style in which the blossoms are painted reflect the emergence of this new artistic world.

According to the Precious Mirror of Painting (T’u-hui pao-chien) of 1365, Ch’ien usually added poems to his best paintings. The Metropolitan Museum’s handscroll surely belongs in this category of outstanding works (Figure 6). Although the handscroll format could easily permit a longer poetic complement,


7. Detail of Figure 6
Ch'ien Hsüan continues the Southern Sung practice of matching quatrains and painting:42

The lonely tear-stained face, teardrops drenching the branches,
Though washed of makeup, her old charms remain.
Behind the closed gate, on a rainy night vainly sorrowing,
How differently she looked bathed in golden waves of moonlight before darkness fell.d

Written immediately following an image of pear blossoms and ostensibly a poem on the subject of flowers, Ch'ien's quatrains surprisingly contains only one word, "branches" (chih), that refers directly to what is shown in the painting; and the significance of even this word is oblique—on the branches fall tears from the face of the poem's true subject, a palace lady. This subject is made clear by the quatrains first line, which alludes to "Song of Unending Sorrow" (Ch'ang-hen ko) by Po Chü-i (772–846). This poem, familiar to every literate Chinese, recounts the story of the T'ang-dynasty concubine Yang Kuei-fei (d. 756), whose love affair with Emperor Hsüan-tsung (reigned 713–756) not only brought chaos to the empire but also led to her murder by mutinous imperial bodyguards. In the couplet to which Ch'ien Hsüan alludes, Po Chü-i compares the concubine's face to pear blossoms:43

The lonely jade countenance, shedding flowing tears:
A branch of pear blossoms drenched in spring rain.e

Although Ch'ien Hsüan's allusion to these famous lines evokes memories of the ill-fated concubine, by the thirteenth century Yang Kuei-fei was no longer merely an historical figure: for Ch'ien and his contemporaries she was an archetype of all palace ladies and a symbol of tragic beauty.

The lady/flower theme Ch'ien Hsüan explores in the Metropolitan Museum handscroll draws on traditions of flower painting from the Southern Sung court. Yet the relationship between poetry and painting in Ch'ien's work departs from Southern Sung precedents. In their poems for flower paintings already discussed, Kao-tsung and Yang Mei-tzu use complex metonymic and metaphorical expressions to equate flowers with human beings and to find in flowers parallels for human feeling. But in his poem for the painted pear blossoms, Ch'ien writes only about a human subject. His painting, in turn, creates a context for the quatrains. Here, poetry and painting are no longer convertible. The two arts have become mutually dependent: without his painting, Ch'ien's poem lacks a meaningful context; and, however evocative its imagery, the painting loses its metaphorical richness without the accompanying poem.

Ch'ien Hsüan's painting in no way illustrates the quatrains: we see only flowers on a background of blank paper. The sinuous branch is painted with layers of light and dark ink that suggest the rough texture of the bark; cropped at the bottom and extending in an S curve almost to the top of the scroll, the branch provides a textural and rhythmic counterpart to the pale white buds and blossoms. The leaves are outlined with brownish ink and painted with dark green pigment, most of which has worn away. Where leaves and stems join the branches, the overlapping tones are finely modulated with gray shading.

Although Ch'ien Hsüan violates no botanical verities, his painted flowers lack the eye-catching sensuous appeal of most Southern Sung works in this genre. The pear blossoms seem as remote in time and space as Yang Kuei-fei herself. Why is this so? How is this effect achieved? What is its significance?

It is not merely the absence of background or atmosphere—these are lacking in earlier flower paintings as well—or the pale colors that make the pear blossoms appear to grow in a realm not bound by time and space. This effect is created primarily by

42. Based on a translation by Wen Fong and Maxwell K. Hearn, in Fong and Hearn, "Silent Poetry," p. 36.
43. Peng Ting-ch'i et al., eds., Ch'ien T'ang shih [Complete T'ang Poetry] (1707; Chung-hua shu-chü ed., Peking, 1960) VII, p. 4816. K'o Chiu-ssu (1290?–1343) mentions this famous couplet in his poem for a painting of pear blossoms by Ch'ien Hsüan. The painting K'o saw was either the Metropolitan Museum handscroll or one like it that bore a similar poetic inscription. See K'o Chiu-ssu, "Ti Ch'ien Shun-chu hua li-hua" [Inscribed on Ch'ien Shun-chu's Painting of a Pear Blossom], Tan-ch'iu chi [Collected Works of Tan-ch'iu] (Li-tai hua-chia shih-wen-chi ed., Taipei, 1971) pp. 67–68. Another K'o Chiu-ssu poem appears on Ch'ien Hsüan's Doves and Pear Blossoms in the Cincinnati Art Museum. Although K'o mentions Yang Kuei-fei in this poem, the presence of the two doves in the painting changes the symbolic import of the allusion. See Lee and Ho, Chinese Art Under the Mongols, no. 181. For a selection of poems on the theme of pear blossoms that allude to Po Chü-i's "Song of Unending Sorrow" see Chang Yü-shu et al., eds., P'ei-wen ch'ai, VIII, pp. 5349–5362.
the abstract, schematic clarity of Ch'ien's style. Although the painted leaves seem to turn naturalistically in space, Ch'ien subtly distorts the foreshortening of their folded edges to create strongly two-dimensional patterns. This is most evident in the cluster of flowers farthest to the right (Figure 7). Outlines of the leaves are precise and unassertive, but just sharp enough to keep the forms they define parallel to the picture plane; the leaves extend horizontally and vertically but not back into space. The schematization in Ch'ien's drawing becomes clear when the leaves in his handscroll are compared with those in the Kao-tsung fan, which are carefully foreshortened to recede naturalistically into an imaginary void.

This abstraction extends also to Ch'ien Hsüan's drawing of the flowers. He composes the unopened buds as round or oval shapes subdivided by pale lines into layers of petals. Likewise, Ch'ien's drawing of the opened buds creates a subtle tension between the illusion of three-dimensional objects in space and the two-dimensional graphic formula by which they are depicted. Where petals curl back on themselves, they form flat shapes subdivided into smaller parts rather than a single plane turning in space. As James Cahill notes concerning another of Ch'ien Hsüan's flower paintings, the schematic folding of leaves and blossoms is a device for creating pattern and tonal variety rather than a means of depicting real objects in nature.44

Ch'ien Hsüan's style in the Metropolitan Museum handscroll should be contrasted with that of one of his imitators as seen in _Pear Blossoms and Bird_ (Figure 8), which is a hanging scroll in the John B. Elliott Collection, on loan to The Art Museum, Princeton University.45 The composition and colors of this work make it similar to Ch'ien Hsüan's painting, but the underlying pictorial conceptions are different. In the Elliott scroll, leaves are foreshortened to turn threedimensionally in space; many end in long brown tips that extend aimlessly outward. Contours of the petals lack the cool precision of Ch'ien's drawing, and buds display none of the geometric clarity seen in the Metropolitan Museum scroll. Ch'ien's imitator successfully reproduces those aspects of the master's style closest to Southern Sung court painting—the elegant

44. Cahill, _Hills_, p. 21.
45. Fong et al., _Images of the Mind_, no. 8, p. 288.

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8. Anonymous, _Pear Blossoms and Bird_, ca. 1300. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, 91.5 × 50.7 cm. Princeton, N.J., John B. Elliott Collection, on loan to The Art Museum, Princeton University (photo: The Art Museum, Princeton University)
sweep of the branches, the colorful and alert bird, and the fine botanical detail—but he fails to grasp Ch’ien’s transformation of this tradition.

Artistic and poetic transformation of conventional subject matter are achieved with great eloquence in a handscroll by Ch’ien Hsüan excavated from the same tomb that yielded the Kao-tsung fan.⁴⁶ Like the Metropolitan Museum’s *Pear Blossoms*, this work combines painting and poetry on the theme of flowers. The scroll depicts three lotus blossoms and several large leaves, all seen as if from a frog’s-eye view, as they rise from a pond (Figure 9). Following the painting is Ch’ien’s quatrains:

> Softly waving above the jade pool: white lotus blossoms.  
> Going, coming, blue birds are tranquil and silent.  
> The hermit doesn’t drink, but leisurely carries his staff,  
> Merely recalling the pure fragrance of flowers in the moonlight.

Like most flowers, the lotus has several different meanings in Chinese culture. It was a favorite blossom of Ch’ü Yüan (343–227 B.C.), the virtuous poet who drowned himself after failing to win recognition from the king of Ch’ü. In Buddhist iconography it is the sacred flower of Sakyamuni.⁴⁷ The lotus gained further significance when the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Chou Tun-i (1017–73) composed an essay praising the flower as a symbol of purity.⁴⁸ In Ch’ien Hsüan’s poem and painting, however, the lotus becomes a vehicle for expression of the artist’s private ideals.

Ch’ien Hsüan’s quatrains introduce the flowers with imagery traditionally associated with a Taoist divinity, the Queen Mother of the West (Hsi wang mu). By the Yüan dynasty, however, the “jade pool” of her palace and the “blue birds” that announce her arrival had lost any specific connection with the mythic Queen Mother and were conventional expressions found in countless poems on the theme of the lotus.⁴⁹ In the second couplet Ch’ien’s poem takes an unexpected turn, and the flowers are suddenly transformed into objects of contemplation for a strolling hermit, or *yu-jen*. Interpreted in the context created by Ch’ien’s poem, the painted lotuses acquire new meaning: as symbols of eremitic life they allude to Ch’ien Hsüan’s deepest longings.

> Just as Ch’ien’s quatrains transform conventional

⁴⁷. In their colophons attached to Ch’ien Hsüan’s painting, Feng Tzu-chen and Chao Yen (active first quarter of the 14th century) mention the Buddhist monk Hui-yüan (334–417), founder of the White Lotus Society, who planted lotuses near the Tung-lin monastery on Mt. Lu. See ibid., p. 29.
⁴⁹. See ibid., p. 66.
poetic imagery to endow the lotuses with private meaning, his pictorial style transforms the painted flowers into something more than a depiction of real objects. Since Ch'ien's true subject is a state of mind, he eschews the sensuous realism of Southern Sung flower painting in favor of a more abstract style. In this painting the same cool schematization as seen in the Metropolitan Museum handscroll makes the lotuses appear to be timeless, unchanging archetypes of noble flowers, rather than ordinary plants destined to wither and decay. The blossoms are drawn in firm ink outlines and colored with light green washes; opened petals are outlined with taut, geometric contours too perfect for depiction of real plants (Figure 10). Folded leaves remain flat shapes.

The complex interaction of poetry and painting in this handscroll, which gives unexpected meaning to the theme of the lotus, corresponds to that found in Ch'ien's Pear Blossoms. There, poetic allusion to a doomed concubine and a painting style that makes the rain-washed blossoms appear distant and inaccessible evoke feelings of loss, regret, and nostalgia. We have seen that flower paintings such as Chao Meng-chien's ethereal Narcissi, which presage Ch'ien's art, were interpreted by i-min connoisseurs as symbols of profound political and cultural import. Ch'ien's pear blossoms demand equally subtle interpretation. Accordingly, Richard Barnhart sees in Ch'ien's painting and poem an evocation of China's sorrow under Mongol rule:

With the same careful irony in painting and poem, Ch'ien plays upon traditional imagery and symbolism, evoking a court beauty, abandoned and aging, weeping by a veranda. Now, dramatically, the beauty is Sung China, behind a locked gate, in darkness and rain—China in a Mongol prison.40

This reading of Ch'ien's handscroll gains further depth when the poem and painting are related to the vicissitudes of the artist's life. For Ch'ien, the scholar turned professional painter, the pure beauty of the pear blossoms was as remote as the closing years of the Southern Sung, when, as a promising young man in Hangchow, Ch'ien "scattered gold" to enjoy the capital's pleasures. The Mongol conquest and his sudden change of status and profession brought this idyllic period of his life to a painful and irrevocable close. Enriched by the artist's poetry, painted as a private vision of a lost world, Ch'ien Hsüan's pear blossoms evoke his sad dream of this golden past.

50. Barnhart, Peach Blossom Spring, p. 40.
(a)

五色鸚鵡來自嶺表養之禁苑
馴服可愛飛鳴自適往來於苑
園間方中春繁杏過閑翔舊舊
上雅詠容與自有一種態度縱
目覩之宛勝圖畫且做詩馬
天產華麗此異禽
遐陬來賈九重深
體合五色非凡質
惠吐□言更好音
飛禽似妙毛羽貴
徘徊如飽稻梁心
細膩紛紛而能雅
為賦新篇步武吟

(b)

白露才過催八月
繁枝紅葉共凄涼
黃花冷淡無人看
獨自傾心向夕陽

(c)

漣漪冷蝶宿花房
擁抱夢憶舊香
聞到寒梢尤可愛
此段必是漢宮艷

(d)

寂寞關山涕滿枝
洗脣猶帶舊風姿
閉門夜雨空愁思
不似金波飲暗時

(e)

玉容寂寞淚關千
梨花一枝春帶雨

(f)

蛾眉瑤池白玉花
往來青鳥靜與譚
幽人不飲偏携杖
但憶清香伴月華
### GLOSSARY

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P'ei-wen-ch'ai yung-wu-shih hsüan
P'eng Ting-ch'iu
Po Chü-i
Sekai no bijutsukan
Shan Kuo-ch'iang
Shih-ching
Su Shih
Sung Po-jen
Sung-shih chi-shih
Ta-kuan lu
Tan-ch'iu chi
T'ang-jen wan-shou chüeh-chü
Teng Ch'un

馬麟
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Yang Mei-tzu
Yang Wan-li
yeh-mei
Yü Chien-hua
yung-wu
yung-wu t'zu
Zusetsu Chügoku no rekishi

題錢邨畫花
層疊冰綵
圖繪琱鑑
梅原郁
王紳
王衛
為百花傳神
介紹陳人
百花園
文
文同
文物
吳升
楊貴妃
楊家子
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