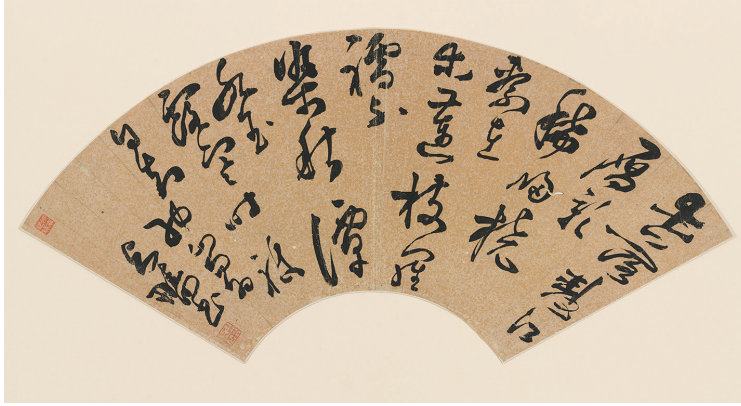


OBJECT IN FOCUS

## Poem in cursive script



Wang Wen (1497–1576)

China

Ming dynasty, mid-16th century

Ink on gold-flecked paper

7 3/8 x 20 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1988.7

## Describe

This is a fan-shaped calligraphy art piece. The gold-flecked paper naturally tapers from the top to a much narrower base. The artist Wang Wen (1497–1576) carefully renders his writings to fit this shape. He alternates long lines of three or four characters with short lines of two. Many of the characters are unconnected, but in some places, several characters are strung together. Some characters look like tightly coiled wire while others are written in a more open, relaxed fashion. The characters are written with heavy, dark ink. Wang must have reloaded his brush frequently to keep it moist. The text is a poem written by Wang himself. It describes traveling home by boat on a chilly autumn day.

## Analyze

Calligraphy is the art of writing. Since ancient times in China, calligraphy has been considered the most important visual art form. Sharing the same tools (brush and ink), calligraphy enjoys even higher status than painting. It has been valued by Chinese scholars as a way of self-expression and cultivation long before painting began. In a sense, how one writes is as important, if not more, as what one writes. Following the brushstrokes of the characters, one can easily decipher the creative process behind the artwork. Here, Wang Wen wrote in cursive script, one of the five main script styles in Chinese calligraphy. Originated during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the cursive script was created for the purpose of faster writing and better artistic expression. In this script, characters are simplified. Several characters may flow together in a single movement of the brush.



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## Interpret

This calligraphy piece is written on a folding fan. The folding fan, made of several bamboo sticks held together at the end by a rivet, became popular during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Folding fan art is considered one of the basic forms of Chinese painting and calligraphy. It was highly regarded by Ming and Qing (1644–1911) scholars and officials. Exchanging folding fans with their own writing and painting as gifts of friendship was a popular tradition among scholar-officials of the time.

The four-line poem translates:

Apricots shed along the twin rivers, the shadows of geese are few;  
My homeward oars are moored to a branch of this magnolia.  
I do not wet my silken robe in waters of the autumn pool;  
For I know it is the season of cold and dew that is clear as jade.

## Inquire

- Research the five main script styles in Chinese calligraphy. Compare and contrast them in terms of when they are used. Describe the advantages and disadvantages with each script.
- When do Americans use cursive script? Teaching cursive writing has declined in American schools. Research possible reasons why.
- Describe the mood of the poem. What emotions does it evoke?
- What natural occurrences do you associate with the arrival of autumn where you live?

## Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1988.7/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

