

[120038 Celestial Fragrance, 2 wall panels EDIT jla 2/9/12]

## The Symbolism of Flowers and Birds in Chinese Painting

Flowers and birds are ubiquitous motifs in Chinese art. China's enduring fascination with these motifs arises not only from their natural beauty, but also from their cultural associations. Often they are suffused with poetic overtones or imbued with social and political allusions.

The symbolism of flowers and birds derives from observation of their natural qualities: their shapes, habits, and the seasons of the year in which they are most conspicuous. Other factors contributing to symbolic meanings include their medicinal properties; appearance in myth, legend, and literature; and in some instances, their associations with particular deities or famous people. Also significant are characters whose names sound like the names of certain flowers and birds.

The symbolism that accumulated around flower-and-bird motifs was determined, intellectually and practically, by the imperial court, with both Daoists and Buddhists adding different layers of meaning. The enthusiasm for these subjects was prompted not purely by the beauty of nature, but also by social, religious, and political motivations. The high culture of the literati played a key role in elaborating the symbolic contexts of these subjects, and in making them a focus for literature and art. Their cultural constructs were passed on to, and in many cases vigorously adopted by, other groups in society who in turn enshrined them in popular culture.

## Diverse Styles in Chinese Flower-and-Bird Painting

The history of Chinese flower-and-bird painting up to the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) represents a gradual, cumulative mastery of the artists' means of description and expression. During the Ming and Qing dynasties (14th–19th centuries), the genre of flower-and-bird painting was dominated by two groups of artists: the academy school and the scholar-painters.

The first group worked mainly with descriptive line and color on silk. These artists pursued a meticulous, naturalistic rendering, a dazzling surface, and a sensuous effect. They created flowering blossoms and birds that were highly admired for their lyrical intensity, naturalistic descriptions, or superb sensuality. The second group was the so-called scholar-amateur painters, who tended to favor a more expressive style. Their approach deliberately departed from naturalistic rendering and pursued impressionistic effects. In both subject matter and monochromatic palette, their works are the very emblem of high-minded cultivation and the epitome of scholarly taste.

In the Ming and Qing periods, Chinese flower-and-bird paintings can be viewed as an accumulation of distinctive Chinese painting techniques. One of the remarkable methods is the *mogu* or boneless method, which denotes an application of graduated washes of color without ink outlines. As flowers and plants are unique in their delicacy, radiance, and splendor, they easily lend themselves to representation in the *mogu* manner. Another technique is the *daoyun* or reverse-saturation method in which the flowers are left as areas of white against an ink-wash ground. This method emerged out of the painters' attempt to capture the brilliant whiteness of blossoms in moonlight, or in a winter setting.