

Spreading Falling Blossoms: Style and Replication in Shen Zhou's Late Calligraphy

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ABSTRACT

The renowned artist Shen Zhou (1427–1509) began to explore the theme of falling blossoms as a subject for poetry, painting, and calligraphy in his very late years. The theme stands out both for the number of times Shen Zhou worked on it and for the quality of the poems, calligraphies, and paintings that he produced. He began with ten poems in 1503, prompted by an illness that kept him from enjoying the seasonal blossoming of spring fruit trees in the Suzhou area. His intention was to record his meditations on the passage of time and human mortality, but the act of writing these verses quickly shed its private, meditative cloak and became something fundamentally different as Shen Zhou shared them with a number of prominent cultural figures in the Jiangnan region (Suzhou-Nanjing area), including his students. The poems became objects of celebration—admired products from a revered, sage-like elder in the cultured city of Suzhou—and they consequently prompted the rhyming poems of others on the theme. These, in turn, were rhymed again by Shen Zhou. In the end, from the period of 1504–1508, Shen Zhou produced some fifty poems on the theme of falling flowers, as well as numerous calligraphic transcriptions and paintings. Recognizing that his own end could not be far off, and playing off of the falling blossoms theme's focus on the passage of time and loss of youth, in a highly conscious manner, Shen Zhou made falling blossoms his swansong.

The many manifestations of the falling blossoms theme raise a number of issues, from the practical matter of authenticity to more intriguing questions of the role of style in Shen Zhou's promotion of his late-life artistic persona and the circulation of artistic identity in early sixteenth-century Suzhou. This article introduces the primary materials of the Falling Blossoms project, including important comments made by Shen Zhou and

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others that address problems related to the artistic process. The focus is on Shen Zhou's practice of calligraphy. A synthesized approach is presented, in which the usual coordinates of connoisseurship—quality, style, and habit—are balanced by considerations of intention and social practice, and the visual properties of calligraphy are recognized as part of a broader discourse on culture-formation.

Key Words: Shen Zhou, Wen Zhengming, calligraphy

The renowned artist Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427–1509) began exploring the theme of falling blossoms as a subject for poetry and painting in his late years. The theme stands out both for the attention Shen Zhou devoted to it and for the quality of the poems and paintings that he produced. He began with ten poems prompted by an illness that kept him from enjoying the seasonal blossoming of spring fruit trees in the Suzhou area. Shen Zhou's intention was to record his meditations on the passage of time, the ephemeral nature of beauty and human mortality, and the poems succeed as touching, genuine reflections on these most universal of topics. However, the act of writing verses on the theme of falling blossoms fundamentally changed when Shen Zhou shared his poems with a number of prominent cultural figures in the Jiangnan region (Suzhou-Nanjing area). The poems shed their personal cloak and became objects of celebration: admired products from Shen Zhou, who was considered the revered, sage-like elder of the cultured city of Suzhou. The private immediately became public, as those with whom the poems were shared wrote their own falling blossoms poems, following the time-honored social practice of engaging in poetic dialogue by responding to the original rhymes. These, in turn, were rhymed again by Shen Zhou, who felt compelled to respond to the responders. In the end, Shen Zhou produced some fifty poems on the theme of falling blossoms,¹ but the five-fold increase of poems hardly tells the whole story. Evidence suggests that from about 1503 to 1507 or later, a period that corresponds with the last phase of his life, Shen Zhou made and circulated a number of transcriptions of his Falling Blossoms poems, oftentimes accompanying them with paintings. Recognizing that his own end could not be far off, and playing off of the theme's focus on the passage of time and loss of youth, in a highly conscious manner Shen Zhou made falling blossoms his swansong. On the basis of comments made by Shen Zhou himself and later traditional Chinese commentators, one can easily argue that his Falling Blossoms represents Shen Zhou's single

1. Shen Zhou's fifty *Falling Blossoms* poems are found in his collected works, *Shitian Shixuan* (*Selection of Poetry by Shen Zhou*) *Sikuquanshu*, Wenyuange edition/electronic version (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Ltd. 2002), 9, pp.16b–26a.

most important body of artistic work.

The goal of this article is to examine the role of Shen Zhou's calligraphy in the Falling Blossoms project. Calligraphy, of course, is the necessary third component in this quintessential presentation of the *sanjue* 三絕, or "three perfections," and the primary vehicle for presenting the poems, but this is not to assume that it shoulders equal weight with poetry and painting. Although few today think of Shen Zhou as a poet, it is likely that he considered poetry—the genesis of Falling Blossoms—to be the most important of the expressive arts.² And while Shen Zhou was rightly praised for his abilities as a calligrapher and developed a distinctive style of writing, his reputation as a master of the graphic arts always relied more on his painting, which displays a higher degree of creative latitude and sensitivity. If, as I contend, poetry and painting are the twin engines that provide Falling Blossoms with its generative power, why then focus on Shen Zhou's calligraphy? The answer becomes apparent when we step back and look at Falling Blossoms as the sum of its various parts. The project may have been initiated by the incidental (Shen Zhou's illness), but it quickly transformed into an involved, multi-faceted program, the end result of which was the presentation of Shen Zhou as both person and paradigm, which is a matter of considerable consequence. Shen Zhou's calligraphy plays an important role in helping to define that image, and determining the manner in which this occurs is of obvious interest. Equally important, the calligraphy of the Falling Blossoms project, amounting to the same poems written a number of times over a period of years, provides a rare opportunity to evaluate patterns of change and consistency under tightly circumscribed conditions and consider what these might say about the construction of persona. Shen Zhou's own comments suggest complex impulses at work in his production of Falling Blossoms. Are these reflected in his calligraphy? Or to phrase the question more productively: How does Shen Zhou's calligraphy coordinate with what we can learn regarding the development of this project?

When confronted with a number of examples of a text written by a figure as famous as Shen Zhou, the immediate and prudent reaction is to assume questions of authenticity.³ The fame of the Falling Blossoms poems in particular, coupled with

2. See Jonathan Chaves research and comments on Shen Zhou as a poet in his "The Chinese Painter as Poet," in Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong eds., *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 431–458, esp. pp. 450–455. See also Rongchun Ruan, *Shen Zhou* (Changchun: Jilin Meishu Chubanshe, 1996), pp. 175–188.

3. For a recent work on the issue of authenticating Shen Zhou's calligraphy, see Joan Stanley-Baker, "Identifying Shen Zhou (1427–1509) Methodological Problems in Authentication: A Work in Progress," *Oriental Art*, 55.3 (2006), pp. 48–60.

their early publication, made them an attractive target for forgers already familiar with Shen Zhou's distinctive style of writing. There is no question that the problems posed by forgery must be taken seriously here. However, recognition of the fact that Shen Zhou repeatedly wrote out the poems over the last years of his life complicates the problem of connoisseurship: quality and stylistic variation must be carefully considered in personal and social contexts of expression and function. This essay will not foreground the kind of detailed, stroke-by-stroke, formal analysis that is commonly employed for calligraphy studies, as my primary focus is precisely on these personal and social contexts that envelop Shen Zhou's *Falling Blossoms*. Indeed, without an understanding of such contexts, exercises in authentication are tainted by a sense of false objectivity. In this essay, I offer a synthesized approach, whereby the methods of connoisseurship are refined to accommodate the specific conditions posed by the artist's exploration of this theme in early sixteenth-century Suzhou. One goal, thus, is to consider a methodological structure for the study of calligraphy, in which the usual coordinates of connoisseurship—quality, style, and habit—are modified by considerations of intention and social practice. In this regard, the materials introduced and discussed here can be fruitfully integrated into a broader discourse on culture-formation during the mid-Ming.

1. Genesis and Evolution

... In spring of the *yichou* year of the Hongzhi reign (1505), I fell ill for an entire month. When I finally arose from bed I rushed outside only to find that the blossoms had been swept clean of the trees, bits of red and white filling the ground. I missed their opening and only saw their falling. This filled me with such sadness. Encountering objects, I created verses. I titled the ten quatrains *Falling Blossoms* and sent them to Zhengming—one who understands me...

弘治乙丑春，一病彌月，迨起則林花淨盡，紅白滿地。不偶其開而見其落，不能無悵然。觸物成詠，命爲落花篇，得十律焉，寫寄徵明知己……

This account by Shen Zhou, narrating the specific circumstances that led to his composition of the first ten *Falling Blossoms* verses, appears in the middle of an important inscription on a handscroll in the Nanjing Museum. (Fig. 1) Shen Zhou signed that inscription *The Eighty-year-old Man*, which would suggest a date of 1506. Fortuitously, this is also the year of a well-known extant portrait of Shen Zhou, which thus provides a human face to complement the *Falling Blossoms* project. (Fig. 2) Two years earlier, on the first day (*ji* 吉) of the tenth (lunar) month, 1504, Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) produced an album transcribing in “fly-head” small standard-script

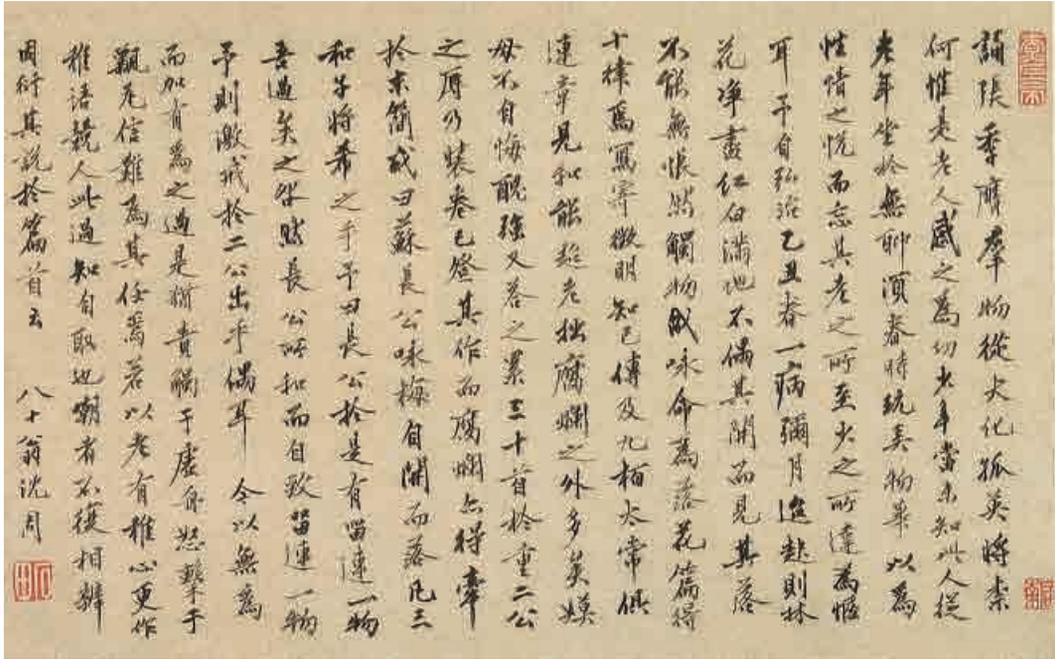


Fig. 1
Shen Zhou, *Falling Blossoms*. Ca. 1506,
Ming Dynasty. Detail of a handscroll, ink
on paper, h: 35.9 cm. Nanjing Museum.



Fig. 2
Anonymous, *Portrait of Shen Zhou at
Age Eighty*. 1506, Ming Dynasty.
Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk,
71×52.4 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.
Source: *Yiyuan duoying* #27 (1986), p. 45.