

Case 8: *Winter Birds*



Why is this fan so *cold*?

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Introduction

This week's artwork is the *Winter Birds*, a round fan painting attributed to the Southern Song court painter Liang Kai (ca.1200). The composition depicts birds (jackdaws) nestling around a barren old plum tree on a wintery shore, while a white crane approaches from the distant sky (Fig. 1). Although the general peacefulness and darker tone of the painting does not beg for immediate attention of the eyes, it *is* trying to convey a message. In other words, behind all the quietness of the scene, there is a "voice" that is trying to speak to us. But how is this done in a thirteenth century Chinese painting like the *Winter Birds*? And how can we "hear" it?

In this case study, we will reverse-engineer the making of the *Winter Birds*, breaking it down to its pictorial conventions, stylistic features, and cultural codes. In doing so, we will explore how these elements are artfully appropriated and reconfigured in the composition to orchestrate meanings for its contemporary viewers.



Figure 1. Attributed to Liang Kai (ca.1200). *Winter Birds*. Fan painting mounted as album leaf. Harvard Art Museums.

Warming Up

Try to put into words what you see in this image:

- What kind of birds are there?
- Where are they located?
- How would you describe the colors and painting surface the artists use?
- What kind of mood does it leave with you?

Problem Set

- What does cold have anything to do with this painting?
- How does *Winter Birds* fit in with the popular modes of painting from its time?
- What kinds of cultural and literary contexts help us understand *Winter Birds*?
- Do you see any recurring themes present here that carry over from our previous case? If not, how is it different from the previous case?

Frameworks of the *Winter Birds*: Pictorial Conventions

As the old Chinese saying goes, “Small as a sparrow is, it is complete with the Five Vital Organs.” Despite the small size of *Winter Birds* (9 × 10 inches), the painting synthesizes two kinds of stock-in-trade pictorial conventions during the Song dynasty: “small scene” landscape painting and bird-and-flower painting.

Small Scene Landscape

The early part of the Song dynasty witnessed the rise of monumental landscape paintings that took on larger-than-life significances. A representative example of the monumental landscape is Guo Xi’s (ca.1020–90) iconic *Early Spring* (Fig. 2). Dated 1072, the sizable painting (62.32 × 42.56 inches) depicts a powerful peak in the center emerging from behind the spring morning mist and penetrating into the sky. Amid the falling waterfalls and soaring trees, pavilions and halls are tucked deep in the mountain ridges, while tiny human figures are snuck onto the shore, whose rather insignificant scale only contrasts the dominant, dizzying heights of the mountains. As Guo himself writes, besides capturing the appearances of the natural world, the purpose of the landscape painting is to glorify the imperial order through capturing the earthly form of cosmic order.¹ In other words, the landscape painting was meant to be large,

¹ Richard Barnhart et.al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 118-19.

monumental, and cosmic, designed to impress and inspire awe in its viewers for the natural and the imperial order.

While monumental landscape paintings remained popular throughout the Song, landscape painting as a genre also developed in another direction, turning to depict smaller and more close-up scenes. An early stage of this trend is Zhao Lingrang's (late 11th–early 12th c.) *Whiling Away the Summer by a Lakeside Retreat* (Fig. 3). Dated 1100, the painting does not depict large mountain peaks but focuses on a closer view of a misty band of river shore. In effect, it is as if we cropped a riverbank section from one of the monumental landscape and zoomed in to it. By the early thirteenth century around the *Winter Birds*' time, "small scene" had matured as an independent and popular landscape genre. As we see in Ma Yuan's (1160–1225) small scene *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring* (Fig. 4), the monumental mountain peaks have been reduced to fading ranges in the left background, yielding to a cornered, close-up depiction of the contemplative figure and his surroundings in the foreground. The result of this shift is the fading away of the monumental and cosmic ambition, replaced by a heightened interest in the human subjectivity in the painting that gives more room for expression of inner voices. Our *Winter Birds* belongs to the "small scene" landscape category. In fact, it shares many compositional similarities with Ma Yuan's *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring* such as the diagonal, cornered foreground and the hazy distant background that suggests extension of landscape space beyond, which are common characteristics of the small scenes of this period.

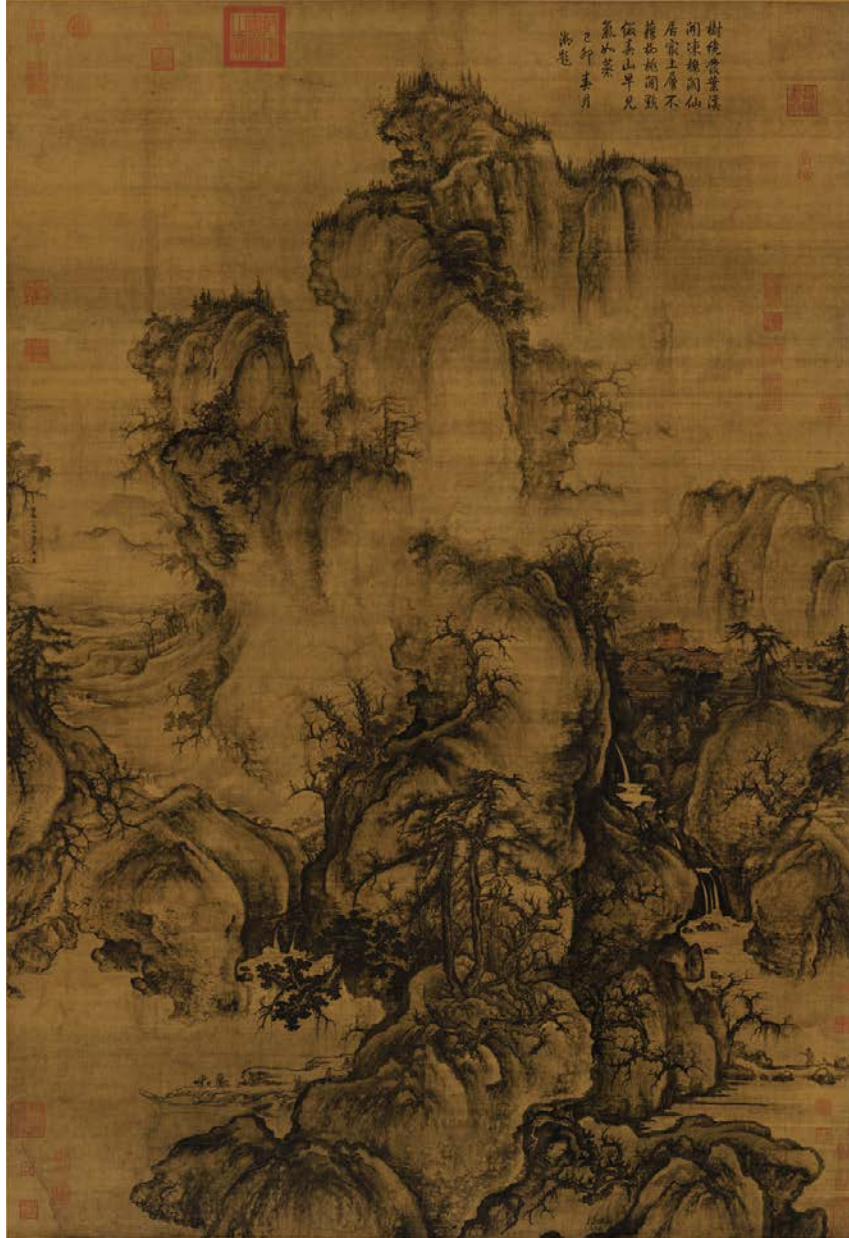


Figure 2. Guo Xi (ca.1020–90). *Early Spring*. Hanging scroll. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Figure 3. Zhao Lingrang (late 11th c–early 12th c.). Section of *Whiling Away the Summer by a Lakeside Retreat*. Hand scroll. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 4. Ma Yuan (1160–1225). *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring*. Album leaf. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Bird-and-Flower Painting: The “Rich and Aristocratic” and the “Rustic and Free”

Besides the small scene landscape, the *Winter Birds* registers another pictorial convention in Chinese painting called the “bird-and-flower,” which includes flowers, birds, fish, and insects in its genre. Although birds and flowers are popular motifs in Chinese art throughout history, “bird-and-flower painting” as a separate genre did not emerge until the end of the Five dynasties period (907–960). Two painters are of particular importance to the founding of the genre: Huang Quan (903–965) and Xu Xi (d. before 975). Interestingly, while both painters worked in the court, their artistic styles differed drastically and represented two kinds of opposite taste: the courtly and the rustic.

Huang Quan’s style emphasized realism. Much like how Durer created his nature studies, Huang starts by closely studying the life subjects and precisely drawing out their contours. He then fleshes them out with carefully applied layers of texturing strokes and color within the contour lines. This mode of painting resulted in a high degree of verisimilitude as we see in his *Sketches of Birds and Insects* in the Palace Museum, Beijing (Fig. 5), in which Huang captures the fleeting, momentary appearance of the birds, insects, and turtles with convincing proportion, volume, and vivid color. Xu Xi, on the other hand, took a more spontaneous approach with freer and bolder use of brushstrokes and ink wash in his painting. Although no painting by Xu survives today, Xu was known for the *mogu* “boneless” style of painting, which only used color or ink wash to paint the subject without drawing the outline or structure first. This method produced an effect that was more suggestive than realistic.² In the words of the eleventh century art critic Guo Ruoxu (active 1070s), “the Huangs [Huang Quan and his sons] were rich and aristocratic [*fugui*]; Xu Xi was rustic and free [*yeyi*].”³

In any case, by the later part of the Song dynasty the two names have become stylistic labels that stood for two kinds of values: Huang’s realistic and opulent mode became associated with material wealth and worldly success, and was evidently dominant in the court as we can identify its lasting influence in later Song court paintings such as the *Loquats and Mountain Bird* (Fig. 6); Xu Xi’s style, which embraced spontaneity and easiness, became more associated with the spiritual serenity of a retired scholar in recluse that was in much resonance with the *danbo* “austere and bland” aesthetic in currency during the Song.⁴

Put on the “Huang-Xu” scale of Song dynasty bird-and-flower painting, the *Winter Birds* clearly leans towards the side of Xu-style rusticity. This is not only evident from

² For an introduction of Huang and Xu’s painting styles, please see Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years*, 91-92.

³ Translation quoted from Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Scholar-Painting Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99.

⁴ *Ibid.*

the general lack of color in the painting, as it is predominantly painted with monochrome ink, but also from his sketchy brushstrokes in depicting the birds, rocks, etc. In addition, the barren tree branches are constructed with heavy and wet ink only, much in resonance with Xu's "boneless" style, diverting further away from the Huang mode of painting that emphasize modeling and contours. In this sense, the *Winter Birds* carries values of easiness, spontaneity and a degree of un-conforming individualism that is more akin to the rustic and free mode of bird-and-flower painting in the Song dynasty.



Figure 5. Huang Quan (903–965). *Sketches of Birds and Insects*. Hand scroll. Palace Museum, Beijing



Figure 6. *Loquats and Mountain Bird*. 13th c. Album leaf. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Voice and Voice-Recognition: Cultural Practice of Communicating Through Painting in the Song Dynasty

The fact that the *Winter Birds* combines small scene landscape with the rustic bird-and-flower painting suggests that it was a subjective space for expressing thoughts. But what meaning is it trying to convey to the audience? In order to understand the voice inside the *Winter Birds*, we need to first take a brief look at *how* meanings are constructed in paintings and communicated to its contemporary viewers at the time. In fact, in the Song dynasty there was a sophisticated system of “communication through painting” that was closely aligned with literary practices among the elite at the time.

The relationship between painting and literary practices is perhaps best summarized in the words of the illustrious Northern Song scholar-official Su Shi (1037–1101) in his comment on a painting by the Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei (699–759): “There is painting within poetry, and poetry within painting”. As poetry had been regarded as the highest form of art and mode of self-expression in the Confucian tradition, Su’s comment points to the eleventh century understanding of painting’s equal potential with painting as a mode of communication for the educated. In this context, paintings in the Song often drew on a body of literary allusions shared among the educated class. This meant that painters were able to “compose” paintings like poems by assembling a series of visual tropes commonly seen in poetry. An example of this is Zhao Mengjian’s (1199–1295) famous fan painting *Three Friends of Winter* in the Shanghai Museum (Fig. 7). Here, the overlapping branches of the Three Friends—pine, bamboo, and blossoming plum—are long-standing symbols in the literary tradition for the Confucian virtue of maintaining one’s integrity in difficult times, as the three were known for their capability to endure the harshness of winter.⁵ Thus this painting of three plants is transformed into a commentary on fortitude and spiritual purity. And in this way, the “vocabulary” of visual codes merged with that of literary codes, which the educated men in the Song dynasty could draw on to spell out a particular message or “voice” in a painting and then expect the viewers to recognize and comprehend it by way of their shared knowledge in literary allusions. It is much the same with how a western audience would recognize St. Luke immediately when seeing a male painting a portrait of Mary and Baby Jesus based on his or her knowledge of the episode in the bible.

An interesting fact to note here is that Zhao’s *Three Friends of Winter* is also painted on a fan, just like the *Winter Birds*. This choice of format further speaks to the painting’s role as a medium of communication, especially for the highly educated scholar-officials. In the Song, paintings were frequently circulated among scholar-officials for viewing and commentating (think about Zhang Cheng’s colophon on *In the Palace*), and played an important role as an unofficial channel of communication, as the messages encoded in the painting were not immediately transparent and required a process of educated decoding.

⁵ Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years*, 140.

Fan paintings were particularly favored for this purpose, as they were often small, easily circulated and suitable for the casual writing of poems and couplets.⁶

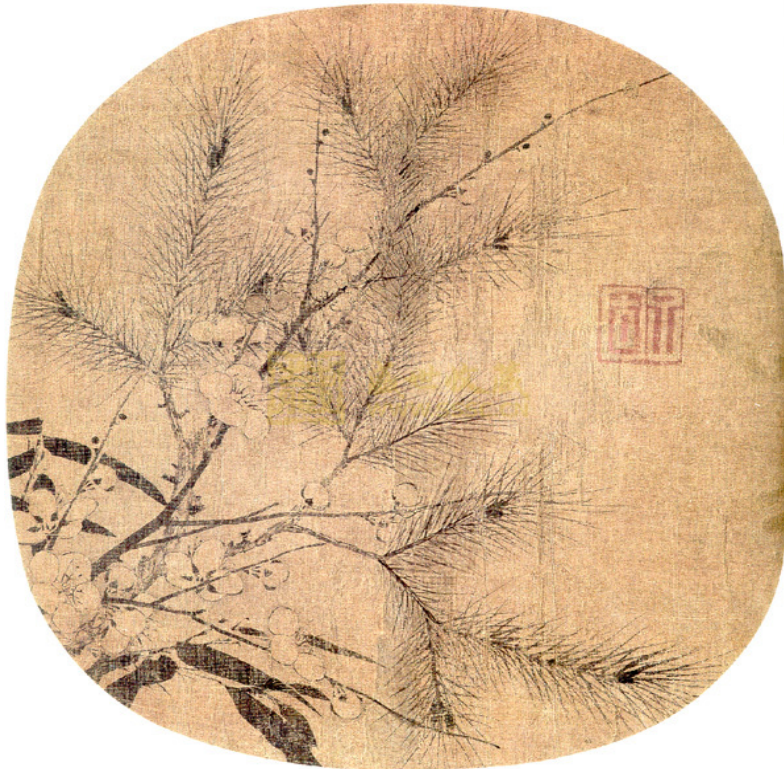


Figure 7. Zhao Mengjian (1199–1295). *Three Friends of Winter*. Fan painted mounted as album leaf. Shanghai Museum.

Fan: Painting vs Image-bearing Object

Although *Winter Birds* is now mounted on a flat, square canvas, its circular format implies that its previous life was probably a fan. The crucial evidence that proves the painting to have been mounted on a practical utensil is a vertical wrinkle in the center, darkened color around the edges, and slightly abraded surface at the bottom where a grip should have been attached.⁷ Fans were not only held in an owner's hand but also tucked

⁶ Ibid., 129

⁷ Bo Liu, *Political Expression in Song Dynasty Fan Painting* (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Michigan, 2009), 1.

in sleeves or waist bands. Unlike other formats of Chinese painting, such as handscroll, hanging scroll, and album, fan is very intimate with its owner.⁸

It is also petite—perhaps the smallest among the painting formats considering their size in average. Despite its smaller scale and practical function, fan paintings never fail to be a refined, exquisite work of art as in our case of *Winter Birds*. From this time onward, therefore, it should be remembered that the fan painting as one side of an artwork and the other end of an intimate belonging used for practical purpose. The later phase of the Song dynasty was when this particular format of painting bloomed to the fullest after the surge of large wall hangings and long handscrolls that express the perspective toward heroic, monumental nature from the early Northern Song dynasty to the beginning of the Southern Song dynasty.⁹



Figure 8 (left) Empress Wu, poetic inscription to *Green Mountains, White Clouds*. 12th century, Southern Song. Fan mounted as album leaf. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 9 (right) Anonymous, *Green Mountains, White Clouds*. 12th century, Southern Song. Fan mounted as album leaf, ink and color on silk Palace Museum, Beijing.

Our Harvard fan painting lacks a lengthy colophon or inscription that provides any hint of craftsmanship or viewership of the past as found in *In the Palace*. While the absence of supplementary text is not uncommon among extant fan paintings, we cannot conclude that they are completely detached from words because it is highly likely that

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th – 14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 257.

many of the paintings were originally paired with accompanying inscription on the other side of the fan.¹⁰ Although it seems almost impossible to rematch the pairs as most were separated over the course of time. Fortunately, we still find a few surviving examples of a fan painting coupled with its corresponding poem. One of the early unscathed original compositions is a pair with a poem (Fig. 8) by Empress Wu probably written for Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127–62) and the painting (Fig. 9).¹¹ The poem reads:

Green mountains at dawn, white clouds soar up,
Green mountains at dusk, white clouds return,
Green pines luxuriant, the bright moon shining,
Never ceasing—who can comprehend this?¹²



Figure 10 (left) Emperor Lizong, poem by Wang Wei. 1256, Southern Song. Fan mounted as album leaf. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Figure 11 (right) Ma Lin, *Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds*. Ca. 1225-75, Southern Song. Fan mounted as album leaf, ink and color on silk. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

This is an early case of a collaborative practice of imperial family members and Academy painters flourished in the Southern Song court, which lasted until the end of the dynasty.

¹⁰ James Cahill, *Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 23; Bo Liu, “Political Expression in Song Dynasty Fan Painting,” 9.

¹¹ Hui-shu Lee, *Empress, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 144-47.

¹² Cahill, *Lyric Journey*, 24.

Emperors are also said to enjoy assigning poems for painters in his Academy to pair it with his own writing.¹³ By the time when the Harvard fan painting was produced, it became more common to extract couplets instead of quatrains from well-known masterpieces and to pair it with paintings. There is another beautifully preserved example of Emperor Lizong's (r. 1224–64) writing of a couplet (Fig. 10), taken from Wang Wei's (699–759) famous *Villa on Zhongnan Mountain* which reads:

I will walk to the place where the waters end,
Or sit and watch the time when the clouds rise.¹⁴

This couplet pairs with Ma Lin's painting (Fig. 11), of a man quietly watching the distant mountain beyond the water and clouds. The painting, deprived of pictorial details, is seemingly too terse and abbreviated to convey every word of the great poet, but it is difficult to deny that it flawlessly visualizes the poetic ambiance from the excerpt. The collaborative artistic process of poetry, calligraphy and painting, as well as the circulation and appreciation of the fan after its production played a role in facilitating communication among the elites, carrying a voice without saying the words.



Figure 12 (left) *Jackdaws on Withered Willow*, attributed to Liang Kai. Fan mounted on album leaf, ink on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 13 (right) *A Pair of Jackdaws with Autumn Willow*, attributed to Liang Kai. Fan mounted on album leaf, ink on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.

¹³ Ibid., 204.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29; Translation done in Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 51.

Liang Kai is said to have produced at least two more fan paintings of jackdaws with bare trees, of a more abbreviated style with less detail that better represents the painter's reputation as a master of a "reduced brushwork."¹⁵ One is titled *Jackdaws on Withered Willow* (Fig. 12) and the other one *A Pair of Jackdaws with Autumn Willow* (Fig. 13), both currently housed in the Palace Museum, Beijing. With our *Winter Birds*, all of these three paintings bear a clear abrasion in the center and are in almost the same size, which implies that they might have been made as a set or series of fans while he was serving at the court. They look cold, with jackdaws whose Chinese name is "cold crow 寒鴉." Most of all, they share a composition with the leafless tree that creates a visual momentum in the center of the painting ground and imbues a chill into the scene. These denuded trees look forlorn yet bring a delight rhythm to the fan as if they would stem from the grab of the fans. The very refined silk surface of *Winter Birds* still shimmers like gold, vividly proving Southern Song capital's finest silk craft and its highly sophisticated material culture. Along with the paired poetic connotation and emblematic characteristic, we may catch a glimpse of what the painter achieved in the flowering of fan painting in the Southern Song dynasty.

Winter Birds, with the Palace Museum fan paintings, is assumed to be made sometime between the two aforementioned examples as a pair. However, no companion text has been found for any of Liang Kai's fans; we only can imagine that there might have been a couplet once paired with the painting but now ever lost. Do you think there was an accompanying poem for the painting? If the painting was paired, what do you think the text would be like? How much do you expect the image to correspond the text? How do the text and image in the above two examples interrelate? Do the images enhance the text or is it vice versa?

Breaking Down the Codes in the *Winter Birds*: Jackdaws, Cranes, Cold Groove, and Old Plum

Now we know that paring a work of painting with a text of a shared sensibility as a fan was a common practice in the Song dynasty. Supposing our Harvard *Winter Birds* also once was a double-sided fan, we may begin to search for its lost companion. Thus, it is time to identify the visual codes in the painting and consider their allusions. Looking closely at the painting, we find that there are four main tropes in the *Winter Birds*: jackdaws, cranes, cold groove, and a barren old plum. What did these visual codes mean to the painting's contemporary viewers? And what message do these tropes spell out?

Jackdaws and Cranes

¹⁵ Fong, *Beyond Representation*, 283.

Before arduously wondering in the endless forest of ancient and medieval poems, most of the subject matters are found in a beautiful poem written during the middle of the eighth century by Du Fu (712–770), one of China’s most famous and enduring poets of all time. Titled *Gazing Over the Wild Plain*, the poem reads:

In the clear autumn, my gaze has no limits;
On the horizon layers of haze rise up.
Distant waters blend with the clean sky;
A solitary town is hidden in the depths of fog.
The wind returns and drops the remaining leaves,
Just as the sun sets behind the far mountain.
*Why does the lone crane return so late,
When the crows of dusk have already filled the forest?*¹⁶

The final two cryptic lines of the poem bring us to one of the most important questions concerning the content of our *Winter Birds*: the significance of the birds themselves. You may have noticed that there is a group of jackdaws in the lower right corner of the painting, with a crane also swooping in from the upper left-hand portion of the work. Considering the close similarity between the crane and jackdaw in our composition and the depiction in Du Fu’s final lines, we might be able to find some clues for their meaning by exploring the allusions in Du Fu’s poem.

In fact, Du Fu’s couplet has been interpreted as a contrast between the “superior man” or gentleman (whose qualities we discussed in case three) and the “lesser man” who lacks the virtues of the gentleman.¹⁷ In such a configuration, our crane might stand as a representation of the superior man, especially given that it was situated in flight above the lesser jackdaws. It is possible that this comparison is at play, as jackdaws have themselves occasionally functioned as a symbol for the common people in Chinese literature.¹⁸ Take for example a passage from China’s earliest surviving poetry compilation, the *Shijing* “Classic of Poetry”:

Joyful are the jackdaws,
As they flock home to rest;
All among people happy,
I alone am in misery.¹⁹

However, we should stop ourselves short of considering the fan as nothing more than a direct illustration of Du Fu’s poem. Note that according to the poem, the jackdaws

¹⁶ Translation from Charles Hartman, “Literary and Visual Interactions in Lo Chih-ch’uan’s ‘Crows in Old trees,’” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 28 (1993): 150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, “Literary and Visual Interactions,” 150.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁹ #197 in the *Shijing*. Translation quoted in *Ibid.*, 150.

should be perched within the trees and block the crane from returning to roost. Within our painting, they appear to be roosting in a nest upon the ground near the tree but do not occupy the trees. Moreover, there are other interpretations for the birds. For example, jackdaws were also traditionally associated with filial piety—an important virtue for the superior man. Indeed, the Chinese word for “jackdaw” even means “filial crow.”²⁰ Cranes, on the other hand, is also a symbol of the *yang* energy in early Chinese cosmology, as well as a common token of longevity in Daoist beliefs.

Interestingly, this particular couplet of Du Fu’s seems to have inspired not only the painter of *Winter Birds* but also other Song dynasty writers as well. Peng Ruli (1042–95), who was an official and diplomat of Northern Song, has indirectly cited Du Fu’s lines to his poem and masterfully transformed the original five-word verse into a seven-word couplet that reads:

A lone crane flies from cold sky to tranquil pond,
When the sun sets and jackdaws return to their old forest.²¹

The coherence between Peng Ruli’s couplet and the Harvard fan painting is so strikingly tight that it almost tricks us to see this newly phrased couplet as the painting’s inseparable companion. We may continue unearthing reference or investigating the world’s museum storages to rematch the pair. For now, however, it is important to note that the painter must have been keenly aware of every possible source of inspiration, whether it was from the original couplet of the old master or the Song revival of the classical *magnum opus*, to render what he read.

So far, our interpretation of the pictorial idiom in *Winter Birds* still does not seem to deviate too much from its probable textual source. But the painter made the greatest intervention of painting’s literary parallel, which eventually dominates the atmosphere of the scene—snow. The seasonality presented in the painting is purely an invention of the artist; it is never provided in Du Fu’s poem that only mentioned “fall” in the beginning. Then, why do you think these birds are depicted in a wintry scene?

Cold Grove

Inside the small scene of *Winter Birds* we find a cold wintry landscape, which points to the *han lin* 寒林 “cold grove” convention in Chinese painting. Particularly popular during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), the “cold grove” paintings are not about capturing physical likeness of a scene, but rather a visual device to invoke a certain mood of poverty, languish, and solitude that is very much in concert with the aesthetics of

²⁰ Ibid., 149.

²¹ Peng Ruli, *Poyang ji* 6; Translation done by Seung Hee Oh.

danbo “austerity and blandness.”²² As exemplified in the eleventh-century *Cold Grove* in National Palace Museum, Taipei (Fig. 14) the composition of a cold grove painting often juxtaposes barren tree branches in the foreground with an unarticulated hazy horizon (clouds, mist, etc.) stretching into the background, which is known as the “level distance.” The interplay between barren branches and level distance often alluded to time—leafless trees suggest chilliness of the late fall or winter and evokes memories of the lush summer past, while level distance triggers thoughts of a remoter past or uncertain future and a physical sense of remoteness and solitude.²³ The effect is one of melancholy, causing the viewer to contemplate the passage of time and one’s lot in life.

The melancholy of the cold grove becomes even more intriguing when we consider the puns hidden inside it. The phrase *han lin* “cold groove” is a homonym with *han lin* 翰林 “Imperial Academy,” a government office where the most erudite gathered. Moreover, trees are often associated with personal talent because *cai* 材 “timber [for building]” is homonym with *cai* 才 “talent,” and so a barren/fallen tree branch becomes a visual signal for “unused/neglected talent.” In this sense, the cold groove landscape was a subjective and humanized space for self-expression, perhaps particularly so for the frustrated scholar-official in service of the government, who would have been emotionally invested in the cold groove as a self-lamentation or a subtle commentary on the harsh political situations they found themselves in.²⁴

In addition, the “cold groove” theme is tightly connected with birds. Since the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), Chinese literature had described various trees as appropriate perches for birds that represented different kinds of people. The trees, in turn, represented suitable state positions.²⁵ The common people flocked to higher positions (or branches), whereas the superior man either removed himself from society to maintain independence and integrity or was foolishly snubbed by those in power.²⁶ In this sense, the cold grove genre of landscape painting was also associated with the poetic ideals of poverty and eremitism. If we think of our crane as the true gentleman or superior man, we may have found our explanation for the separation of the crane from the rest of the birds in the painting. But what should we make of the fact that the crane seems to be returning to the fallen branch? Our exploration continues.

²² Eugene Wang, “‘Picture Idea’ and Its Cultural Dynamics in Northern Song China,” *The Art Bulletin* 89.3 (2007): 466–68.

²³ *Ibid.*, 465.

²⁴ Hartman, 140.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145, 150–52.



Figure 8. *Cold Grove*. 11th Century. Hanging scroll. National Palace Museum, Taipei

Old Plum: Ink Plum Painting

Let us now turn our attention to the tree branch in the *Winter Birds*. Beyond association with cold grove painting, our tree in *Winter Birds* also bears formal similarities to *ink plum* painting, a subgenre of Chinese bird-and-flower painting that focused on depicting the flowering plum with monochrome ink. While its origin traces back to the early twelfth century Chan monk Zhongren, the genre flourished during the Southern Song dynasty, which is around the time period when the *Winter Birds* was painted.

One of the earliest surviving ink plum paintings is Yang Wujiu's (active late 12th c.) *Four Plum Blossoms* (Fig. 15). We notice that the scraggly branches of the plum appear quite similar to the central branches in our *Winter Birds* (Fig. 16) and that the two both reflect the Xu Xi style "boneless" monochrome ink painting technique in their execution. These similarities suggest a degree of connection between the ink plum painting tradition and the *Winter Birds*. However, while the flowering plum was a harbinger of spring and also often associated with Confucian virtues, as we have seen in Zhao Mengjian's *Three*

Friends of Winter, the tree in our *Winter Birds* is bare, which points to the possibility of other symbolism in the painting. So, what other meanings were attached to the old plum during the *Winter Birds*' time?



Figure 9. Yang Wujiu (active late 12th c.). Leaf 3 of *Four Plum Blossoms*. Hand scroll. Palace Museum, Beijing.

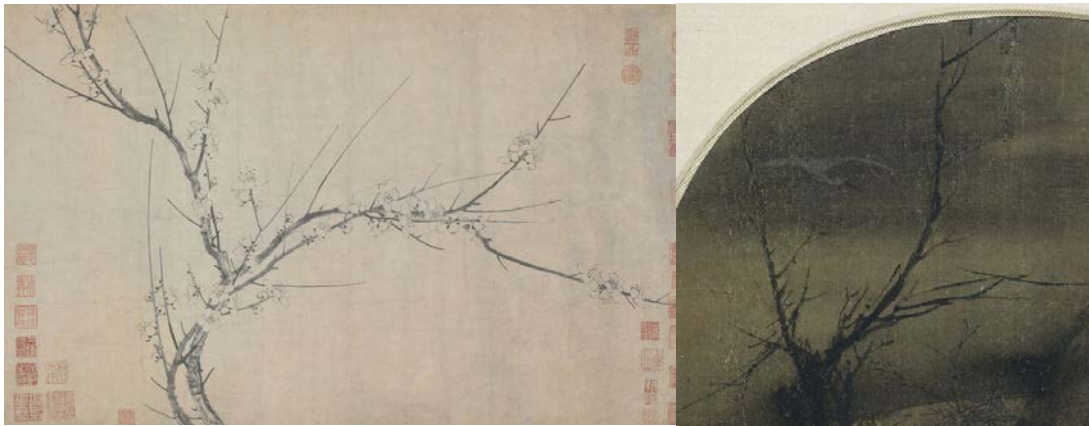


Figure 10. Comparison of Yang Wujiu's *Four Plum Blossom* and the plum branch in *Winter Birds*.

I. Lin Bu (967–1028 CE): The Flowering Plum Recluse

There is an influential individual whose works may have had bearing on the meaning of the old plum in the *Winter Birds*: Lin Bu. Lin was a Northern Song (960–1028) poet-recluse who lived alone on the Gushan Island near the shores of Hangzhou on the eastern Chinese seaboard. Rejecting worldly connections, Lin never married or served in government, instead spending his days creating poetry and calligraphy, raising plum trees and nurturing cranes.²⁷ Lin wrote primarily about plum trees, and his poems aestheticize the purity of plum tree:

Its sparse shadows, in irregular pattern, float on the water so shallow and clear;
The faint fragrance at dusk can be felt as the bright moon begins to appear.

While still alive, Lin began to draw the admiration of fellow scholars who were deeply impressed by his poetic verses and eschewal of external recognition.²⁸ He soon became a living symbol of the flowering plum and model for the “flowering plum recluse.” The term eventually came to designate a scholar who withdrew from society in order to focus on poetry and the beauty of nature.

Although the flowering plum had been associated with eremitism since the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE), the archetype of the flowering plum recluse truly solidified around the figure of Lin Bu.²⁹ Beginning in the Song and extending through the Qing dynasty, members of the literati strove to emulate Lin.³⁰ It was said that the plum trees were Lin Bu’s wife and the cranes were his children. Before his death in 1028, he wrote the following lines for his cranes:

I would like to say farewell now,
To the south of the southern mountain;
To the north of northern mountain,
You are free to come and go.

Likewise, he wrote the following verse for his plum trees:

For twenty years, I have joined your elegant beauty and I am satisfied. From now on, you are free to blossom, flourish, or wither.³¹

In light of Lin Bu’s legend, we may understand the *Winter Birds* differently. Perhaps the barren plum tree in the painting had chosen to wither without Lin Bu, while the white

²⁷ Bickford, *Ink Plum*, 23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

²⁹ Bickford, *Bones of Jade*, 22-23.

³⁰ Bickford, *Ink Plum*, 24.

³¹ Some of Lin Bu’s poems are recorded in *Xihu Jiahua* (Hangzhou: Wenxuanju, 1982). The plum poem is cited from page 89.

crane may signal his eventual return. In this sense, the painting becomes an expression of both dismay and hope: the barren plum tree sings its lament for the absence of virtuous gentleman like Lin Bu in the world, but the sorrow is deemed to come to an end soon, as the returning white crane—“son” of Lin Bu, perhaps a metaphor for those who would carry on the sage-hood—is just around the corner.

II. Meifei: The Flowering Plum Beauty

For many thirteenth century viewers, flowering plum trees would have also evoked the beautiful yet heartbreaking story of *Meifei*, “the Flowering Plum Consort.” In the popular Southern Song fiction, *Meifei zhuan*, or *Biography of the Flowering-Plum Consort*, Meifei is depicted as a consort of the Tang dynasty emperor Xuanzong (r.712-756) and a rival of the more flamboyant consort Yang Guifei. Xuanzong eventually abandons Meifei, and she languishes in the harem annex in solitude. In the end, she is murdered when the rebels took over Chang’an.³²

In the story, Meifei is presented as the living embodiment of the aesthetic of the pure, delicate, and humble associated with plum flowers: she used make-up and adornments sparingly and dressed with refinement and restraint, but her appearance was bright and lovely. At the same time, Meifei also became a trope for the abandoned lady longing for her lover, as well as the transience of youth and beauty: when she was neglected by Xuanzong, Meifei wrote poems that expressed her longing for the emperor and compared her fleeting moment of favor to the plum’s short-lived blossoming. After her death, she was buried beneath a flowering plum tree.

Around the same time when Meifei’s story gained popularity, there emerged a category of painting called the “flowering plum beauty.” Su Hanchen’s (active mid-12th c.) *Lady at a Dressing Table* (Fig. 17), for example, shows a woman in a palatial interior garden gazing into a mirror under a plum tree. Dressed in a plain white and light blue costume, the young lady could very well be Meifei herself, and we know that her fate will be just like the plum tree blossom above her, beautiful, but neglected and withering deep in the palace.

As we have already discussed in the previous case of *In the Palace*, the trope of an abandoned woman longing for the husband is often used as a politically charged allegory for a loyal minister and his devotion to his ruler.³³ In this sense, the barren plum branch in the *Winter Birds* could be interpreted as a lamentation for one’s neglected talent and

³² For more about Meifei, please see Bickford, *Ink Plum*, 54-60.

³³ Lara C.W. Blanchard, “Huizong’s New Clothes: Desire and Allegory in *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*” *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 36, (2009), pp. 111-135.

the passing of his prime years, while also signaling his fortitude and undying loyalty despite so.



Figure 11. Su Hanchen (active mid-12th c.). *Lady at a Dressing Table*. Fan painting mounted as album leaf. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Now we have covered the tools for the conventional reading of subject matters. So far, our interpretation of the pictorial idiom in *Winter Birds* still does not seem to deviate too much from its probable textual source. But the painter made the greatest intervention of painting's literary parallel, which eventually dominates the atmosphere of the scene—snow. The seasonality presented in the painting is purely an invention of the artist; it is never provided in Du Fu's poem that only mentioned "fall" in the beginning.

Then, why do you think these birds are depicted in a wintry scene? Considering the symbolic association of jackdaws with hungry commoners, it may be understood as people in their temporary discomfort during winter, waiting for spring to come. However, in the Song dynasty, winter was not something that could be simply portrayed as romantic terms. Before closing this week's case, why don't we also think about what the painter *saw* and *felt* in addition to what he *read* from the past?

Little Ice Age in China and its Art

From the late Northern Song to the early Southern Song, exceptionally cold winters lasted almost for a century and affected every parameter of China's ecology and society. The aftermath of extended low temperature was particularly dire as this period was preceded by two centuries of an unusually warm time, so-called "Medieval Warm Period (ca. 800-1000)."³⁴ This Cold Period, spanned around 1100-1190s, involved a significant plunge in temperature and heavy snowfalls caused not only snow-related calamities but also food crisis and social disorder. During the warmer period, snow was an auspicious sign of good harvest in agriculture and winter was often a metaphor for temporary discomfort in art and literature. However, from the twelfth century, snow was no longer romantic or felicitous; it became something rather inauspicious, miserable, and distressing.

Now we may attempt to imagine how artists in this era perceived winter as a spectator and a survivor. Not surprisingly, during the relentless cold period, there was a noticeable increase in the proportion of a wintry scene compared to other seasonal subjects. This phenomenon explains that a snowscape was tragically pronounced in painters' everyday life far from being a conventional setting. The *Painting Catalogue of the Xuanhe Period* accounts that more than half of the landscape paintings of renowned painting masters in the late Northern Song is of a winter-related subject.³⁵ Among them, Yan Su (961-1040) produced nineteen snowscapes out of his twenty-seven landscape paintings, and 75% of Zhao Xiaoyin's (ca. 1119) is known to winter scenes. For an extreme example, all identifiable works of some painters in the early twelfth century are snowscapes. Even Emperor Huizong (r. 1100-26), who reigned China when there was the deepest dip in temperature, also painted a panoramic scene of a frozen river (Fig. 18).

Winter Birds is attributed to Liang Kai who was appointed to the Painting Academy between 1201 and 1204. This span was when the temperature finally began to go back to normal after a century of the cold period. Thus, by this time winter would not have been as disastrous as in the previous century while the painter probably witnessed the very last

³⁴ Huiping Pang, "Strange Weather: Art, Politics, and Climate Change at the Court of Northern Song Emperor Huizong," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 39 (2009): 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

stage of the little ice age and snowscapes painted by his predecessors at the Academy. Still being somewhat wary about the cold and snowfall, the painter might have been experiencing a gradual change in climate with milder winters and warmer summers. We can observe all these dramas in art and ecology of the Southern Song dynasty through the micro-universe presented in *Winter Birds* because it is portrayed on a fan, a practical utensil for summer.

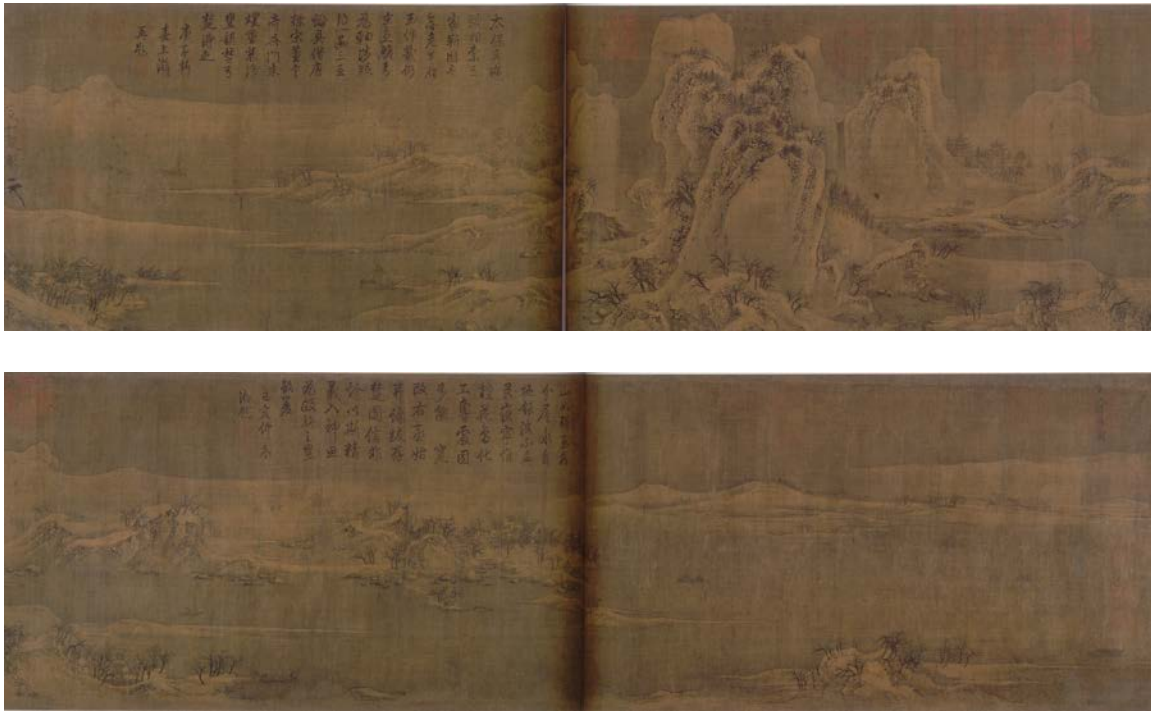


Figure 18 Emperor Huizong, *Returning Boat on a Snowy River*. Handscroll, ink on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Looking Back: “Picture Idea” in the *Winter Birds*

In this case study, we have examined the pictorial conventions of “small scene” landscape painting and “bird-and-flower” painting appropriated in the *Winter Birds*. We also identified and explored the potential meanings of the allusions embedded inside the composition, including jackdaws and cranes, cold grove, and the ink plum. At this point, we may wonder: which one of them is the “true voice” of the *Winter Birds*?

The answer is both “none” and “all.” In fact, the *Winter Birds* is not an illustration of one or more of the allusions, but an organically connected network of cultural codes that together construct a “picture idea” that incites a certain subject position or a “voice” for the viewer. Indeed, all of the elements in the painting seem to converge to a certain sentiment. In other words, while none of the concepts and allusions seems to fully explain the composition single-handedly, together they spell out a subjectively-charged space, or

a field, that resonates with the viewers familiar with their meanings. In this sense, the coldness in the *Winter Birds* is not seen, but heard and felt.

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Terms to Know

Bird-and-Flower Painting: A genre depicting birds and floral plants that became popular during the Song Dynasty in China.

Flowering Plum Beauty: A woman fulfilling an aesthetic ideal of elegant simplicity related to the flowering plum; prominent during the Southern Song.

Flowering Plum Recluse: A scholar-poet who removed himself from the world to immerse himself in nature and write poetry.

Ink Plum: A style of bird-and-flower painting that depicted the flowering plum through a monochromatic palette and dramatic brushstrokes. The flowering plum was a beloved symbol of the Southern Song.

Lin Bu (967–1028 CE): A scholar-recluse who raised plum trees and cranes and became a symbol of the flowering plum. He was the prototypical Flowering Plum Recluse.

Meifei, the Flowering Plum Consort: A literary character embodying the ideal of the Flowering Plum Beauty but whose husband abandoned her for another showier wife.

Cold Grove Landscape Painting: A subset of landscape painting showing bare branches juxtaposed against a “level distance.” Meant to evoke feelings of poverty and solitude.

Level Distance: One of “atmospheric perspective” with High Distance and Deep Distance, which was innovated by Guo Xi. Level Distance is to view the mountain far away from the nearby mountain.

Shijing: The “Book of Odes,” the oldest collection of Chinese poetry, consisting of more than 300 poems.

Northern Song Dynasty: The first era (960–1127) of the Song dynasty before invading northern forces pushed the dynasty into southern China. The capitol city was located in the northern city of Bianjing.

Southern Song Dynasty: The second era of the Song Dynasty (1127–1279). After the northern Jurchen defeated the Song, the court fled across the Yangtze River and established a new capitol in the southern city of Lin'an.

Tools for New Discoveries

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