

## **Mongol Art in Chinese Land**

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**Bringing together textual and material sources to question cultural and historical assumptions about what constituted art, and who was making this art in the multicultural Yuan dynasty, McCausland explores the impact that non-Han cultures had upon China.**

**Review:** Shane McCausland, *The Mongol Century: Visual Cultures of Yuan China, 1271-1368*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, 295 pp.

Shane McCausland's welcome new book on the arts of the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty (c. 1271-1368) is an ambitious study of the cultural pluralism that characterized the art and broader culture of one of the most fascinating of China's dynasties. McCausland brings together a variety of visual and textual materials under thematic, rather than chronological or medium-based studies. This approach challenges historical assumptions regarding dichotomies of "fine art" and "decorative arts" as well as "Han Chinese" (historically regarded as the majority population in China) and "Mongol/Other" that too often are found in studies of the Yuan period. While several museum exhibition catalogues (*The Legacy of Genghis Khan*, LACMA/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003; *The World of Khubilai Khan*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010), have begun to question the traditional narrative of Yuan art – that is, that the only significant artistic output was found in Chinese literati painting – *The Mongol Century* is the first study in

which the broader complexities of Yuan cultural production are treated in a single tome. While *The Mongol Century* is useful as an introduction to Yuan dynasty arts and history, there is a wealth of material included in the book for the specialist to consider in future approaches to the Mongol period in China.

### **China or Khitai?**

McCausland begins by considering the particularities of the Yuan dynasty and the Mongol legacy in China and in Eurasia more broadly. He draws out distinguishing features of the dynasty and points out sources for the traditionally negative view of Mongols, which are found anywhere from European histories, to the systematic erasure of Mongol cultural contributions during the Ming Dynasty (c. 1368-1644). McCausland also brings up the problematic concept of “sinicization,” *hanhua*, which translates literally to “becoming Han” and suggests that we should look not only to the incorporation of “Han” traditions by the Mongols, but to the impact that non-Han cultures had upon China, and coins the term *huhua*, “becoming alien” to describe this effect. Questions raised by the notions of both *hanhua* and *huhua* are reintroduced throughout the book in different guises, forming a cohesive theme.

Rather than organizing *The Mongol Century* by medium, or strictly chronologically, McCausland structures the book thematically with a loose adherence to the reigns of various emperors. In this way, he is able to weave together a narrative that brings in a variety of sources and actors that tie into the central themes of the book. By taking objects out of a medium-specific context, McCausland allows the viewer to better imagine the visual cultures of the Yuan, where designs may have migrated not only from one medium to another, but also from one culture to another.

## **Desecration and Incorporation**

To better understand the impact that the Mongol conquest of Song dynasty (c. 960-1278) China had on Song citizens, McCausland takes the desecrating and looting of the Song imperial tombs by a powerful Yuan Buddhist cleric as a central case study. This act allows McCausland to consider a range of issues, including Mongol imperial religious patronage, the complexities of establishing a courtly culture that incorporated both Chinese and Mongol customs at the beginning of the Yuan, and the psychic stress that the Mongol conquest had on the Song population. McCausland's examination of the desecration of Song imperial tombs highlights the power that certain religious figures had in the early Yuan dynasty, offering some explanation of how such looting was allowed to take place, perhaps without the knowledge of Khubilai Khan (r. 1260-1294), the first Yuan emperor. It also offers an example of an atrocity that potentially had a psychological impact on Song loyalist subjects living in the south of China. Khubilai attempted to recruit Song loyalists into serving as officials in his government. Among those who chose not to serve were some of the best-known of the Yuan literati painters, many of whom depicted subjects involving officials retired from corrupt courts, or those incorporating subtle messages of dissent against Mongol rule.

While Khubilai Khan was not opposed to borrowing from "Han" Chinese culture, or recruiting promising former Song subjects into his government, many institutions and practices that characterized prior Chinese dynasties were abolished in the founding of the Yuan, most notably the imperial examination system, which prior to the Yuan had been the main avenue for male subjects to enter the imperial bureaucracy. When it was reinstated at the beginning of the

14<sup>th</sup> century, it favored Mongols, and *semu* people, i.e. “people of various kinds” (that is to say, not “Han” Chinese). McCausland examines how the Mongols used both the reinstating of the examination system, and the establishment of a bureau of literature in disseminating Yuan culture across the empire. The reinstating of the exam system and foundation of the “Hall of the Stars of Literature Academy” have often been framed in the context of increased “sinicization” by the later Yuan emperors. McCausland, however, shows how much more complex these institutions were.

### **Yuan Internationalism**

One of the themes of *The Mongol Century* is the multiculturalism that characterized the Yuan dynasty, both in terms of the ethnic diversity of Yuan subjects and the cultural diversity that resulted from political and economic ties to the broader Mongol Empire, which spanned the majority of Asia. One of the clearest manifestations of this cultural pluralism is found in Yuan blue and white porcelain, a popular export item from its creation, and which became synonymous with China itself in the Ming dynasty. Among the important issues that are highlighted by McCausland’s study of Yuan blue and white porcelain, his observations about the use of writing on porcelain, and questions that he raises about how widespread the use of ‘Phags-pa script actually was in the Yuan dynasty is perhaps the most intriguing.

‘Phags-pa script was invented as a way to write the Mongol language by the ‘Phags-pha lama (c. 1235-1280) during Khublai Khan’s reign. Due to the lack of sources that have survived to the present day written in ‘Phags-pha script, and the fact that it seems to have ceased to be used after the Yuan dynasty, it is often thought of as a failed experiment. However, McCausland points to its use on ceramics in both a decorative capacity, and for inscriptions, and suggests that

it may have had wider currency than previously thought. This leads to questions about the variety of scripts and languages used in the Yuan dynasty and Mongol Empire more broadly, and how the multiplicity of scripts available may have impacted that most traditionally “Chinese” of arts: calligraphy. This type of scholarship, bringing together textual and material sources to question cultural and historical assumptions is art history at its best.

### **Rethinking Yuan Art**

McCausland’s central contribution to the fields of Chinese art and history is in his ability to challenge our assumptions about what constituted art, and who was making this art, in the Yuan period. By showcasing the variety of potential sources of inspiration of media ranging from painting to calligraphy to ceramics and metalwork, he asks the reader to broaden her mind to how “Chinese art” might be defined. The Yuan period has long been considered a turning point in Chinese painting and calligraphy, but McCausland asks us to widen our view of both art forms. He brings this broadening tendency to the Yuan more generally.

As thorough as this book is, it remains focused on China and the place of Yuan art in the arts of China. Hopefully, *The Mongol Century* will inspire future studies that take into account the Yuan’s place in the larger Mongol Empire. The Mongol period, while certainly characterized by specificity in terms of cultures in the individual khanates, also had a broader visual culture, and it would be interesting to discover the extent of this internationalism, past comparisons between Yuan and Ilkhanid manuscripts and ceramics.

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