

ASIAN ART COLLECTION

Shen Quan

A Birthday Painting

Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 1756

Ink and color on silk

99 × 45 ³/₈ in. (251.5 × 115.3 cm)

Museum purchase, funds provided by the Kathleen M. Axline Acquisition Endowment
2004.32.1

The inscription by the Qing dynasty artist Shen Quan at the top right of the hanging scroll reads, “During the lesser spring [tenth lunar calendar month] of Emperor Qianlong’s reign [1756], brushed for the honorable master Jingweng to celebrate his sixtieth birthday and to wish him a glorious long life by Shen Quan, known as Nanpin.”

Born in Wuxing, Zhejiang Province, Shen Quan specialized in bird-and-flower paintings and in depicting animals. Shen’s renown for such subjects established him as an ideal candidate in the international market for commissioned paintings, especially by clients in Japan. It is noted in letters and documents that various shōgun and other high-ranking government officials throughout Japan urged Shen to travel to cities like Nagasaki during the mid-eighteenth century. Accepting several commissions, Shen was able to enjoy considerable wealth as well as receiving prestigious gifts from his commissioning hosts in Japan.

A Birthday Painting depicts two deer resting beside a woodland stream. One deer kneels down to nibble at a fungus growing on the rocks. The other deer looks up to observe a monkey in the trees poking a beehive with a stick. A pair of birds playfully chasing each other through the air completes the scene. All of these images are visual puns for words and phrases in Chinese that convey wishes for wealth, long life, high status, and marital happiness. The combination of so many auspicious images in this painting is explained by the inscription that identifies it as a commissioned gift for a man named Jingweng on his sixtieth birthday. In the traditional Chinese numerical system, 60 represented a complete cycle of numbers, so persons who reached their sixtieth birthday were considered to have reached a great milestone.

