

Animals in Art at the Yuan Court

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The values that different cultures of the Mongol-Yuan polity in East Asia attached to certain animals did not always coincide, but nevertheless created an important space or point of friction for intercultural dialogue, often relating to the practice of government centred on the Yuan court. Paintings of fine stallions by southern Chinese scholar-official artists like Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322) and Ren Renfa (1254-1327), for instance, would have held compelling visual appeal for Mongols, Central Asians and others, but also carried into the discourse of art a figurative purport from the heritage of Chinese statecraft in connection with probity in office and meritocracy in regard to appointments and promotions. This study examines the agency of contemporary and old master Chinese paintings of animals at the Yuan court, taking as its starting point the recent exhibition at the National Palace Museum, Taipei, about the 'elegant gathering' hosted in a Buddhist temple in Dadu in spring 1323 by one of the most important art collectors of the Yuan, Sengge Lagyi (c. 1283-1331), Grand Princess of the Principality of Lu and sister of two khans, Khaishan Külüg (r. 1307-11) and Ayurbarwada Buyantu (r. 1311-20). The Chinese scholar-official Yuan Jue (1266-1327) attended the banquet and inscribed colophons on some 41 picture-scrolls—many depicting animals—brought out for the occasion from the princess's collection. He later composed a record of the event which stands as an *apologia*, as insightful as it is bold, for Mongol royal collecting of Chinese art and its value to kingship and ruling.