

Deep Fragrance in the Valley of the Void
Ch'en Shun, 1483-1544
(Also called Ch'en Chun, Ch'en Tao-fu)
96.30.2



Deep Fragrance in the Valley of the Void: Gallery Label - Current

The son of an imperial censor, Ch'en Shun (who was also called Ch'en Ch'un and Ch'en Tao-fu) was regarded by many as the Ming dynasty's best classic flower painter, but he was also a landscape painter and leading calligrapher. A member of the Suchou Wu school and elite circle of Wen Cheng-ming (1470-1559), Ch'en was a follower of Shen Chou (1427-1509), founder of the Wu school. Ch'en painted many flower studies and the best are virtuoso ink performances.

Ch'en signed this painting with the seal Tao-fu. The work also bears three collections seals of the Ch'ien-lung emperor Kao-tsung (who reigned from

1736-1795). The inscription on the paper mount is by a relative of Pu-i, the last emperor of China. Typical of laudatory colophons, it reads:

Pai-yang shan-jen's [Ch'en Shun] expressionistic

flower paintings created a unique style:

The patriarch of flower paintings in the Ming

His brushwork is sparing and graceful,

succinct in form and rich in content;

Its meaning goes beyond the imagery,

these are true masterpieces.

P'u Sung-chuang, Spring 1983

The Ming dynasty replaced the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in 1368. During their rule a new capital city was built in Beijing and the Forbidden City was built within its walls. With 9,999 rooms it is still the largest palace complex in the world. No one was allowed to enter the Forbidden City without permission. The Ming period also saw China construct a defensive barrier against the outside world – the Great Wall. The Ming was a period of cultural restoration and expansion but was also a time when imperial power grew unchecked. The reestablishment of an indigenous Chinese ruling house led to the imposition of court-dictated styles in the arts. The imperial family often requested the services of the most accomplished artists. The personal styles of these academic painters and the artistic styles of the imperial family became the leading factors in the artistic trends of the day. Large-scale landscapes, flower-and-bird compositions, and figural narratives were particularly favored as images that would glorify the new dynasty and convey its benevolence, virtue, and majesty.

By the time the Yuan emperors were driven from China, and the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) was established-- *literati* painting was a firm tradition. Literati paintings were prized above academic paintings by most educated people, who understood their goal of revealing the inner character of the painter and communicating, through depictions of nature, man, or objects, virtues, strength of purpose, and sensitivity towards the conditions of human life.

So important had painting become, that some *literati* chose to focus their entire lives on mastery of the art, rather than pursuing government careers, even though their rulers were no longer alien to China. In the increasingly urban and educated society of Ming China, these men actually made considerable income from their work, either in the form of cash "gifts" or of other goods "traded" for their art. *Literati* circles at the highest levels often included among a group of close friends (who, acting as a mutual support group, were often a force to be reckoned with in local society and politics) painters who would inspire group activities the way that premier poets did. In fact, poetry and painting began increasingly to overlap. Often *literati* painters would present paintings to friends with the invitation to write on them poetry and short essays. In this way, paintings sometimes seem to become more group expressions than mere individual expressions of the painter, capturing an essential Confucian element of sociality.

As Ming court painting flourished, two schools of painting rose to prominence outside of the palace—the Zhe School and the Ziangxia School, a regional group of artists. Along with court painters, they dominated the artistic scene during the early and middle stages of the Ming dynasty. However, their favored status was challenged by the Wu School of painting. Wu, the ancient name of Suzhou, is a city in the Yangzi delta region famous for its beautiful landscape and highly developed culture. The *literati* flourished here during the Ming Dynasty (particularly after the end of political persecutions and high taxes of the early Ming period).

The Wu school explored the expressive calligraphic styles of Yuan scholar-painters emphasizing restraint and self-cultivation. The Yuan dynasty was a richly eclectic tradition and included regional Chinese traditions as well as foreign influences. For example, the fourteenth-century development of blue-and-white ware and cloisonné; enamelware arose, at least in part, in response to lively trade with the Islamic world, and many Ming examples continued to reflect strong West Asian influences. In Ming scholar-painting, as in calligraphy, each form is built up of a recognized set of brushstrokes, yet the execution of these forms is a unique personal performance. Valuing the presence of personality in a work over mere technical skill, the Ming scholar-painter aimed for mastery of performance rather than laborious craftsmanship.

BIOGRAPHY of the ARTIST:

Chen Chun was born into a wealthy family of scholar-officials in Suzhou and was fond of painting from childhood. His father was a close friend of Wen Zhengming, under whom he studied. Despite this, his paintings were not at all like his teacher's. Wen Zhengming once made a joke that Chen "had his own techniques and therefore not my student". To encourage students to outdo their teacher, the Chinese used the analogy, "Indigo blue is bluer than the indigo plant it is extracted from." The fact that Chen Chun did not strictly follow in the footsteps of his teacher explains why his art and his position in art history are greater than Wen's other pupils who were strictly imitative. Although he was admitted to the Imperial College, he refused to serve at court and voluntarily returned home to lead a solitary life.

Chen made significant contributions to "flower and bird" painting at a time when the Chinese use of monochrome in the bird and flower paintings developed to an unprecedented height. Chen was unwilling to be bound by tradition. He surpassed earlier artists in his lively use of the brush and his outpouring of emotions. His bird and flower paintings are mostly sketches of flowers and grasses growing in the courtyard and vegetables and fruit in the fields, which are given character and ideals that transcend the worldly. He also used many experimental techniques in his landscapes including texture strokes (cun) to show the shading and textures of rocks and mountains, rubbing with a very dry brush (ca), dotting (dian), adding a wash or tint of color (ran). He was also more versatile in his methods of depicting the size and layers of his landscape motifs. One of his daring experiments was to leave a blank space along the contour of trees to give a sense of transparency of sunlight after rain.

Chen learned calligraphy from Wen Zhengming. (Please note last picture.) As stated previously, he was associated with the Wu School of Literati painting.

Fan shaped painting was miniature and portable, easily accessible for the casual writing of poems and used as a form of communication.

THE NARCISSUS:

In ancient China, a legend about a poor but good man holds he was brought many cups of gold and wealth by this flower. Since the flower blooms in early spring, it has also become a symbol of Chinese New Year. Narcissus bulb carving and cultivation is even an art akin to Japanese bonsai. If the Narcissus blooms on Chinese New Year, it is said to bring extra wealth and good fortune throughout the year. Its sweet fragrances are highly

revered in Chinese culture.

QUESTIONS:

- Describe what you see in this painting. What color is it? What has the artist chosen to emphasize?
- How would you describe the brushstrokes?
- Why would the artist choose to produce a painting in the shape of a fan?



Mountains in the Clouds, Freer Gallery of Art, 1535, Chen Chun



The Album of Flowers and Birds-Crab, Chen Chun



Running Script Calligraphy, Wen Zhengming (1440-1559),
Chen Chun's Teacher, MIA, 98.120.2 (not currently on view)

Resources:

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Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting, Yale University Press, 1997

The Arts of China, Sullivan