



Seated Lady Holding a Fan

Late 17th to early
18th century
(Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911)

Mang Hu-li
(Chinese, born 1672, died 1736)

Watercolor on silk

66 ½ x 43 ¾ inches (168.9 x 111.1 cm)

This watercolor painting depicts a Chinese lady of the Qing (qing) dynasty. The **phoenix** designs on her fine silk gown and the four-clawed dragon image on the blue-and-white porcelain stool indicate that she was a highborn person of noble rank. The phoenix was a well-known symbol of the empress, and only nobility were permitted to have depictions of four-clawed dragons on their possessions. Her luxurious surroundings—which include a couch with inset marble panels, an antique table from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and a tall, lacquered wood stand with inlaid gilt filigree—reflect her wealth and elegant taste. Both dignified and demure, the lady looks at us with a slight smile in a manner appropriate for a woman of her class.

Other motifs in this painting tell us that this woman is well educated and highly cultured. To her right, a citrus fruit known as “Buddha’s Hand” scents the room, as do the rose and orchid cuttings in the **celadon** vase. A round lacquer box decorated with tortoiseshell—which may have once held incense—a gilded incense burner, and a cloisonné vase holding incense utensils are displayed on the wood stand. The neat stack of books, the bamboo design painted on her fan, and the fresh orchid blossom in her hair indicate literary inclinations. For scholars, bamboo was a symbol of virtue and integrity, and the orchid was long admired for its subtle appearance and fragrance. The artist Mang Hu-li has portrayed a woman who embodies the feminine ideals of refinement with modesty and charm with grace.

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