

44. Kang Tao [K'ang T'ao] (ca.1693-ca.1763)

“Beautiful Lady” 1748

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk
116.3 x 47.3 cm. (45 3/4 x 18 5/8 in.)

Inscription:

“A plucked flower—to send to whom? During the third lunar month of the year 1748 in the Qianlong reign-era, made by Lianrui Fengtou (‘tip of the lotus flower stamen’), Buxiuren (‘imperishable man’).”

Artist’s seal:

Shizhou (“stone boat”)

Collector’s seal:

Yangzhi Jianshang

Provenance: An American private collection



A lovely woman stands alone, isolated against the blank ground, and thus commands our close attention. Wearing a flowing gown, with colorful textiles wrapped as a sash around her middle and as a wrap over her shoulders, the figure has yet a pensive air, looking slightly downward while holding up and seeming about to proffer a sprig of blossoming plum to someone unseen.

The plum has been described as “ice-skinned and jade-boned” and compared to a burgeoning but as yet innocent girl. It represents winter and virginity. “Plum-blossom” is also a common term for lady’s-maids and serving girls, and carries connotations of sexual pleasure. The present painting is thus a very beautiful and pleasurable visualization of complex ideas and emotions.

Kang Tao (ca.1693-ca.1763), the artist, was born in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. Although he mainly lived in Yangzhou, the names by which he referred to himself in later years suggest he lived then in the area of Huangshan in Anhui province.

The late 18th century *Yangzhou huafanglu* reports that Kang excelled in painting landscapes and bird-and-flower compositions but virtually all of his extant paintings feature beautiful ladies engaged in activities ranging from the maternal to the social to the amorous. Such works are not only lovely aesthetic objects but they also embody in symbolic form some of the most basic human desires. The sources of Kang’s imagery and style range from Sung academic painting to works done by the Ming masters Qiu Ying (d. 1552) and Tang Yin (1470-1523), but those earlier paintings most often included detailed environments for the figures. In Kang’s paintings, that more restrictive approach is abandoned in favor of concentration on the figures alone, which allows them to stand not as individuals limited by time and space but almost as iconic representations of various ideas (fig. 1). The present

painting, with even less of a background, was done twenty-seven years after the 1721 picture illustrated here and may suggest a chronological change in style over time.

Standard biographical sources do not record the dates of Kang Tao's birth and death but the *Yangzhou huafanglu* does note that at age seventy he was still able to write very small "fly-head" sized characters. Kang's latest known paintings date to the year 1763, the latest date in a documented career of 42 years; if we assume that he was at least seventy years of age at that point, he would have been born in the year 1693 or earlier. The present painting was thus done during the years of his maturity, exemplifying the distilled essence of a long and very distinguished career.



Fig. 1. Kang Tao: "Ladies with Children in Garden," 1721, after *Kaikodo Journal* III, Spring, 1997, cat. 14, p. 84.