



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol. 3, No. 3 (Total Issue No. 10) Published: 2025-09-30

Time and Emotion in Ming Dynasty Literati Four Seasons Miscellaneous Flower Paintings

Teng Teng

To cite this article: Teng Teng, “Time and Emotion in Ming Dynasty Literati Four Seasons
Miscellaneous Flower Paintings,” ArtFrontier 3, no.3 (Sep. 2025): 97-110 DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.64212/RDQA2552](https://doi.org/10.64212/RDQA2552).

DOI: 10.64212/RDQA2552

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

© 2025 Frontier Press.

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: <https://www.cafontierpress.org/>

Email: editorial2023@artfrontier.org

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



Time and Emotion in Ming Dynasty Literati Four Seasons Miscellaneous Flower Paintings

Teng Teng

Abstract

Literati painters of the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty produced numerous four seasons miscellaneous flower paintings. Ubiquitous in literati painting-centered social exchanges, these works reflect a break from the traditional formal language of the Song Dynasty under the influence of the burgeoning “School of Mind” (xinxue, 心學). Responding to Wang Wei’s precedent of “not being bound by the four seasons,” they embody the individualistic contemplation of Ming literati painters. Characterized by distinct emotional expression, these paintings are intrinsically linked to the social transformations and fluctuating fortunes of the literati class during this period. They served not only as vital instruments of social interaction in the late Ming but also as critical vehicles for the maintenance and expression of the literati’s sense of self.

Key Words

Ming Dynasty, four seasons miscellaneous flower paintings, painting and social interaction

In established art history, Wang Wei is noted for “painting regardless of the four seasons, such as depicting peach, apricot, hibiscus, and lotus in a single scene... which he deemed difficult to discuss with the vulgar...”¹ This practice shattered long-standing temporal rules and established visual experiences in painting, setting a precedent for flowers of different seasons to flourish within the same pictorial space and time. Departing from the thinking of strictly adhering to natural laws and relying entirely on the laws of the seasons to observe and contemplate nature, this approach sparked widespread debate in the history of painting regarding whether depicted imagery should strictly conform to physical truth. Seasonal flowers remained a significant theme in ancient Chinese painting. In the literati paintings of the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty, handscrolls of four seasons flowers were highly favored in literati painting-centered social circles. Artistic techniques evolved from the “boneless” (沒骨) method, exemplified by Shen Zhou and Chen Chun, to the “expressive ink” (shuimo xieyi, 水墨寫意) style represented by Xu Wei. Diverse forms emerged, including independent or combined pictorial motifs,

continuous handscrolls with cropped views, and the “one poem, one scene” format. A review of these works reveals that beginning with Shen Zhou, contemporaries and successors such as Wen Zhengming, Chen Chun, Xu Wei, and Sun Kehong were keen on creating four seasons bird-and-flower handscrolls. The painters’ intent of “connecting categories to link emotions, where atmosphere and interest often merge”² is manifested in the works and their colophons, conveying their respective emotions and artistic concepts. Why was the handscroll format of four seasons bird-and-flower painting so widely utilized by literati painters during this period? Furthermore, what specific creative thoughts of the Ming literati do these handscrolls embody?

1. Inheritance and Evolution: The Development of Traditional Seasonal Flower Themes in the Ming Dynasty

The handscrolls of bird-and-flower paintings that blend imagery of the four seasons flourished in the Ming Dynasty as the Wu School painters rose to prominence.



Figure 1. Mu Xi, *Paintings from Life*. Ink on paper, 44.5 × 1017.1 cm, Song dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

However, prior to this, during the Song Dynasty—a period when “Yearly Scenery” (一年景) decoration was popular—such four seasons bird-and-flower handscrolls were already in circulation.

Song Dynasty painting is most celebrated in art history for being both derived from nature and deeply

evocative. The *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (《宣和畫譜》) states: “The essence of the Five Elements is gathered between Heaven and Earth. When Yin and Yang exhale, vegetation flourishes; when they inhale, they wither and contract. Thus, the beauty of flowers and the lushness of trees are innumerable... Therefore,

