

ZHAO Mengfu

Zhào Mèngfǔ 赵孟頫

1254–1322 Yuan dynasty painter and calligrapher

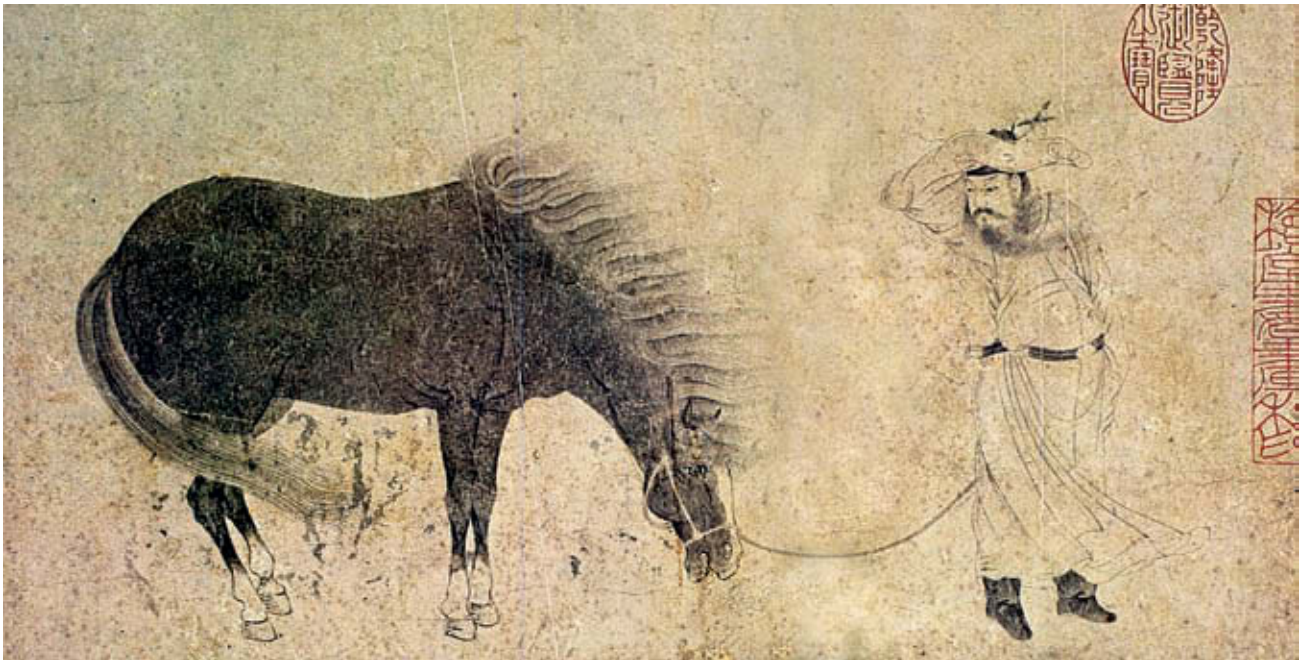
Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 was a poet and musician and a highly distinguished painter and calligrapher of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). His painting was marked with a return to archaism and covered a wide range of subjects, while his calligraphic scripts, called the “Zhao style,” were elegantly structured and rigorously controlled.

Zhao Mengfu, born in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, as a descendant of the founding Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) emperor, was a painter, calligrapher, poet, and musician of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). His father, who excelled in poetry, was a high local official during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), and Zhao thus benefited from his family’s rich literary collections. After the collapse of the Song dynasty Zhao Mengfu accepted an offer of an official post from Yuan emperor Khubilai Khan. This acceptance provoked bitter feelings among many ethnic Han Chinese scholars who regarded Zhao’s service in the Mongolian court as a dishonorable collaboration. Zhao later held many other high posts, including the governorship in two provinces and the directorship of the imperial Hanlin Academy.

Zhao Mengfu painted a wide range of subjects, including landscape, human figures, birds and flowers, bamboos and rocks, humans and horses, and goats and sheep. The techniques he used also varied, ranging from finely detailed colored paintings to pictures done with broad, spontaneous brushstrokes that express symbolic

messages. One of Zhao’s most famous paintings, *Autumn Colors on the Que and Hua Mountains* (handscroll, ink and color on paper, 1296, National Museum, Taipei, Taiwan), is based on his visit to the two mountains in Shandong Province. Arranged on the two sides of the painting, the two greenish mountains rise abruptly in the background. The middle and front distances of the picture are filled with cottages, trees, boats, reeds, and human figures. Stylistically, this painting is far from naturalistic. The mountains in the back are too small in scale compared with the houses and trees in front of them. Light brushstrokes moving left to right by the lakefront establish the different levels of perspective in the painting but somehow impede the sense of space receding into the picture plane. Such discontinuities and anomalies deliberately refer and pay tribute to the ancient masters such as Gu Kaizhi (active fourth century), who experimented with spatial relations among human figures, trees, rocks, and flowers. Zhao’s return to archaism marked a decisive move from the naturalism of Song painting technique and was followed by many artists in the same spirit.

Another famous painting by Zhao, *Elegant Rocks and Sparse Trees* (handscroll, ink on paper, Palace Museum, Beijing), uses broad and cursive brushstrokes to depict the rocks and tree boughs in a typical calligraphic style. His own inscription on the painting states that “Rocks as in flying white (script), trees as in seal script” and “calligraphy and painting have always been the same” (Cahill 1997, 187). Indeed, Zhao was one of the four great masters of the formal scripts in China with Ouyang Xun (557–641), Yan Zhenqing (709–785), and Liu Gongquan (778–865). His calligraphy, called the “Zhao style,” is elegantly



***Horse and Groom in the Wind*, a painting by master painter and calligrapher Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322). Ink on paper.**

structured and rigorously controlled. The official *History of the Yuan Dynasty* (composed in the fourteenth century) judged Zhao's skills in different kinds of scripts as having no rival.

Yu JIANG

Further Reading

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