

## THE FOUR GENTLEMEN 四君子

The Four Gentlemen (四君子), also called the Four Noble Ones, in Chinese art refer to four plants: the plum (梅), the orchid (蘭), the bamboo (竹), and the chrysanthemum (菊). The term matches the four plants with junzi, or "gentlemen" in Confucianism. They are common subjects in traditional ink and wash painting, belonging to the category of bird-and-flower painting in Chinese art.



*Cymbidium*



*Bamboo*



*Chrysanthemum*



*Plum*

The *Cymbidium* orchid became an independent subject of Chinese painting during the Song dynasty (960–1279).

Artists created meticulous depictions of the orchid employing outline and color.

From the thirteenth century on, most scholar artists chose to paint the leaves and blossoms calligraphically, using only ink. Following the Mongol conquest of the Song in 1279 and the founding of the Yuan dynasty, the "ink orchid" took on strong overtones of loyalty to the fallen regime.

The subject also held appeal for certain groups that flourished at the margins of society. Monk artists belonging to the Chan school of Buddhism, for example, appropriated the ink orchid for their own purposes during the fourteenth century. Similarly, while the plant remained perennially popular among scholar artists, during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (16th - 17th centuries) the ink orchid also became a mainstay for a coterie of renowned courtesan painters, many of whom formed romantic liaisons with prominent scholars of the time.

Traditional Chinese Brush painting contains only enough detail in order to recognize the subject and its character. It's not necessary to "fill up" the whole painting - white space is desirable.

The plum tree is renowned for bursting into a riot of blossoms in the dead of winter. Its subtle fragrance spills forth at one of the coldest times of the year, making it difficult to go unnoticed. Though neither the plum tree nor its blossoms are very striking, they manage to exude an otherworldly exquisiteness and beautiful elegance during the desolation of winter. The demeanor and character of the plum tree thereby serves as a metaphor for inner beauty and humble display under adverse conditions.

The orchid represents the spring. The beauty and grace of the orchid is fragile in form, with no violent tendencies. Like the plum blossom, its fragrance is never overpowering, symbolizing humility and nobility.

The stalk of the bamboo is hollow, which came to symbolize tolerance and open-mindedness. Furthermore, the flexibility and strength of the bamboo stalk also came to represent the human values of cultivation and integrity in which one yields but does not break.

The chrysanthemum blooms in the cold autumn air and foretells the coming of winter, which symbolizes the virtue to withstand all adversities. It was the favorite flower of the great poet Tao Yuanming (陶淵明, 365-427), a towering figure in Chinese literati culture.

Orchid (蘭, lán)	Chrysanthemum (菊, jú)
Bamboo (竹, zhú)	Plum (梅, méi)

四 (sì)(four) + 君子 (junzi) (Gentleman)



*Cymbidium*



*Cymbidium*

THE EDITOR