



*Panel from Orchids and Rocks, Gu Mei, ca. 1644*

The Sackler Museum's 2016 exhibit, *Painting with Words: Gentleman Artists of the Ming Dynasty*, displays a number of pieces from the Wu School of art, a prominent school located in Suzhou that peaked during the middle of the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644 C.E.).

The exhibit highlights artists like Shen Zhou (1427 – 1509), the “spiritual founder” of the Wu School, and Wen Zhengming (1470 – 1559), the most prominent artist of the period. As the name of the exhibit suggests, they are all gentlemen—not just in gender, but also in status.

The gentlemen “ideal” was a standard of accomplishment for men in the Ming Dynasty. They were literati, a group of scholar-artists who rose through the Confucian education system and often took official positions in the government to serve the court in Beijing. Instead of being professional, full-time artists who sold their services to patrons, the literati were amateurs who created art for the appreciation of their fellow artists.

While this exhibit accurately portrays the male-dominated sphere of gentlemen artists from the middle of the Ming Dynasty, one late-Ming piece from the Sackler's holdings offers a different look at the literati. Gu Mei's *Orchids and Rocks*, painted around the fall of the Ming Dynasty in 1644, is renowned for its sophisticated, fluent, and beautiful brushwork. Gu Mei was a prominent member of late-Ming intellectual circles, and was an accomplished musician, poet, and painter; she was also a woman.



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Gu Mei was born near present-day Nanjing in 1619. Her beauty, combined with her exceptional talent in poetry and painting, carried her from being simple courtesan in the Nanjing district to being widely famed and admired for her work. Her home, known as Mei's Tower, attracted many prominent members of the literati, who gathered together to talk about politics and art. By the time of her death, Gu Mei had achieved a remarkable amount of independence and boldness for the time; she even resisted the new Qing authorities by hiding a Ming loyalist in her art studio in Beijing.

Though women were excluded from traditional Confucian education and could not take the civic exams, many like Gu Mei broke through the scholarly spheres of influence through their husbands, lovers and peers. Once they had access to an audience that cared purely for the quality of the art, the merit of their paintings alone could cement their presence and reputation as true artists. A select few, Gu Mei included, were considered equal members of the gentleman scholar circle; they were true female gentleman artists.

Even if rendered unequal to their male counterparts by every other aspect of traditional Chinese values, these female artists achieved a moment of equality and independence, speaking to the power of art as a medium for progress and a tool for challenging common conventions.

There are dozens of other recorded cases of Ming Dynasty females breaking through into the literati, and presumably hundreds more that aren't recorded. Of those that we know of, Gu Mei was second in reputation only to Ma Shouzhen (1548 – 1604), whose own art was praised by collector Pei Jingfu (1894 – 1924) as being “as elegant as that of Wen Zhengming”—the central figure from the Sackler's current exhibit.

Although the Ming literati network was widespread, complex, and vastly intertwined, the Sackler's *Painting with Words* exhibit captures a brilliant snapshot of painting and poetry during one of China's greatest dynasties. However, beneath the narrative of the Wu School is a story that can only be told by pieces like Gu Mei's *Orchids and the Rocks*—the story of the *female* gentleman artists.