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比之干城良有以
也萬機之暇迺命
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寫幽懷
腸太監王忠
宣 二年秋八月
上瀚
御製

Zhu Zhanji [Chu Chan-ji] 朱瞻基
(1399-1435)
[ruled as the Xuande emperor 宣德帝: 1425-1435]

"Hawk on Branch" 1427
枝鷹圖

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk.
115.8 x 59.9 cm. (45 1/2 x 23 1/2 in.)

Inscription:
"Hawks flocking together in lofty groves have unyielding characters. Formerly they were compared to the virtuous in cities.... when at leisure from the ten-thousand affairs of state, I then call for (brush and ink) from the study and paint so as to banish my cares and give lodging to my feelings of loneliness.
Created by the Emperor during the first ten days of the 8th lunar month in Autumn, of the 2nd year of the Xuan….x……..reign-era and presented to Eunuch Wang Zhong."

Artist's seal**:** *Youshu* ("Written by the Emperor")

Two collector's seals:
One of Xiang Yuanbian 項元汴 (1525-1590); the other illegible

The hawk pitches aggressively forward, anchored by the firm grip of its scaley talons around a desiccated tree branch. The dark-feathered back of the bird with its square tail is depicted from a high vantage point. The wings, tipped in white at the bends, seem about to unfold but are still pulled close enough to the body to present a stout physique. The long blade-shaped contour feathers, carefully delineated with edges in reserve, are depicted in naturalistically aligned and overlapping formation. The shorter feathers from the top of the head, down the nape of the neck and across the mantle, are repetitive jabs of dark over a lighter ink ground while the bird's underside and upper leg feathers appear, soft, white, and spotted. The bird's keen vision is conveyed in the sensitive depiction of the focused eye while the sharply pointed hooked beak appears ready to engage. The branch is a growth from an apparently old tree; another branch appears to have broken off leaving a jagged stump behind

At some point there appears to have been an attempt to pass this painting off as a work by the eminent Northern Song period painter-aesthete, Zhao Ji (1082-1135) who ruled as the Huizong emperor (1100-1125/26). However, neither the style of the painting nor the calligraphy are consistent with those of the Huizong emperor, whose works are universally well-known. On the other hand the painting style, as well as subject, are closely akin to the works of such early Ming dynasty painters for example Bian Wenjin and Lin Liang. Despite all of this, a perfect opportunity to promote the notion of Song authorship, which would likely have added to the value of the painting, was provided by the inscription. Due to the darkening of the silk over several centuries as well as stress on the silk, the inscription has not been perfectly preserved and is therefore difficult to read in some areas. However, one character appears to have been purposefully cut out and that character would have been key to the date and therefore authorship of the painting: the second character of the reign-era in the inscription here was obliterated in order to make possible attribution to the Xuanhe 宣和 era (1119-1125). The original era written by the author of the inscription--the only other possibility--is the Xuande 宣德 era (1426-1436) of the emperor Zhu Zhanji, whose style of painting and calligraphy do correspond to those seen here. Final confirmation of the correct date of the painting, 1427, comes from the name of the recipient, Wang Zhong, who was Secretary to the Ministry of War during the Xuande reign era.

Zhu Zhanji ruled for no more than a decade and in that short time distinguished himself as an enlightened and sympathetic ruler and a champion of the arts. For example, the creative production of porcelain at Jingdezhen burgeoned under his oversight, the innovation combined with the revival of old imperial styles enriched the ceramic landscape of the early 15th century, which is still lauded as one high point in the ceramic history of China. Zhu Zhanji had inherited a trove of capable advisors and officials several of whom had long served the empire and the emperor is known to have dedicated his own paintings to those in his circle, as is the case of the present work He also gathered around him many of the talented painters of the day, studied, enjoyed and judged their work. Whereas many of his own paintings are stylistically somewhat light-handed, even delicate, in color and ink on paper, the present work in its monochromatic splendor on silk is related more directly to the style of the professional painters attached to his court with whom an interchange of ideas and approaches to painting is apparent.