



# Peach Blossom Spring : Gardens and Flowers in Chinese Painting

Richard Barnhart



A vast Imperial pleasure palace on the outskirts of the Tang dynasty capital is the subject of a set of hanging scrolls acquired for The Metropolitan Museum of Art by The Dillon Fund in Spring 1982. Working in 1691 with shimmering azurite and malachite, the artist Yuan Chiang gave the seventh-century Chiu-cheng Palace-the Palace of Nine Perfections-an imaginative splendor that may have surpassed that of the original. The acquisition of this set of twelve paintings lent impetus to the suggestion of the distinguished collector John M. Crawford, Jr., that the right moment had arrived to mount a show of garden and flower paintings at the Museum. In addition to the Tang garden palace, here viewers will find depictions of private gardens full of mystery, wonder, and innumerable blossoms, painted both in the vividly realistic court style as well as in the refined literati mode of pale color, or in the most subtle technique of all-shades of pure ink. The exhibition and publication *Peach Blossom Spring*, like the garden of the Astor Court nearby, communicate the importance of gardens and the contemplation of nature in the Chinese tradition of self-cultivation. Quiet reflection was one of the most significant activities in the garden. To let the mind ramble at ease in that imaginary world was to nurture equanimity and possibly to gain a degree of enlightenment. The author, Shen Fu, a garden enthusiast, put it this way: I used to crouch down by the hollows and protrusions of the mud wall or among the tangled grasses and bushes on the raised flower beds, so that I was on the same level as the flower beds. Then I would compose myself and look closely, until the clumps of grass became a forest, the ants and other insects became wild beasts, the clods and pebbles which jutted up were hills, and those which sank down were valleys. My spirit roamed freely in this world and I felt completely at ease. These paintings, similarly, invite us to share an attitude of playfulness, to experience the delight of imaginative leaps into illusion. We are encouraged to closely approach delicate images of nature, to let our spirits roam through detailed spaces. We will be rewarded in the very least by the sheer beauty of masterly evocations of flowers and gardens. But greater pleasure is promised to the readers of the catalogue, as they comprehend the deeper layers of significance inherent in these works. [This book was originally published in 1983 and has gone out of print. This edition is a print-on-demand version of the original book.]

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