

# Flower-and-Bird Painting

in Ancient China



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藏书章



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# Preface

The Chinese ancestors who invented the original pictographic Chinese characters also developed, with the passage of time, the unique traditional Chinese painting, which falls into three genres: flower-and-bird, landscape and figure drawing.

The flower-and-bird painting traces its history back to ancient times. It embraced many different schools and a large number of accomplished painters came to the fore. Archaeological data show that in the Neolithic Age, people already used “brushes” and natural pigments to draw flowers, birds and fish on pottery, which can be regarded as the embryo of China’s flower-and-bird painting. Abstract birds and animals were engraved on bronze ware of the Shang (1600–1046 BC) and Zhou (1046–256 BC) dynasties.

Archaeologists also found phoenixes drawn on silk belonging to the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) and *zhuque* (similar to phoenix, referring to the seven southern mansions of the 28 lunar mansions in ancient astronomy) on silk and lacquer ware of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 25). As late as the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) appeared relatively mature flower-and-bird paintings.

According to historical materials, during the Wei Kingdom (220–265), Jin Dynasty (265–420), Northern and Southern Dynasties (386–589) some painters began to specialize in flower-and-bird painting, marking that divorced from figure and landscape drawing, it entered Chinese art as an independent genre. The Tang

Dynasty (618–907) was a period in which the new genre reached maturity. With their technique being perfected day by day, more professional painters were expert at drawing flowers and birds. Both the Five Dynasties (907–960) and the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) saw further improvement of flower-and-bird painting, which entered its heyday actually in the sandwiched Song Dynasty (960–1279). The two dynasties of Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1616–1911) produced numerous flower-and-bird masters, making the genre known to the Western world.

Those painters depicted a great variety of subjects, including flowers, plants, birds, beasts, vegetables, fruits, mountain rocks, and fish, to express their feelings

and understanding of nature. In this way, flower-and-bird painting can be rated as a perfect combination of traditional Chinese culture and art.

Many subjects, known very well by the public, have commonly accepted implications. For instance, the peony stands for wealth and rank, orchid for elegance, lotus for self-preservation and moral integrity, chrysanthemum for honor in one's later years, plum for innate pride and iron determination, bamboo for tenacity and indomitableness, pomegranate for fertility, pine and crane for longevity, mandarin ducks for love, fish for abundance, and so on.

These exquisite paintings are highly aesthetic, with many being kept by private collectors and museums at home and



abroad. Some have become China's national treasures.

The technique of drawing ranges from *gong-bi* (fine, delicate brushwork), *xie-yi* (freehand brushwork) to the combination of the two. The paintings are mainly drawn on silk or paper in the form of horizontal scroll, vertically-hung scroll, album and fan. In terms of the use of color, there are five methods: colored painting, line-drawing, *shui-mo* painting (ink and wash), *po-mo* painting (splash-ink), and *mo-gu* or "boneless" painting (drawing without outline but with forms achieved by washes of ink and color). Many drawing skills like *shui-mo*, *po-mo* and *mo-gu* were created distinctively by Chinese painters, making flower-and-bird painting a unique art-form in the world.

China's traditional flower-and-bird







painting and Western painting have both similarities and differences.

Classical Western still-life painting gives priority to accurately reproducing an object's original shape. In other words, a sense of visual accuracy is prerequisite to judging a painter's skill and understanding his or her aesthetic conception.

The works of Chinese painters cover a relatively wider range of subjects. They paid more attention to the creation of *yi-jing* (artistic mood). Therefore, they sought after similarity in spirit rather than formal resemblance, and underscored the integrity and harmony of a tableau. As a result, the viewers can often feel a particular charm and appeal from these paintings.

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