

English Summary of
the Exhibit Information
by the Nanjing Museum
Expert



(1)

Ancient court ladies at leisure

Anonymous

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Handscroll, ink and colour on silk

This handscroll guides viewers through more than 20 activity sites, and takes them through some of the colourful leisure activities of ladies in ancient times, such as *cuju* (ancient football), swing, *doubaicao* (match my plants) and pitch-pot. The ladies' actions, the landscape and the architectural structures are all presented vividly with great details. The painting shows women participating in literati activities, such as painting, calligraphy, playing the zither and chess, fishing, picking flowers, drinking tea and sitting in a boat. It enables the viewers to see how the women's interior and exterior activities are related to the customs and seasons of the time. The handscroll was attentive to the details of clothes and movements. It is like a pictorial guide to ancient entertainment of ladies.

Section I Understanding fashion trends through the creative expression of women

It seems that women haven't changed much from the past to the present in terms of their appearance. But there are significant differences in the evolution of their make-up, hairstyles and outfits, which reflected the social environment and fashion trends at the time. They also reflected if the society the women were living in was open-minded or preserved. The difference between integration and innovation was also represented.

In other words, the outfits and make-up embodied the dreams, beliefs, and feelings of women in different eras. This section brings together unearthed female pottery figures, paintings and objects. It shows the charm of women starting in the Han and Tang dynasties and how their lives represented the Four Feminine Virtues in ancient China: proper manner, decent appearance, graceful speech and diligent work. Although these exhibits are only a small part of the long history of Chinese civilisation, they testify to the essential role women played in ancient civilisation.



(2)

Pottery figure of a female musician

Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 220)

Earthenware

The female figure with middle-parting hair rests on her knees. Her long hair is tied in a bun on the back of her head, and she wears a long garment with a right lapel. She is bending her arms and holding them high. It is believed that the musical instrument held in her hands has been missed. Although the original paint has faded, her calm temperament can still be seen.



(3)

Ladies enjoying the spring

Anonymous

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk

This painting represents the classic lives of the ancient court ladies. They are depicted as taking care of their children, reading books, pondering or enjoying their leisure time in the garden. It portrays the lives of the ancient noble women by using meticulous drawing technique and saturated colours, showing the gentle and elegant images of women.



(4)

Ode to the plum blossoms

Chen Hongshou (1598 – 1652)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1649

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk

Chen Hongshou (1598 – 1652) were first influenced by Lan Ying, a painter who was active during the Ming dynasty. Taking reference from and adapting traditional painting styles, he infused exaggeration and distortion techniques in paintings while maintaining the elegance of human figures, flowers and birds. He represents the archaic aesthetics of the late Ming dynasty.

In 1649, Chen painted this work for his friend which depicts the domestic scene of a scholar at his home. Our focus is directed from the scholar, who racks his brain to write a poem, to the lady sitting in front of him. There are also ink, brush and paper prepared on her desk. She is looking at the plum blossoms in the jar held by a maid. The composition of the painting is meticulously arranged with profound implications. This work reflects the sophisticated techniques of Chen Hongshou who was a renowned painter and poet in the early Qing dynasty.



(5)

Ladies in four seasons

Fei Danxu (1802 – 1850)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1833

Set of four hanging scrolls, ink and colour on paper

Fei Danxu (1802 – 1850) was a painter born in Huzhou. Taught by his family, he began painting when he was very young. He later travelled throughout Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Fujian . He specialised in painting human figures, but also occasionally painted flowers and landscapes. His paintings are very vivid, as if a mirror captured the objects. He is most noted for painting beautiful ladies in a landscape background. His works were known as the “Fei School” because of his soft and delicate style and fluent brushwork, which exerts a sense of lightness.

Each of the four scrolls is accompanied by Jiang Kui, Li Qingzhao and Chen Yuyi’s Song lyrics, showing four ladies in typical Fei’s style.



(6)

The weaving ladies

Anonymous

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Handscroll, ink and colour on silk

This painting captures a scene of women working at home in ancient times. In this work, women are spinning and winding threads on a loom to finish her weaving. It meticulously depicts a large loom and other equipment in the middle of a spacious room. The painter adopted ink-fading technique to show all the structures and subtle details of the machines. *Gongbi* method, combining fine lines and rich colours, was used to portray the female figures. The 16 masters and servants and two infants are also lifelike. The painting details, as shown in the movement of the weaving ladies, show that the painter was very familiar with the various scenes of textile weaving, which renders the painting realistic and emotionally arousing.



(7)

Dish with the “four imperial concubines and sixteen boys” design in underglaze blue
Qing dynasty Shunzhi period (1644 – 1661)
Porcelain

The ancient social values are reflected through the porcelain themes popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties. One of the key Confucian thoughts, filial piety, was reflected in the concept “*duo zi duo fu*” (the more children a family have, the more blessings they receive) and big family at that time. The pattern of this dish is “four imperial concubines and sixteen boys”, which depicts four slender ladies each with a fan in her hand and 16 children playing actively in an outdoor setting. This happy and cosy scene of mothers playing with their children reflects people’s definition of a happy life at the time.



(8)

Lady holding a fan

Ren Xiong (1823 – 1857)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1855

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk

A native of Xiaoshan, Zhejiang, Ren Xiong was a master painter in the late Qing dynasty. He is the representative of the “Four Rens of the Shanghai School”. The famous painter Ren Xun was his brother. He was good at painting portraits, landscapes and flowers-and-birds. Inspired by Chen Hongshou’s style, he painted portraits that feature heavy brushwork and are full of decorative interest. In 1855, Ren emulated Chen Hongshou and painted *Lady holding a fan*. The painting portrays a beautiful lady with a peony bun holding a fan in her hand. Ren deliberately stretched the proportion of the female figure, and was attentive to the details of hair accessories and the clothes. It demonstrated Ren’s great *gongbi* techniques with fine and fluent brushstrokes.



(9) Lady worshipping
Ren Xun (1835 – 1893)
Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper

Born in Xiaoshan, Zhejiang, Ren Xun (1835 – 1893) was a famous painter, skilled at painting portraits, landscapes, flowers-and-birds. He was also an expert in garden design. He and his kin, Ren Xiong, Ren Yu, and Ren Yi, are collectively known as the “Four Rens of the Shanghai School”. This painting of a lady worshipping is simple and elegant, with clean lines and delicate brushwork, depicting the image of a lady from an eminent family in the Qing dynasty. It also vividly represents the domestic life of a lady from a cultured family, showing theatrical qualities.



(10)

Lady holding a baby

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Hanging scroll, silk (*kesi* slit tapestry weaving)

There are some auspicious meanings embedded in this *kesi* artwork. A woman is holding a baby and a child is playing nearby, signifying the birth of a child. The persimmon and *ruyi* on the table mean “all wishes come true”, and the vase with peony symbolises “peace and prosperity”. The female depicted with Ming portrait-painting styles, used the *pingke* and *gouke* technique, giving more details to the drapery lines.



(11)

Lady lying on her side

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Hanging scroll, silk (*kesi* slit tapestry weaving)

This *kesi* tapestry is a masterpiece from the mid-Qing dynasty. This *kesi* work depicts a woman lying on her side. Despite peach blossoms blooming outside the circular window, the atmosphere appears cold and quiet, which emphasises that the beautiful lady kept in the room has nothing to do. With its different coloured welt threads that create meticulous patterns, this portrayal of a lady lying on her side looks just like a fine-line painting.



(12)

Pottery figure of a female dancer

Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 220)

Earthenware

The long-sleeve dance was popular during the Spring and Autumn period, and it went viral again during the Han dynasty. This type of dancing integrated the “grievances” of real life and the desire to dream beyond reality, showing unique aesthetic qualities compared to other acrobatic, music and dance performances. The female figure vividly captures the moment when a dancer twists her waist and throws her long sleeve airily and elegantly.



(13)
Pottery figure of a female dancer
Tang dynasty (618 – 907)
Earthenware

This pottery figure was half of a pair with another female dancer. The figure is slightly twisted at the waist, with one hand up and the other next to her hips, and one leg in a boot sticking out from underneath a long fluttering skirt.



(14)

Metal figure of a female dancer

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Iron

In the Ming dynasty, the use of pottery figures as grave goods became less popular in comparison to the Han and Tang dynasty. At that time, the highest standard of burial objects were mainly pottery, or wood carved objects. Meanwhile, the metal figures were generally placed at the temple. Most large figures were mass produced using moulds. This metal figure of a female dancer has been well preserved. Although it was made with moulds, her smiling face, the sweep of sleeves, the dancing pose and her clothes were all naturally depicted.



(15)

New Year woodcut print “Breaking the heavenly gate battle formation by Mu Guiying”

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Woodcut printing

The story of “Breaking the heavenly gate battle formation by Mu Guiying” is a popular theme of Chinese folklore, operas and novels. Two-third of this work depicted Mu Guiying and Yang Zongbao leading rows of Song generals to break the heavenly gate battle formation.



(16)

Painted pottery figure of a lady

Tang dynasty (618 – 907)

Earthenware

With a tall hairdo, this female figure wears a round-necked long dress with slim sleeves. The design of the waistline is raised to under the armpits. The ribbon on her chest was painted with colour. One of her (missing) arms is by put by the side of her body, while the other arm is pointing forward. The pattern on the round collar has been preserved. She is wearing a pleated dress with an elegant standing posture.



(17)

Pottery figure of a female attendant
Southern Tang dynasty (937 – 975)
Earthenware

This pottery figure has a high bun at the front and a round bun at the back of her head. The hair on each side of her face falls in coiled knots, covering her ears. She wears beautiful deep clothing with loose cuffs. Crafted elegantly, it is a rare gem, unearthed from the Two Mausoleums of Southern Tang.

Section 2: The rich hearts of ladies in ancient times

Women in ancient times usually stayed home all day and were involved mainly with chores. They looked after their families and handled all the housework without complaining to support their men, who focused on political, economic and cultural achievements. Although women looked after the family while men worked outside the home, this did not mean that their daily lives were confined to specific duties. While the woman handled household duties, they also attached importance to grooming themselves, adding a sense of beauty to their lives. As Wei Yong wrote in *The Book of Beauty*, “make-up should neither be too much nor missing. One should choose that which suits her best, whether it is light or heavy make-up.” This also suggests that women from less affluent families could be fashionable, as simple dresses could still make them look elegant. In this section, through make-up tools, accessories, and everyday utensils, we explore the experience of women from different social classes to show the splendour of the court boudoir and the simplicity of ordinary people’s homes.



(18)
Woman's green satin blouse embroidered with butterflies
Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)
Textile

This blouse is made of green satin with buttons down the front, straight sleeves and a round collar. Hundreds of butterflies are vividly embroidered symmetrically on the blouse, each looking different, yet lifelike. Its cuffs, collar and hem are sewn with black silk, and the cuffs have inches of yellow flowing silk. Interestingly, the patterns on the yellow silk sleeves are decorated in Cantonese embroidery style, which was different from the Suzhou embroidery style, as shown in the central part of the cloth. This woman's satin blouse is elegant and refreshing, with unique, symmetrical patterns.



(19)
Gold hairpin with Magu design
Ming dynasty Zhengde period (1506 – 1521)
Gold

This hairpin was inserted in the front of the hair buns of married women. The themes of the decorations on the hairpins in the Ming dynasty were usually Buddha, Guanyin, the immortals and flowers.



(20)
Wooden comb with gold and jade
Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)
Wood, gold, jade

This wooden comb is shaped like a half-moon with jade on its spine. The pattern of the comb spine is delicate and smooth, crafted like 11 concave petals. The pattern was also designed to enhance the grip of the comb. In the Ming dynasty, the craftsmanship of gold inlaid with jade and gold filigree was well-developed and widely applied to various ornaments. This wooden comb, on the other hand, was not decorated by any of these complicated techniques, which makes it look simplistic yet elegant.



(21)

Wooden comb decorated with gold, jade and gemstones

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Wood, gold, jade, gemstones

In the Song and Yuan dynasties, gold and silver were used to decorate the back of wooden combs (known as “*shubeier*”). This elegant wooden comb is decorated with gold, jade and gemstones, carved with *ruyi* pattern. It is one of the best examples to show how booming the craft and decorative arts industry was in the Ming dynasty and how well the craftsmen used a wide range of materials.



(22)

Golden court crown

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Gold, gemstone

Braided with thick gold wires, the crown’s main decoration consists of a gold flower inlaid with a red gemstone surrounded by phoenixes, cloud and floral patterns. It was also decorated with a double-dragons-playing-with-pearls pattern and seven gold phoenixes. At the top of the crown, two phoenixes are spreading their wings. It is also adorned with a rectangular plaque *enrong* (favour and glory) and eight circular plaques carved with the Chinese words: *ri, yue* (sun and moon), *feng, tian* (obeying heaven), *gao, ming* (patent by ordinance) and *chao, guan* (court crown). The whole crown looks dazzling and exquisite and is decorated with various delicate techniques, such as gold filigree, carving and inlaying.



(23)

Gold pendant with three tools

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Gold

This gold ornament is probably the gold pendant with three tools, which was popular in the Ming dynasty. The gold pendant was commonly made of gold, jewels and jade to carry with hygiene tools. Among all the hygiene tools, ear picks, toothpicks, tweezers, scent sachets, pouches and boxes were the most popular items they would take with them.

The central ornament of this golden pendant has a circular flower motif. It is a five-petal flower in openwork, with the stamen and each petal inlaid with gemstones. The circular border is carved with floral scrolls, and its rim is a protruding bead decoration, identical on both sides. Four small rings are equidistantly attached to the central ornament with chains. The upper end of the middle chain is connected to a double *ruyi* and a gem-embedded peony, followed by a butterfly and another six-petal flower. The rings at the end of the other chains suggest that the attached accessories are now missing.



(24)
Covered box in *qingbai* glaze
Song dynasty (960 – 1279)
Porcelain

This covered box in *qingbai* glaze is top-quality, and the porcelain is as lustrous as jade. Presumably, women used this box to store their make-up powders. The box is divided into three sections with lotus root decoration, and three smaller containers are attached to each compartment. The smaller containers and the covered box are both melon-shaped. The lid of the larger box is carved with lotus patterns, and the smaller containers also have floral designs.



(25)
Painted lacquer box enclosing seven boxes
Western Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 8)
Wood, lacquer

This type of cosmetics box was mainly used to store cosmetics and toiletries, such as bronze mirror, comb, fine-toothed comb, copper brush, dai inkstone (for eyebrow drawing), powder puff, wig, hair and ear ornaments. There was also a set of nine or even 11 small boxes inside the main lacquer box. This set of lacquer box encloses seven small boxes, which are of rectangular, square, horseshoe, round and oval shapes. Both the exterior and interior of the boxes are painted with black lacquer and red coloured-patterns. The domed cover of the largest box is decorated with a persimmon sepal-shaped silver foil on top. The decorations of the small boxes are similar to that of the large box.



(26)

Sedan chair

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Wood, textile

Sedan chair used in wedding was originated from the sedan chair used as a kind of vehicles in ancient times. It was used in wedding starting in the Spring and Autumn period. In the Song dynasty, sedan chair became a popular mode of transportation, and since then, it had been used for weddings. Using a sedan chair for the bride on her wedding day became a folk custom.

This sedan chair was carried by four people. The valances of sedan chair were turquoise in colour and embroidered with traditional auspicious motifs, such as peonies, the two deities of harmony and the goddess bringing children, giving blessings to the bride.



(27)
Linghua-shaped mirror with mandarin ducks design
Tang dynasty (618 – 907)
Bronze

Bronze mirrors were used for personal grooming. Before the Tang dynasty, mirrors were mainly round. In the Tang dynasty, mirror production techniques reached a historical peak, and many breakthroughs were documented regarding the shape, decorations, inscriptions and craftsmanship of bronze mirrors. This *linghua*-shaped mirror has eight petals with a round mirror knob at its back. It was cast with typical Tang dynasty patterns of mandarin ducks, clouds and lotuses.



(28)
Bronze mirror with handle and lacquer case
Southern Song dynasty (1127 – 1279)
Bronze, lacquer, wood

Mirrors made during the Song dynasty had round, square and floral shapes. Some of them were even designed with handles, in the shape of a rectangle, heart, shield, bell or *ding* (a three-legged ancient Chinese vessel). The design of this mirror was new at the time. It was much lighter and thinner than the mirrors in the Han and Tang dynasties. It is round-shaped and with handle. The mirror case was designed with a lid and painted by red lacquer on its exterior and black lacquer on its interior. It is small in size and well preserved.



(29)

Gold scent holder with lotus and mandarin ducks design

Yuan dynasty (1271 – 1368)

Gold

Gold scent holders were common in the Tang dynasty, most of them in the form of an openwork ball. Heart-shaped scent holders emerged since the Song dynasty. The gold scent holders were usually tied at the front end of the *xiapei*, which looked like a long scarf, to ensure that the *xiapei* was straight. This tool was made in the early Yuan dynasty. The middle part of it is slightly raised, with a hollow design, made by hammering two gold leaves into the shape of a heart. These two gold leaves were then crafted with lotus and mandarin ducks design. Rich families started insisting on having the bride wear a phoenix crown and *xiapei*, sit in a sedan chair carried by eight people, and having suitable documents and wedding gifts prepared to show their social status.



(30)
Round-shaped wood board with embroidery pattern
Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)
Wood

Raw lacquer, which turned black in high temperature, was applied on the wood board that could be used for carving. After lacquering and polishing the wood board until the surface was smooth, the craftsmen carved patterns on the board. This kind of wood board is used for decorating the silk fabric. Nowadays, digital equipment is used to print embroidery patterns on fabric in Zhenhu, Suzhou. In the past, these embroidery patterns were handmade. The patterns were designed and carved on a wood board and then transferred to the fabric before the needlework started.



(31)
Porcelain urinal for women in underglaze blue
Qing dynasty Daoguang period (1821 – 1850)
Porcelain

This porcelain urinal is painted with peony scrolls on all four sides, and the edges are decorated with interlinked stems. At the top, a pair of butterflies is painted on the inside and a bat on the outside. The colour tone is light, making the urinal look simplistic yet elegant.

Section 3: Talented women show ingenuity in art

Ye Xiaoluan, a talented woman in the Ming dynasty, expressed that there were women from different eras passionate about calligraphy, painting, weaving and embroidery. But the artworks of women in ancient times were not widely circulated for various reasons. This section selects excellent works by women in past eras, including poetry, calligraphy and painting, embroidery, inkstone, and *Yixing* ware, to demonstrate their creative talent and highlight their artistic sensitivity. Specifically, embroidery was an essential skill traditional women had to learn and a craftwomen were expected to embrace. Each embroidery work can be considered a genuine representation of feminine art.



(32)

Flowers and butterflies

Ma Quan (Unknown)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1760

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk

Ma Quan was born into a family of artists. Her father and grandfather were good at painting. When her father, Ma Yuanyu, worked for a scholar-officer, Jiang Tingxi, Ma Quan taught Jiang's daughter, Jiang Shu. She had many female students, all of whom come from the same region. Some of her students were sophisticated in imitating Ma Quan's flower-and-bird paintings. Ma Quan often used light colour palettes. Her paintings were overwhelming with the flowers and grasses looking especially lifelike. This large painting, *Flowers and butterflies*, represents its subjects vividly with poetic mood. There is an interesting contrast with the messy and solid rocks and the enchanting and colourful poppy flowers. Her painting technique was very delicate with fine brushwork and excellent colouring, with a spirit reflecting her profound family background and the elegant style of a woman artist.



(33)

Pear flowers and a swallow

Zhou Shuxi (1624 – ?)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1679

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper

Zhou Shuxi was active during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. She and her sister, Shuhu, were well-known in a circle of painting elites. However, there seems to be no record of her sister's painting and calligraphy activities after her marriage. Shuxi continued to develop creative works throughout her entire career. The Nanjing Museum houses more works by Zhou Shuxi, most of them depicting flowers and birds. In this painting, a swallow is flying between the pear flowers and the bamboos. The plants look even greener after the rain. All the colours are carefully rendered with great harmony.



(34)

Poems by the Four Beauties of the Qinhuai River

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Album, ink on paper

Stitched-bound, this anthology comprises three volumes. Each album has 16 lines, and each line has 18 characters. The beginning of the chapter has exquisite illustrations; the text is printed with highlight marks with commentary in the top margin. This set of book was kept by Wu Jinde and other famous collectors in the Qing dynasty. Wu Jinde (1725 – ?) had a rich collection of books during the reigns of Qianlong and Jiaqing.



35

Duan inkstone

Gu Erniang (Unknown)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Stone, lacquer

Gu Erniang was a native of Suzhou, active during the Yongzheng and Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty. She got married with the son of Gu Delin, a master of inkstone carving in Suzhou. The inkstone created by Gu Delin was famous of its natural and classic style. Gu Erniang learnt the sophisticated techniques from the seniors of her husband's family. Her works were not fancy but were representations of natural and classic elegance, demonstrating her top-notch carving skill. Because of her superb techniques, the inkstones carved by Gu Erniang were highly sought-after by many artists and scholars at the time. A famous poet and collector of inkstone in the Qing dynasty, Huang Ren (1683 – 1768), highly appreciated her skills and collected many works by Gu Erniang.



(36)

Guanyin

Guan Daosheng (1262 – 1319)

Yuan dynasty (1271 – 1368)

1309

Hanging scroll, embroidery on silk

Embroidery works were considered to be handicrafts, so they weren't included in the scope of calligraphy and paintings. However, it was not unusual for ladies in ancient times to do both embroidery and painting during their spare time. Their embroidery works drew inspiration from paintings, and demonstrated their artistic style. Guan Daosheng (1262 – 1319), the wife of the Yuan great master of painting and calligraphy Zhao Mengfu, was conferred the title of “Lady of the Duke”. She was very gifted in art and excelled in poetry, painting, calligraphy and embroidery. As a very intelligent lady, she was also very proficient in housework and was kind and generous with all members of the family. Her talent and virtue were seen as exemplary for later generations of women.

This embroidered portrait was made in 1309, when Madame Guan was 47. In this work, Guanyin is standing, holding a string of beads. The lines are executed concisely. The artist used needle and thread with confidence, switching stitches freely. Guanyin's silk-like hair and clothes appear to move with the wind, suggesting that this is an exquisite work with technical virtuosity.



(37)

Bodhidharma

Anonymous

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Hanging scroll, silk (Gu embroidery)

Bodhidharma embroidered on the white silk ground is sitting on a praying mat with a gourd by his side. The outlines of the figure were simple yet vivid. The inscription of the painting is about the famous stories of Bodhidharma “Crossing the Yangtze River on a reed” and “Meditating for nine consecutive years”. It also remarks that the work was created in Lu Xiang Yuan, a garden owned by the Gu family in Jiangnan area which was very well-known for its embroidery. This work combines embroidery and painting. The face of Bodhidharma was painted with black ink. Among the Gu embroidery, it is not common to see works with simple background like this one’s.



(38)

Flute playing lady

Xue Susu (1564 – 1637)

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Hanging scroll, ink on silk

Born in Suzhou, Xue Susu was active during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. She was a legendary figure. It is said that she was beautiful and graceful in both singing and dancing, and that she excelled in poetry, calligraphy and painting. Xu Susu was a well-rounded courtesan, who was even proficient in horse riding.

In the painting, the lady, perhaps portraying Xue Susu herself, plays the flute in a quiet corner of the garden. The rock and bamboo provide a sense of melancholy.



(39)

Lotus and a pair of mandarin ducks

Li Yin (1616 – 1685)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1681

Hanging scroll, ink on silk

Li Yin (1616 – 1685), a female painter in the Ming dynasty, was a famous courtesan in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang area in her early years, and later became the concubine of Ge Zhengqi, from Haining. She was good at painting landscapes, flower-and-bird in ink. Her landscape painting drew inspiration from Song masters Mi Fu and his son, Mi Youren. Her flower-and-bird paintings, drawn in the style of Ming painter Chen Chun were praised for their unrestrained and casual manner. *Lotus and a pair of mandarin ducks*, painted in 1681, expressively depicts plants and waterfowl. The freehand style is consistent with several other paintings collected by the Nanjing Museum.



(40)

Flower

Cao Zhenxiu (1762 – 1822)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1808

Hanging scroll, embroidery on silk

Cao Zhenxiu (1762 – 1822) was born in Xiuning, Anhui. Her interest in calligraphy and painting was deeply rooted in family tradition. She studied calligraphy and painting under her father and uncles. Her husband, Wang Qi sun, was a provincial graduate during the reign of Qianlong. She had an excellent reputation in calligraphy. Her husband appreciated her calligraphy and encouraged Cao Zhenxiu to further develop her artistic talent, and she continued to create new works. Cao Zhenxiu also excelled in embroidery. She used *qiangzhen* stitch (a type of embroidery stitch that depicts the shapes of the subjects, one stitch closely following the others) to create this beautiful embroidery work in 1808, presenting the flowers vividly with a sense of elegance.



(41)

Chinese crab apple and light-vented bulbuls

Shen Guanguan (Unknown)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Hanging scroll, embroidery on silk

Shen Guanguan was born into a family of embroiderers in Suzhou. Her father Shen Junshan published a book about the history of needlework and her mother was a master of hair embroidery. Shen Guanguan's works were appreciated by the top-notch scholars of the time. In this embroidery, a renowned scholar You Dong (1618 – 1704) added an inscription to commend the exquisite skills of Shen Guanguan. This embroidery shows a pair of light-vented bulbuls perched on a Chinese crab apple branch. It vividly depicts the objects and symbolises "living to a ripe old age in conjugal bliss". Shen Guanguan's embroidery emulated the painting style of the Song dynasty. The art of embroidery and painting was integrated as one in this work.



(42)
 Sakyamuni Buddha
 Ling Zhu (Unknown)
 Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)
 Hanging scroll, embroidery on silk

Born in Wujiang, Suzhou, Ling Zhu was a famous boudoir embroidery expert during the reign of Guangxu, in the Qing dynasty. This work shows Sakyamuni Buddha wearing a robe and an ornate crown, sitting with crossed legs on a zafu. The moon-white fabric was meticulously embroidered with a carpet of lotus brocades. A follower stands next to the Buddha, holding a long and narrow flay in his hand. Horsehair was applied to create the outlines and a variety of stitches was used in this embroidery. With her exquisite craftsmanship, Ling Zhu created this masterpiece with bright colours and flowing outlines.



(43)
 Silk tapestry (*kesi*) fan with flower-and-bird design
 Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)
 Textile, wood

This four-lobed fan is an exquisite *kesi* work. The design features a white-headed bird perched on a peony branch on blue ground, symbolising riches and honours to a ripe old age. *Kesi* weaving techniques were used to emulate delicate paintings with subtle tonal changes and diverse colours. This is an elegant and refined sample of a silk screen fan.



(44)

Arhats

Shen Shou (1874 – 1921)

Early 20th century

Vertical scrolls, embroidery on silk

The four major schools of Chinese embroidery were Suzhou, Hunan, Sichuan and Cantonese. During the late Qing dynasty, embroidery master Shen Shou incorporated the principles of light and shadow in traditional Suzhou embroidery and created a realistic *fangzhen xiu* (life-like embroidered imagery), also known as *Shen* embroidery. Shen Shou (1874 – 1921) was originally named as Shen Yunzhi. She studied embroidery under her elder sister at the age of seven. When she was 14, she had built her reputation in her region. She married Yu Jue, a provincial graduate from the Zhejiang province when she was 17 years old. The couple loved and supported each other to develop their talent and career. Every day, they planned to use half of the time to work on painting and half of the time to study embroidery. They integrated the skills and concepts of painting and embroidery. With the support of her husband, Shen excelled her embroidery skills and became renowned for her works. In 1904, on the 70th birthday of Empress Dowager Cixi, Yunzhi offered her a birthday gift of her newly embroidered works, *Eight Immortals Presenting Gifts* and *Amitabha Buddha*. The works were well-acclaimed, and she was granted the word *shou* by the empress. She therefore changed her name to Shen Shou. She soon established a reputation for exquisite embroidery works. In 1914, with the support of Zhang Jian, she became the director and an instructor of the Nantong Women Workers Training Institute.



(45)

American actress – Beecher

Shen Shou (1874 – 1921)

1914 – 1916

Embroidery

This is the representative work of Shen Shou created from 1914 to 1916. It took her three years to complete this masterpiece. Shen incorporated the principles and techniques of chiaroscuro and perspective borrowed from Western paintings into traditional Chinese embroidery, expressing her boundless creativity. She brought the characteristics of Suzhou embroidery into full play, demonstrating her superb craftsmanship. Although the actress Beecher was willing to pay US\$5,000 to collect this work, Zhang Jian declined the offer. In 1986, his offspring donated this masterpiece of embroidery. Shen Shou travelled to Japan where she came into contact with Western classical paintings and got inspiration to invent this life-like embroidery style. Her knowledge, perseverance and intelligence made her a master of embroidery.

Section 4: Extraordinary stories told in ink paintings

Mainly written by men, Chinese cultural history did not mention much about the achievements of the women who looked after their families, supported the husbands and took care of their children. But this does not imply that men did not admire the women's talent. On the contrary, praise for rare and extraordinary women was documented, especially during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Moreover, female virtues, such as gentleness, introversion, steadfastness and chastity, were widely admired in society. Many accounts written by males challenged the prejudice that women were insignificant in promoting historical change. Some of the exhibits in this section are portraits of historical figures. They presented the women's virtues seen through the imagination and skills of outstanding painters.



(46)

Portrait of Dong Xiaowan

Zhou Xu (Unknown)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper

Dong Xiaowan, a native of Suzhou, enjoyed tranquillity and loved the nature. When she was young, her parents were separated and then the family fell into a downturn. In order to support her family, she entered a brothel to earn money. With Xiaowan's extraordinary talent in poetry, painting and music, she became a renowned concubine when she was 16 years old. Like Liu Rushi, Xiaowan was also one of the "Eight Beauties of Qinhuai". Later, she met the famous scholar Mao Xiang in Suzhou. They fell in love with each other by the first time they met. Since then, the fate of Xiaowan had been totally changed. After several twists and turns, Xiaowan left the brothel and eventually became the concubine of Mao Xiang. In the family of a scholar, Xiaowan started to live an elegant and artistic lifestyle. The stories of Dong Xiaowan and Mao Xiang became well known. The gentle and beautiful image of Xiaowan served a model for many painters. It is believed that the painter of this portrait, Zhou Xu, imitated the work by another artist, Xiao Yuncong.

A native of Dongtai, Zhou Xu was active during the reign of Daoguang, in the Qing dynasty, and excelled at landscape, flower-and-bird painting. His brother, Zhou Wei (courtesy name Xiling), was both a calligrapher and a painter.



(47)

Portrait of Li Qingzhao

Gai Qi (1773 – 1828)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk

According to the inscription, Gai Qi imitated Tang Yin's female portrait and depicted the famous writer Li Qingzhao (1084 – 1155) in solitude. Li was a representative poet in the Song dynasty. She was also considered to be “the most talented woman in history”. In her early years, Li Qingzhao led an intellectual but sheltered life of cultural refinement and opulence, and this enabled her to write poetry marked by carefree vitality. However, the Jurchen conquest of the Song capital shattered the blissful family life of Li Qingzhao and her husband, Zhao Mingcheng. In their evacuation to the south, Zhao died of an illness in 1129, leaving Li Qingzhao alone and drifting. In this painting, the lady stands quietly, holding flowers, as if pondering upon something else. She is portrayed as a graceful young woman, but she seems to be sad and lonesome.

A Songjiang (present-day Shanghai) native, Gai Qi (1773 – 1828) was a painter in the Qing dynasty. Drawing inspiration from Hua Yan, Gai Qi is known for employing the plain outline technique and light ink wash. Many of his works feature a simple background, slender and elegant figures, and fluid lines of clothing, creating a new style of women's portraits, known as the “Gai School”.



(48)

Li Duanduan

Tang Yin (1470 – 1524)

Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644)

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper

Among the five people depicted in this painting, there is a scholar with a hat and a moustache sitting on a chair. Both his facial expression and gesture reveal his scholarly manner and elegant demeanour. There are a zither and some scrolls of painting and calligraphy putting on the table next to him. Two maids are standing by the scholar. This man is the Tang poet Cui Ya. It is said that Cui Ya wrote a poem to mock the courtesan Li Duanduan for her tanned skin. After Li Duanduan had heard about this poem she was very worried and eventually decided to meet Cui Ya in person. The guest on the left with a white peony is Li Duanduan, looking calm and graceful. A maid is standing by her side. Surrounded by four women, Cui Ya, who is sitting in front of a screen with painted landscape, looks even more significant.

Tang Yin (1470 – 1524) was a painter known by his courtesy name, Bohu. In the 11th year of the reign of Hongzhi (1498), he was awarded the highest honours (*jiyuan*) as a prefectural graduate. Unfortunately, his official career was cut short because of his inadvertent involvement in an examination scandal. Eccentric and unrestrained, Tang Yin excelled at diverse painting genres, including figures, landscapes, and flowers and birds, and his calligraphy works were praised for being delicate and rhythmic.



(49)

Portrait of Kou Baimen

Fan Qi (1615 – 1694)

Wu Hong (1615 – 1680)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1651

Hanging scroll, ink on paper

Kou Baimen, a native of Jinling (now Nanjing), was one of the “Eight Beauties of Qinhuai”. She was a famous courtesan known for chivalrous deeds. When she was 18 years old, she married with a Ming high official, Zhu Guobi. After the fall of the Ming dynasty, she returned to Qinhuai and eventually died of illness. This portrait of Kou Baimen was painted by Fan Qi and the landscape was painted by Wu Hong. Through the simplistic outlines, the beauty and elegant style of Kou was portrayed in this painting. It is both a remembrance of this beautiful woman and a reflection of the sadness of the Ming loyalists through the poems and inscriptions added to the painting.

Fan Qi (1615 – 1694), born in Jiangning (now Nanjing, Jiangsu province), was a painter in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. He excelled at painting landscapes, flowers and figures, and was regarded as one of the Eight Masters of Jinling.

Wu Hong (1615 – 1680) was a native of Jinxi, Jiangxi and later moved to Jiangning (now Nanjing). Most of his paintings are based on natural scenery and the imaginary world of *Peach Blossom Spring*. He was also one of the Eight Masters of Jinling.



(50)

Jixian picking mulberry leaves

Yin Yuan (1836 – 1899)

Ren Yi (1840 – 1896)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1893

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper

Yin Yuan painted the portrait of this painting, while Ren Yi painted the background and Wu Changshuo added inscriptions. The painting features the wife of Wu Changshou who was around 50 years old at the time. Although Wu Changshuo married Jixian in 1872, Wu could only reunite with her in Suzhou 10 years after their marriage. The couple then moved to live in Suzhou.

Ren Yi is known as one of the “Four Rens of the Shanghai School”, while Yin Yuan (1836 – 1899) excelled in portrait painting. Yin’s portrait paintings were sought-after in the market. In this painting, Jixian’s face was carefully depicted in detail, while her clothes were painted in a free style. In Wu Changshuo’s inscription, he expressed his gratitude to his wife for her support to their family, expressing the love between the couple.



(51)

Leisure time of aristocratic family

Yang Jin (1644 – 1728)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1688

Handscroll, ink and colour on silk

The composition of this handscroll is complex. It depicts numerous scenes, in which the people are taking part in various activities. The delicate outlines and exquisite colouring reflect the sophisticated painting skills of the artist, Yang Jin. He was a well-rounded artist who vividly portrayed the daily life of an aristocratic family in the early Qing dynasty. In this painting, ladies are shown admiring lotus, reading books, doing embroidery, walking through the garden, drinking tea outdoor or chatting with each other. All these activities are meticulously arranged with suitable composition.



(52)
Portrait of Yuan Tingtao's mother
Lu Danrong (Unknown)
Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)
1790
Handscroll, ink and colour on silk

There are limited historical records about the Madame of Songling, Lu Danrong. We know only that she was a native of Songjiang (now Shanghai) and was known by another name, Lu Xiumei. As shown in the painting, she expresses exceptional control of portraiture techniques, and the depiction is subtle and restrained. The lady depicted in this work is the mother of a famous Jiangsu book collector, Yuan Tingtao. She was born in 1742 and passed away in 1781. Yuan's mother remained chaste after the death of her husband. Her virtues were widely admired and respected at the time.



(53)

Oracle bone

Shang dynasty (c. 16th – 11th c. BC)

Bone

Fu Hao was one of the three lawful wives of King Wu Ding of the Shang dynasty. She was a remarkable woman with exceptional ability. Fu Hao was an empress, a mother and a military leader who participated in a number of wars with great achievements in battles. She was also a high priestess who could host the ritual ceremonies of the Shang dynasty.



(54)

Imperial award to the wife of the Prince of the First Rank

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1813

Gold

In 1813, Jiaqing Emperor awarded his second imperial son, Mianning, as the “Prince of the First Rank”, which later became the Daoguang Emperor. His second wife, Lady Donggiya, was then given this four-page gold imperial award, which commended her for her filial piety to her elders, support for her husband, and exemplary behaviour, following the rules of etiquette. This imperial award served as an official recognition of her virtues and status.



(55)

Brocade imperial order

Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

1481

Silk

An imperial order, also known as an imperial edict, was a decree issued by emperors to promote or award their officials. It was usually woven with five-colour or three-colour silk. The patterns and contents of the imperial orders would vary based on the ranks of the officials. They were prepared by the Imperial Academy with standard format and writing style. The number of words would be increased or decreased according to the ranks of the officials. It was written in this imperial order that Qin Hong, the right assistant censor-in-chief of the Censorate at the time, was promoted to be the “Grand Master Exemplar”. His primary wife, Liu was canonised as the “Respectful Lady”.



(56)

Portrait of Xiaoqing

Hu Junsheng (Unknown)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

Album, ink and colour on paper

Xiaoqing, a native of Guangling, was a concubine of a man whose ruthless wife imprisoned her in a mansion in West Lake. Xiaoqing was not able to see her husband. Being lonely and despaired, Xiaoqing turned to admire her youth and beauty. She was happy to stand by the pond to appreciate her own reflection. Someone was hired to paint her portrait before died at the age of 18. Since the early Qing dynasty, many playwrights used her sad story as a blueprint and reinterpret the image of Xiaoqing.

A native of Changzhou, Jiangsu, Hu Junsheng was a skilled portrait painter, active in the reign of Daoguang, in the Qing dynasty. He was also related to portrait painting master Hu Huanxi. When he was young, Hu Junsheng studied painting under Bi Chen, a student of Hu Huanxi. Owing to failing eyesight, Hu Huanxi often asked Junsheng to help him in his later years.



(57)

Portrait of Gu Hengbo

Zhang Pudong (Unknown)

Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

1891

Handscroll, ink and colour on paper

Gu Mei (1619 – 1664) was known by the pseudonym Hengbo; people called her “Madame Hengbo”. She was the most prominent courtesan among the “Eight Beauties of Qinhuai” and afterwards led a blissful family life. Gu married Gong Dingzi (1615 – 1673) and changed her name to Xu Shanchi. She was proficient in literature and history and skilled in poetry and painting. Her landscape paintings were exquisite, and she was especially good at painting orchids. Her earlier work, *Orchid*, painted on a fan, became a treasure of the national museum. The marital life of Gu Mei and Gong Dingzi was delightful. Gong Dingzi was bold and carefree, but poor at managing money. After the marriage, Gu Mei helped him to take care of the household. Gong was good at making friends with talented people, which enhanced his reputation. Later, Gu received the title “Wife of a first rank official” from the Qing court. According to Shen Jingxiu’s inscription, Xu Zeng asked the painter Zhang Pudong to copy the portrait created by the female painter Jin Liying for this artwork.

Zhang Pudong, a painter in the late Qing dynasty, was good at landscapes. His works inherited the aesthetic ideas of the Loudong School.

Shen Jingxiu (1835 – 1899), a poet and essayist, was skilled in calligraphy. He maintained a close relationship with Ren Bonian and Shu Hao, and often collaborated with them.

Xu Zeng (1824 – 1903) was a scholar and bibliophile in the late Qing dynasty. He was keen on emendation and passionate about calligraphy and painting. He had a rich collection of manuscripts and books.

Zhang Jingqi (1827 – ?) was a writer in the late Qing dynasty .