The World of Khubilai Khan-Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty
Metropolitan Museum New York, 2010-09-28 until 2011-01-02

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▲ for images and short explanations see:
http://www.metmuseum.org/special/khubilai-khan.aspx
▲ 360 page catalogue
▲ special articles in Orientations, September 2010, vol. 41 no. 6

Invited by the Board of Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum and sponsored by Stockholm University, Department of Oriental Studies, I had the privilege to attend the preview days of the exhibition before it was open to the public. It was an exceptional opportunity to thoroughly study these over two hundred artefacts in a quiet and concentrated atmosphere. Many of the objects were for the first time on display outside China. Lenders to the exhibition, which took several years of preparation, include a number of lesser known, albeit important institutions like for example the Quanzhou Maritime Museum, the Beijing Art Museum of Stone Carving or the Museum of Huizhou Culture of China, Huangshan. James C.Y. Watt, Brooke Russell Astor Chairman of the Department of Asian Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and his team have brought together the most comprehensive and complex Yuan exhibition since Sherman Lee and Wai-Kam Ho’s ground-braking show at the Cleveland Museum in 1968. It is one of the great merits of the Khubilai Khan exhibition, that it reflects the scholarship and more recent archaeological discoveries concerning the Mongol Yuan dynasty. Spread over six thematically arranged rooms, room one shows portraits of the imperial family, men’s and women’s dresses, travel passes (fu pai), and drinking vessels. The most striking object is a turquoise glass cup and saucer, modelled on ceramic prototypes. This is a local Chinese product produced in Shandong province (excavated in 1972), whereas earlier glass objects had been imported from the Middle East. Room two concentrates on Yuan theatre and architecture. In the Yuan, vernacular plays played an important role, both, in daily life as in the burial context. Pottery tiles with scenes from theatrical plays or illustrations in high relief of poetry once formed part of the interior walls of a tomb. A very fragile, wooden burial structure of a seven-by-one-bay building, excavated from the Wang Shixian family tombs in Zhangxian, Gansu Province, provides a lot of
information on Yuan building practices. Rooms three and four give a very detailed survey over the various religions that had an influence on China at the time. Objects range from paintings to wooden or gilt bronze sculpture, ceramic vessels to tombstones of people of Islamic, Hindi, Nestorian, Manichean, Buddhist, or Daoist faith. To see the portrait of the illustrious Chan abbot Zhongfeng Mingben belonging to the Jishō-in temple in Kyoto was of special interest to me, since I wrote my dissertation on his calligraphy and his connections with Japan. The inscription on a tombstone of a Mongol official in cursive Arabic script on the front, a quotation from the Koran, and his title and position on the back, in Chinese, attest to the great achievements by local Quanzhou stonemasons serving a number of religious communities. Room five assembles calligraphies and paintings of both, well-known artists and anonymous works. There are seven pieces by the most renowned artist of the Yuan dynasty, Zhao Mengfu, three from the Princeton University Art Museum, two from the Palace Museum Beijing, one from the Liaoning Provincial Museum and one from the Metropolitan Museum New York. It is for the first time, that two paintings by Zhao Mengfu, depicting a man and a horse, one belonging to the Met and the other to the Palace Museum Beijing, are shown side by side. The latter was also chosen as the exhibition poster, significantly, a Chinese scholar riding on a horse, hinting at the complicated relations between nomadic Mongols and the Han Chinese elite. A rare example of Yuan history painting is a long handscroll, Episodes from the career of a Yuan official, from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas, done in commemoration of a former Jin official’s acceptance of a career under the Mongols. In the third scene, the protagonist changes his former Jin scholar’s gown to Mongolian attire, neatly laid down before the newly constructed Southern imperial city gate of the capital Dadu (Beijing), completed in 1272. Most impressive is the calligraphy by a Khitan statesman, Yelü Chucai, a descendant of the Liao dynasty ruling family. He played a pivotal role in mitigating the harsh rule of the Mongols over the occupied territories of North China. His calligraphy reflects his intimate familiarity with the brush of the Song dynasty calligrapher Huang Tingjian and shows his sinicized family background. Room six is dedicated to the so-called decorative arts. Apart from the high quality carved lacquers, a rug borrowed from the Gion matsuri festival in Kyoto (Naginataboko Preservation Association), is the high-light in this room, of which James Watson is particularly proud of. This 13th century carpet has a
branch of prunus at its centre and is surrounded by a pseudo-Kufic border, attesting to the impact of Islamic on Chinese art.

Also at the Met is a complementary installation, arranged by Maxwell Hearn, chief curator of Asian Art, of Chinese painting and calligraphy titled: *The Yuan Revolution: Art and Dynastic Change*. A fine selection of the Met’s own Yuan calligraphies and paintings is on display, some works rarely exhibited and certainly not together. Paintings by the Four Masters of the Yuan, include four paintings by Ni Zan alone and several by Wang Meng. A very thought provoking piece is a painting of an orchid and a bamboo done jointly by Zhao Mengfu and his wife, Guan Daoshen. The eighteen colophons on this handscroll are very informative about social and artistic relations of contemporaries. I wrote my M.A. thesis on the art of Guan Daosheng and have since pursued my keen interest in the art of the Yuan dynasty. In this complementary installation, of which there is no catalogue and the art objects are published in scattered places, I selected twenty works which I studied more thoroughly. I found Song Ke’s *After Zhao Mengfu’s thirteen colophons to the Lantingxu* a most striking piece of calligraphy, closely related to one of my current research interests in the “Change of Media”, looking into the question of what happens at the junctions, when a work of art is copied in a different medium.

Apart from a short visit to Princeton University, where I met my colleague Professor Jerome Silbergeld and discussed the exhibition at the Met, I spent a fruitful and intellectually stimulating time in the Khublai Khan exhibition, wearing out my pen and filling the better part of my new note booklet. In the main exhibition, one could not take photographs because it had so many pieces on loan, hence the old-fashioned but highly recommended form of taking handwritten notes! In the Met production on *The Yuan Revolution*, no-flash photography was allowed. Still, I also resorted to my note booklet since texts, colophons and seals which I could see close up or with the help of my monocular (essential art historian’s equipment) told me much more than is written about in publications or visible in photographic reproductions.

As a Chinese proverb says: *Travelling ten thousand li is better than reading ten thousand scrolls*, may I suggest to do both, to arrive at a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.
Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322). *Man Riding a Horse*, dated 1296, handscroll, ink on paper, 30.2 x 52.1 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing

*Khubilai Khan as the First Yuan emperor, Shizu*. Album leaf, ink and colour on silk, 59.1 x 47.6 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei