

Squirrel and Bamboo

松鼠與竹

Dated 1889

Hanging scroll

Ink and color on paper

27 × 15¼ in. (68.5 × 38.5 cm)

The Richard Fabian Collection

INSCRIPTION:

己丑陽春，虛谷寫。

Springtime, in the *jichou* year [1889].

Painted by Xugu.

ARTIST'S SEAL:

Xugu shuhua 虛谷書畫 (square/relief)

THE SQUIRREL was one of Xugu's favorite subjects.¹ As a longtime resident of monasteries, he had the opportunity to observe these small forest creatures at close range. Squirrels were gentle, simple, and completely natural, characteristics that meshed with his own pursuit of purity and freedom. Xugu completed a great many paintings of them; those from his final years demonstrate his ability to match his technique to various expressions of his subject's many moods.²

Here, the squirrel lifts its head to gaze upward, and its mouth opens to reveal a small, reddish tongue. For the single visible eye, the artist limns two arcs of dark ink to indicate upper and lower lids and then fills the encompassing circle with reddish brown and cinnabar to evoke a three-dimensional form. The creature's expression is one of simple animal delight. Xugu depicts the squirrel's fur with extremely fine brush lines accented with short strokes of dry, scorched ink (i.e., exceptionally thick ink that has been left overnight to thicken) followed by light washes of ochre and ink. Loaded with water, the brush leaves pale watermarks that describe the squirrel's round body, ingeniously conveying the thickness and fluffiness of its downy fur and hinting at the faint whisper of a breeze through its hairs. The intent but relaxed squirrel sits on a stone "written" in large strokes. Xugu's succinct brush lines and simple, rounded angles convey an inanimate, sturdy solidity that contrasts with the creature's lively, fluffy form.

Stalks of bamboo enter the painting from the upper left. In contrast to the "boneless" brush used in *Green Bamboo* (cat. no. 3), Xugu employs the "double-outline" method and fills in the forms with color. But unlike a traditional double outline, which relies on long, smooth, flowing lines, the artist employs a thirsty brush with scorched ink in combination with *zhan* 顫 (quivering), *duan* 斷 (broken), and *nishixing* 逆勢行 (reverse-momentum) strokes to outline the bamboo leaves. The resulting linework—rough, broken, and dry—captures the worn appearance of stele engravings and conjures resonance and rhythm that is simultaneously archaic and fresh.



Xugu eschews the time-honored character-shapes of *ge* 个 and *jie* 介 when arranging the leaf blades, allowing instead the leaves to dangle freely like willow leaves. Furthermore, the outlines of some leaf blades do not completely close while the outlines of others crisscross with exuberant, crude vitality. Evenly applied mineral green washes of varying intensity distinguish the relative positions of the leaves—close by or farther off, in front or behind. White space at the center of the leaf blades suggests a convex shape. Light umber shading at the leaf tips conveys the slight drying they experience in autumn. A vine embellished with red leaves pops out in chromatic counterpoint.

The use of light, clear colors for the vine and bamboo leaves and dark, heavier hues for the squirrel and rock causes the painting's center of gravity to settle at the lower right. Yet the squirrel's lifted head leads the viewer's eye to the bamboo leaves in the upper left. The squirrel's gaze and raised paws indicate there is some object it wants, and its slightly open mouth beckons in anticipation. Where is the squirrel's focus? On the green bamboo or perhaps the red leaves? Or is it on the movement of the leaves as they dance and whirl in the cool breeze? Xugu gives the viewer nothing definite, but allows ample space for rich imagining.

Through the power of his brush, Xugu's treatment transcends the usual literary coding of human meaning in natural forms. His inspiration is unmediated—through the inner life of one of nature's creations, he leads us to a direct experience of reality beyond ourselves.

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1. Jung Ying Tsao points out the long history of the squirrel as a subject in Chinese painting, citing a thirteenth-century handscroll by Qian Xuan 钱选 (ca. 1235–1301), now in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan (illustrated in *Chinese Art Treasures* 1961, p. 137, no. 68). He writes, "The beauty of this piece lies in its elegant design, the coloration of the peaches and leaves, and the movement suggested in the form of the squirrel, which appears to be just landing after a leap onto the branch. But in its refined technique and picturesque arrangement, this scene represents nature idealized rather than in the wild. It was probably

around this time that, like the crane and deer, the squirrel took on symbolism as an art motif." Tsao 1993, p. 182.

2. The most notable artist during the Qing dynasty to capture these traits of this humble creature was the Yangzhou Master Hua Yan, who, according to Jung Ying Tsao, depicted its "frolicsome character and brisk movements." He writes, "While Xugu's squirrels retain these traits, they are enriched by an exaggerated whimsical quality and relatively abstract brush technique." Tsao 1993, p. 182.

