



Zhu Da / Bada Shanren, Qing dynasty, 1626–1705, *Flowers on a River* (detail), 1697. Ink on paper, handscroll. Tianjin Museum

Santa Barbara Museum of Art Presents
Flowers on a River:
The Art of Chinese Flower-and-Bird Painting, 1368–1911
Masterworks from Tianjin Museum and Changzhou Museum

Featuring the U.S. premier display of the entire painted portion
of the handscroll by Bada Shanren

On View October 15, 2023 – January 14, 2024

November 8, 2023 — Showcasing masterpieces of Chinese painting spanning 500 years, *Flowers on a River: The Art of Chinese Flower-and-Bird Painting, 1368–1911, Masterworks from Tianjin Museum and Changzhou Museum* marks the first historical examination of the much-appreciated but understudied genre of flower-and-bird painting. It is also the first showing of works traveling from China to the United States since the onset of the pandemic. The exhibition premiered at the China Institute Gallery in New York earlier this year, and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) is the presentation's second and final venue in the U.S. SBMA offers a reduced presentation to focus on some of the most important works in the original exhibition, featuring 21 individual works and 17 artists, and highlighting the U.S. premier showing of the entire 40+ foot-long handscroll painting, *Flowers on a River* (1697) by the eminent and enigmatic artist Zhu Da, better known as Bada Shanren (1626–1705).

This exhibition includes hanging scrolls, handscrolls, and albums from the 15th to early 20th centuries (Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911)). Presented in three sections: Court Artists and the Imperial Taste, Literati and Individual Expression, and Flower-and-Bird Painting in Daily Life, the presentation explores the natural world in terms of human experience, reflecting the deeply-rooted Chinese concept of “humanity in harmony with nature.” Most of the paintings are selected from the prestigious national Tianjin Museum in northeastern China. The remaining pieces come from the Changzhou City Museum in southern China, where a distinct regional style developed and dominated from the late 17th century onwards.

One of the most important highlights in the exhibition is the monochromatic handscroll painting, *Flowers on a River*, by Bada Shanren. Painted at the age of 72, the scroll is a masterpiece of Bada's autobiographical account from Ming Prince to monk painter expressed through lotus flowers by the water and his final resolve through orchids, bamboo, rocks, and waterfalls in landscape. Lotuses are symbols of purity in both the Buddhist and secular worlds. Bada was known for his unconventional painting techniques, often characterized by bold brushwork and ink splattering. This handscroll exemplifies his distinctive style, which combines a free-spirited approach with a deep understanding of classical Chinese painting. The Santa Barbara Museum of Art will be the only U.S. venue that enables visitors to view the entire painted portion of the handscroll.



Image: Lü Ji, Ming Dynasty, 1488–1505, *Eagles and Magpies in Snow*. Silk, hanging scroll. Tianjin Museum.

One of the earliest works is the 15th-century *Eagles and Magpies in Snow* painted by the great Ming court artist, Lü Ji (c. 1439–1505) whose flower-bird paintings set a new aesthetic standard for the “academy” style. The landscape setting is rendered boldly with powerful “axe-cut” brushstrokes defining the rocks and freehand ink and washes for the pine while the birds are rendered with fine details observed from nature. Two eagles perched on high rockeries and the four magpies below are carefully positioned to suggest a courtly audience by the emperor.

The Ming and Qing periods also saw the rise of women artists who excelled in flower-and-bird painting, and the exhibition includes the work of one of the most acclaimed, Yun Bing. Born into a family of artists in the city of Changzhou during the Qing dynasty, she rose to prominence through the legacies of her father and grandfather and was celebrated as an “absolute talent.”



Image: Yun Bing, Qing dynasty, active first half of the 18th century, female artist, *Hundred Flowers* (detail). Ink and color on silk, handscroll. Tianjin Museum.

The flower-and-bird paintings also examine the intimate relationship between nature and the common man, revealing coded imagery that communicates good wishes and aspirations in daily lives. Through pictorial puns or rebuses, flower paintings provide the most colorful offerings of auspicious sayings which became

increasingly popular from the late Ming dynasty onwards. Sun Di’s late 17th- century painting of *Peony, Magnolia and Begonia*, is in fact a colorful painting representing a “Grand Hall of Splendid Wealth,” in which the peony is understood as affluence and abundance while the magnolia shares the same pronunciation as “jade” and begonia puns with “grand hall.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated bilingual catalogue featuring newly commissioned scholarly essays and detailed entries. A series of related events are planned at SBMA in association with the exhibition. More information can be found at www.sbma.net.

Flowers on a River is curated by Willow Weilan Hai, China Institute Gallery and guest co-curators Chen Zhuo, former Director of Tianjin Museum; Lin Jian, Director, Changzhou Museum; and David Ake Sensabaugh former Ruth and Bruce Dayton Curator of Asian Art, Yale University Art Gallery and organized by the China Institute Gallery, Tianjin Museum and Changzhou Museum.

The exhibition in Santa Barbara is made possible through the generosity of SBMA Women’s Board, Antoinette Gump Amorteguy and Dr. Albert Amorteguy, Natalia and Michael Howe, Norman A. Kurland and Deborah A. David, Siri and Bob Marshall, City of Santa Barbara Events and Festivals Grant Program, and SBMA Friends of Asian Art, with additional support from Capital Group, Inc. Oriental Lecture Fund, Lady Dasher Sojo Fund, and WT Family Fund.

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is one of the finest museums on the West coast and is celebrated for the superb quality of its permanent collection. Its mission is to integrate art into the lives of people through internationally recognized exhibitions and special programs, as well as the thoughtful presentation of its permanent collection.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA. Open Tuesday – Sunday 11 am to 5 pm, Free Thursday Evenings 5 to 8 pm 805.963.4364 www.sbma.net



Image: Sun Di, Qing dynasty, Active late 17th century, *Peony, Magnolia, and Begonia* (detail). Ink and color on silk. Tianjin Museum.