

The Value and Relevance of Still-life Subjects in Flower-and-Bird Paintings of the Ming Dynasty Taking Chen Hongshou as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Ming Dynasty flower-and-bird paintings hold a significant position in the history of Chinese painting, with the Qinggong (Pure Offering) theme showcasing unique artistic charm and profound cultural connotations. This paper takes the renowned Ming Dynasty painter Chen Hongshou as an example, enumerating the application of the Qinggong theme in his figure and flower-and-bird paintings. The author argues that the Qinggong motif opened up a new perspective for flower-and-bird paintings, initiating a new direction for these paintings to directly depict life and express the realities of the era.

Keywords: *Qinggong, Theme, Chen Hongshou, Era.*

1. INTRODUCTION

"Chinese philosophy is a philosophy of life, and Chinese aesthetics is also aesthetics of life. The spirit of life conveyed in traditional culture permeates every aspect of popular cultural life. Therefore, it is appropriate to summarize the value of Qinggong as such: not only can traditional Chinese paintings be regarded as a pure offering of life, but also the spiritual world of the Chinese people can be seen as a pure offering of life, full of vitality and infinite energy." [1] Such a summary of the value of Qinggong is fitting.

2. THE QINGGONG THEME IN CHEN HONGSHOU'S WORKS

Chen Hongshou stands out among late Ming Dynasty painters, with his works possessing both the expressiveness and technical proficiency that are not commonly found in scholars' paintings, as well as a transcendent artistic style and a strong scholarly aura. Among the surviving works of Chen Hongshou, there are numerous scenes depicting the elegant lives of literati, as well as a considerable number of flower-and-bird paintings with Qinggong themes, making him a representative painter of the Ming Dynasty's exploration of Qinggong themes. Chen Hongshou applied

Qinggong motifs of various categories and materials in his figure and flower-and-bird paintings, using them to express thoughts and convey emotions, presenting us with a unique pictorial appearance. Behind each Qinggong item in his paintings lie a rich symbolism and a strong humanistic flavor. Chen Hongshou observed with a unique perspective the various minor things in life, and beneath his integrity and dignity, there was a particularly sentimental and sensitive inner world. Through the emotional exchange and ideological collision between people and Qinggong, he achieved spiritual satisfaction and transcendence of secular life. In Chen Hongshou's spiritual garden, the items depicted in his paintings, such as vases, Buddha statues, ancient musical instruments, incense burners, writing brushes, inkstones, bronze mirrors, and pottery, seem to have come to life, possessing noble personal characteristics, providing viewers with endless reverie and gaining widespread recognition among literati.

2.1 The Qinggong Theme in Chen Hongshou's Figure Paintings

In Chen Hongshou's figure paintings, themes such as tea tasting, drinking, incense burning, and quiet reading are quite common, with a large number of Qinggong items depicted, such as

stationery, vases with flowers and incense burners, teapots and cups, and ancient artifacts. These Qinggong items, under Chen Hongshou's brush, are simple yet elegant, echoing the figures' images and appropriately conveying the social background and cultural identity of the characters, playing a significant role in setting the realm and atmosphere of the painting. Therefore, the Qinggong items in the painting, together with the figures, display a unique charm that is not bound by convention.

Chen Hongshou's figure paintings convey emotions and express thoughts through the emotional exchange between people and Qinggong, leading viewers to endless reverie. In Chen Hongshou's paintings, items such as writing brushes, brush washers, ink drops, paperweights, dust brushes, and Ruyi (a traditional Chinese scepter) are used to complement and set off the free and easy, carefree demeanor of literati and ink guests; incense burning and vase offerings are often used to depict scenes of Zen meditation and enlightenment; in paintings with themes of drinking and tea tasting, Chen Hongshou is adept at discovering beauty in

places others overlook, finding a quiet and elegant path in painting. Chen Hongshou has a unique way of depicting celadon shards, meticulously drawing the cracks to express the simple elegance of the celadon's glaze, exploring the charm within the depiction of celadon. Additionally, Chen Hongshou is keen on depicting flower vessels, whether it be translucent glass bottles, antique bronze bottles, or elegant celadon bottles, in his brush, they are either light, heavy, or quiet, all imbued with infinite affection.

In Chen Hongshou's "Tea Tasting Scroll" ("Figure 1"), two people sit facing each other with raised cups, with an ancient musical instrument on the stone table in the middle, accompanied by tea snacks. The most prominent feature is a white lotus blooming in a vase on the right. Whether leaning against the stone or sitting on a banana leaf, the two people engaged in tea tasting and conversation appear simple and innocent, with a natural charm. Chen Hongshou skillfully uses Qinggong to convey a reclusive demeanor.



Figure 1 "Tea Tasting Scroll", Vertical Scroll Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk Thread Color, 75*53cm.

"Portrait of Lai Luzhi" ("Figure 2" left) depicts Lai Luzhi sitting beside a peculiar stone with a base, with a square vase standing behind the figure's left side, holding two chrysanthemums, one tall and one short, one white and one red, creating an interesting contrast. To the right of the figure, there are two large volumes of thread-bound books with 函套, and behind the books, there is a bronze ancient artifact. These few items succinctly and clearly display Lai Luzhi's character as a person who loves books and

antiquities, living in seclusion from the world, making people yearn for such a life.

"Portrait of Lady Lai Luzhi" ("Figure 2" right) depicts an ancient and simple bronze vase on one side, holding elegant white plum blossoms, with two simple porcelain cups with open cracks on a tea tray, while on the other side, it depicts scissors and thread used in daily civilian life. Chen Hongshou presents both the ancient and elegant white plum Qinggong, symbolizing nobility, and the utensils

used in the daily life of the Ming Dynasty common people within the same frame, presenting the literati's life in a market state. The contrast between elegance and vulgarity shows a corner of Lady Lai Luzhi's daily life scene, allowing us to appreciate

the era in which she lived, a state of life where ancient objects are closely integrated with daily life, and also reflects the distinct secular characteristics shown in Chen Hongshou's paintings, making the figures under his brush full of warmth.



Figure 2 "Portrait of Lai Luzhi", Vertical Scroll Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk Thread Color, 102.5×45.5cm. (Left). "Portrait of Lady Lai Luzhi" Vertical Scroll Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk Thread Color, 102.5×45.5cm. (Right)

"Xiao Chuang You Ji" says: "Incense makes one secluded, wine makes one distant, tea makes one refreshed, music makes one silent, chess makes one leisurely, sword makes one chivalrous, staff makes one light, duster makes one elegant, moon makes one clear, bamboo makes one cold, flowers make one charming, stones make one witty, snow makes one open, monks make one indifferent, meditation mats make one wild, beauties make one compassionate, landscapes make one marvel, books and history make one knowledgeable, and bronze vessels make one ancient." [2] This is the best interpretation of the Qingong theme in Chen Hongshou's works.

2.2 The Qingong Theme in Chen Hongshou's Flower-and-Bird Paintings

Chen Hongshou's flower-and-bird paintings are elegant and ancient, forming a unique style, and his painting style itself has already led the spiritual pursuits of literati in the Ming Dynasty. In his flower-and-bird paintings, there is a category of Qingong works with flowers and flower arrangements as the theme, which are the subjects that Chen Hongshou loved all his life. These works usually use glass bottles, copper bottles, and porcelain bottles as vases, setting off the purity of

the flower branches. Chen Hongshou's bottle offerings have a unique appearance in the flower-and-bird paintings of the late Ming Dynasty, leaving a brilliant stroke in the history of flower-and-bird paintings.

In "Copper Vase Rose" ("Figure 3"), Chen Hongshou depicts two pink roses inserted in a relief copper vase. "Copper Vase White Chrysanthemum" ("Figure 4") has two blooming white chrysanthemums inserted in a black copper vase. These two vase offerings have relatively small vases, which perfectly set off the flower heads in the vase, like children with a naive and lovable look. "Flower Album No. 7" ("Figure 5") depicts a short white vase in the foreground, holding white chrysanthemums, and a copper vase twice as tall in the background, which just sets off the white chrysanthemums and white vase in the foreground. The copper vase holds two pink roses, one tall and one short, standing elegantly and brilliantly, echoing the two white chrysanthemums in front. Interestingly, the composition of the white vase with white chrysanthemums in "Flower Album No. 7" is almost identical to that in "Copper Vase White Chrysanthemum," except for the difference in vase color and the direction of the flower arrangement. This repetition of the same subject, even in the same posture, is quite common in Chen Hongshou's works. On one hand, it demonstrates the artist's

persistent depiction of his favorite subjects, treating his works like a refined Qinggong object to be savored repeatedly. On the other hand, with the commercialization of paintings, it is possible that these vase-themed works became orders that the artist reproduced multiple times. However, these aspects are no longer important. What matters is that Chen Hongshou has left us with numerous elegant and ancient vase-themed works, firmly imprinting this significant Qinggong theme in the history of flower-and-bird paintings.



Figure 3 "Flower and Bird Album VI - Copper Vase Rose" Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk, colored, ten sections opened.



Figure 4 "Flower and Bird Album VIII - Copper Vase White Chrysanthemum" Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk, colored, ten sections opened.



Figure 5 "Flower Album - No. 7" Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk, colored, eight sections opened.

In "Ice Pot Autumn Colors" ("Figure 6"), there are two vases, one deep and one light, one large and one small. The large glass vase, with its transparent texture, subtly reveals the branches within, while a section of blue cloth adorns the vase body, preventing it from appearing too light and adding an air of dignity and elegance. Inside the large vase, a tall branch and two autumn flowers are arranged; the autumn leaves on the branch are bright red, with glistening dewdrops, and the autumn grass resembles cockscomb, with drooping leaves and some withered spots. In terms of floral materials, they are far from perfect, yet it is this imperfection that gives them a mottled beauty. The highlight within the vase is two white wild chrysanthemum flowers, one tall and one short, both clusters blooming lively, showing an extremely gorgeous contrast in both color and texture. Beside it, the small vase contains a cluster of the same wild chrysanthemums, echoing the height of those in the large vase, and two white roses, one open and one partially hidden, add a touch of vitality. In Chen Hongshou's vase offerings, "Ice Pot Autumn Colors" displays an idyllic countryside scene, conveying a sense of retreat and seclusion through the pure offerings.

In "Qinggong Tu" ("Figure 7"), a tall, rust-streaked ancient vase is prominently featured, with white plum and rose branches extending diagonally upward to the right. Behind the vase, half of a water vessel with a dragon-head handle and lotus petal decorations is visible, containing clear and bright water, suggesting its use as an inkstone water container for the scholar's studio. The presence of this handle within the vessel confirms the theme of the painting as a scholarly Qinggong arrangement.

"He Ping Cheng Rui Tu" ("Figure 8") features lotus, a vase, Ganoderma lucidum (Reishi

mushroom), and artificial rocks, with the explicit meaning of "peace presenting auspiciousness." At the forefront of the composition is a low, earthenware pot containing a small artificial rock and the *Ganoderma lucidum*, symbolizing good fortune. Behind this, a tall, antique copper vase stands, with two elegant lotus flowers gracefully arranged within, complemented by a large lotus leaf. A cluster of assorted aquatic and terrestrial flowers embraces the vase's opening, creating a rich and full scene that exudes elegance and auspiciousness. Such a vase arrangement, whether used for New Year celebrations or to adorn a study, demonstrates the owner's refined taste and sophistication.



Figure 6 "Ice Pot Autumn Colors" Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk, colored, dimensions unknown, collection of the British Museum, UK.



Figure 7 "Qingong Tu" Ming Dynasty Chen Hongshou Silk, colored, dimensions unknown, private collection.



Figure 8 "Peace rui" Ming Chen Hongshou silk book color 133*50.7cm Cheng Shifa old collection.

In Chen Hongshou's vase offerings, he is solely concerned with expressing his own world, where rusted vases seem to perpetually bloom with elegant flowers such as plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, and lotuses, which are extraordinary and reflective of his innermost feelings, filled with the painter's boundless affection and anticipation. Chen Hongshou's

paintings are a microcosm of the "revivalist trend" in late Ming Dynasty, where his canvases are populated with a multitude of ancient artifacts, rusted and dreamlike. In the serene spaces of his paintings, you might discover the melodious sound of a guqin (a traditional Chinese musical instrument), the rising smoke from an incense burner, and the vibrant energy of vase flowers on a table... The ancient and lofty realm he creates is not about the past, but rather the interweaving of reality and fiction, the overlap of antiquity and modernity.

Chen Hongshou's insights are unique and unparalleled. To the ordinary person, the world he depicts may seem bizarre and strange, but for an artist, is there anything more important than being true to the voice within and expressing one's views on people and objects through a singular language of painting? In Chen Hongshou's works, every piece of Qinggong (pure offering) is a segment of history sealed within the artwork, awaiting discovery and interpretation by those who view it.

3. THE VALUE AND CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QINGGONG THEME IN MING DYNASTY FLOWER-AND-BIRD PAINTINGS

Apart from Chen Hongshou, other painters of the Ming Dynasty also depicted and expressed the theme of Qinggong in their works, though not as extensively and deeply as Chen Hongshou did. Nevertheless, there is a considerable number of independent flower-and-bird paintings that focus on Qinggong as the main subject, imbued with a strong scholarly sentiment and metaphorical significance. The other flower-and-bird paintings themed around Qinggong can be mainly divided into two categories:

One category continues the theme of "New Year's Qinggong" from previous dynasties, primarily consisting of auspicious and symbolic flower-and-bird paintings. Works such as Bian Wenjin's "New Year's Painting" ("Figure 9"), Zhou Zhimian's "New Year's Qinggong" ("Figure 10"), and Ma Shouzhen's "New Year's Painting" ("Figure 11") are examples of this tradition.

The other category is dedicated to expressing the literati's refined tastes, focusing on the depiction of fruits, vegetables, flower arrangements, rocks,

and scholarly objects of contemplation in flower-and-bird paintings. Works such as Sun Kehong's "Cloud Window Qingwan Tu" ("Figure 12") and "Painted Orchid Pot," Lan Ying's "Strange Stone Tu" and "Lake Stone Tu," and Xiang Shengmu's "Qin Spring Tu" are examples of this genre. Further elaboration is not necessary here.



Figure 9 "New Year's Picture" Scroll (Attributed to Ming Dynasty Bian Wenjin Paper, colored 108×46.1cm.



Figure 10 "New Year's Qinggong Picture" Ming Dynasty Zhou Zhimian Paper, colored 89×56cm Private collection.



Figure 11 "New Year's Picture" Ming Dynasty Ma Shouzhen Paper, colored 41.3×102.5cm Private collection.



Figure 12 "Cloud Window Qingwan Picture" Scroll (Partial) Ming Dynasty Sun Kehong Paper, colored

Behind the Qinggong theme, there is a transformation of space; flower-and-bird paintings begin to depict subjects that are detached from their natural environments, with elements originally part of natural themes taking on a more scholarly and humanistic sentiment. These paintings shift their focus directly to people and their lives, marking a transition from nature-centric to human and living environment-centric themes. This shift is not merely a change in artistic expression or a simple conversion of artistic techniques; it represents a shift in the subject matter of painting from natural settings to human habitats. The metaphorical and allusive techniques of flower-and-bird painting give way to direct depiction and expression of the realities of the era.

The new perspective opened up by the Qinggong motif in flower-and-bird paintings is well worth our careful contemplation today. The author reflects on the value and contemporary significance

of the Qinggong theme in Ming Dynasty flower-and-bird paintings as follows:

3.1 Major Expansion in Themes and Directions of Flower-and-Bird Painting

The Qinggong theme has played a crucial role in expanding the subject matter of flower-and-bird painting. It has transitioned the genre from depicting natural scenery and objects in a pure naturalistic manner to representing man-made artifacts with unique cultural aesthetics. This shift has objectively enriched the representational range and expressiveness of flower-and-bird painting. As a result, there has been a surge in works featuring artifacts, man-made environments, and living environments from different eras, which has directly influenced the themes and concepts expressed in later flower-and-bird paintings.

Modern flower-and-bird paintings often focus on materials and environments with specific humanistic meanings, which can be seen as a contemporary continuation of the direction in which the Qinggong theme has expanded the subject matter of flower-and-bird painting.

3.2 Transformation of Preset Spatial Scenes and Aesthetic Objects

Behind the Qinggong theme in flower-and-bird painting lays a transformation of space, shifting the preset spatial scenes from pure "natural spaces" to "man-made spaces" with human activity traces. This shift has moved the focus from natural subjects to human life and living environments, marking a transition from naturalistic representations to depictions of human habitats. This transformation is not merely a change in artistic expression or a simple conversion of artistic techniques; it represents a shift from the metaphorical and allusive techniques of flower-and-bird painting to a direct depiction and expression of the realities of the era. The new perspective opened by the Qinggong theme in flower-and-bird painting is well worth our careful contemplation today.

3.3 Paying Attention to the Times, and the People Behind the Pictures

The natural subjects of flower-and-bird painting carry various symbolic meanings, allowing the genre to express human sentiments and thoughts in a subtle and graceful manner through the cultural symbolism of plants and animals. However, this indirect mode of expression sometimes lacks directness and force in relation to the era.

The rise of the Qinggong theme became a fashion of the Ming Dynasty, directly depicting artifacts and scenes with distinct temporal information, all pointing towards a specific cultural, aesthetic, and social group—the literati. By directly depicting the literati as shadows and special identity markers, the Qinggong theme has given flower-and-bird painting a more direct mode of expression. The literati behind the Qinggong theme have become the main subjects conveying emotions and aesthetics in the paintings, opening a new direction for flower-and-bird painting in directly expressing the era and human groups. This is an important transition that has had a profound impact on the development of Chinese painting and remains inspiring to this day.

4. CONCLTHEYION

The Qinggong theme is not merely a question of painting subjects and styles; it possesses many overlooked values and meanings. Contemplation of these issues offers much inspiration for our contemporary creation and exploration in flower-and-bird painting.

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