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A Study of a Plant from the Malvaceae family

Made for the European market

Guangzhou (Canton), China, c. 1800–1830

Watercolour on pith paper

38.5 cm high, 30.5 cm wide

“To be without method is deplorable, but to depend entirely on method is worse.”

Lu Ch'ai, 17th century Master of Chinese brush painting.

This magnificently verdurous specimen consists of wide, lobed leaves in forest greens with rich mossy undertones. These waxy leaves are heavily veined, encouraging water on its path towards the roots. A profusion of golden stamens erupts from the puce centre as four white trumpet shape petals curl outwards.

The sturdy branch indicates a tree or possibly large shrub. Its textured bark grey with brown detailing terminates with a sawn-off end, yet the base and a further branch seem to have been snapped and consequently appear in a more naturalistic fashion. Emergent buds resembling those of a magnolia tree weigh the lower stem down, causing it to bow in a sweeping arc. This correlates with the opposite stem, which echoes the curve in an upward motion as another bud prepares to open. This sinuous movement embodies the vitality of a plant bursting into flower.

This truly exquisite study epitomises the classical tradition in Chinese art of conveying the spirit of a particular botanical subject, as described by 6th century texts outlining the key principles of Chinese painting. Exceeding a mere record of the plant's features, the work is suffused with energy; there's a melodic quality to the brushstrokes and the whole plant seems awash with life pulsing through its veins.

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