

39. Chen Xing [Ch'en Hsing] (1603-1688 or later)

“Magpies on Snowy Branch” 1688

Hanging scroll, ink on silk
152.5 x 66.4 cm. (60 x 26 1/4 in.)

Inscription:

During a summer day in the year 1688, painted by the eighty-six-year-old man, Chen Xing.”

Artist's seals:

Chen Xing zhiyin; and one illegible



A snow-covered tree branch describes an S-curve as it extends upwards from the lower boundary of the painting. A total of eight magpies—six perched along the trunk, two flying above—provide formal contrast with their support in terms of shape and color and add very auspicious connotations, so widely are they known as harbingers of joy and bliss.

The technique is especially noteworthy. Leaving blank areas of the white silk to circumscribe the leaves of the vines and also to suggest an accumulation of snow on the branch, the artist then painted the leaves and branch before washing in the entire background with ink wash. This wash was not applied evenly, and the resulting changes in tonality suggest a three-dimensional rather than flat surface, a suggestion of pictorial space that is reinforced by the curving of the branch away from the frontal picture plane into the middle ground.

This well-painted and evocative design was created by Chen Xing, an artist active in Suzhou during the late Ming-early Qing era. On the basis of extant paintings, which range in date from 1653 to 1688, Chen began by painting complex landscapes related to Lan Ying and other Hangzhou artists and ended with bird-and-flower paintings such as the present that evoke much earlier styles of paintings.