

33. Qian Xuan [Ch'ien Hsuan] (1240?-1311?), attributed

“Bush-clover and Dragonfly by Stream”

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk

26.0 x 28.0 cm. (10 1/4 x 11 in.)



The composition is based on crossed diagonals, with the flowers extending from lower right to upper left, and the stream countering that structure in the opposite direction. The result is a nicely balanced composition, a small-scale work quite appropriate for display in a Japanese *tokonoma* alcove during a tea-ceremony. The work is clearly Chinese, with the firm drawing of the leaves and blossoms and the nicely calculated spatial recession suggesting a dating to the later 13th century.

A work by Ma Yuan (before 1189-after 1225) (fig. 1) manifests a similar compositional style, with the main pictorial elements balanced against a stream rushing into the background. However, a major difference is the contrast in pictorial space, which in the Southern Song painting is rather limited but still realistic and the later painting, in which the space is compressed and the composition limited mainly to the frontal picture plane. These latter characteristics are common in Yuan dynasty paintings, and suggest a later 13th-14th century date for the present painting.

Qian Xuan, the artist to whom the painting is attributed, although trained to be a scholar-official, worked as a professional painter after the establishment of the Yuan dynasty, unlike his contemporary and friend, Zhao Mengfu (1270-1322), who served the foreign regime at the highest level. The posthumous reputations of these two artists differed greatly. In China, Zhao was regarded as one of the supreme artists of his day, while Qian was thought of as a relatively minor artist, certainly not of the first rank. In Japan, however, their reputations were reversed, with Qian achieving superiority over Chao. In the *Kundaikan Sayuchoki*, the late 15th century catalogue of the Ashikaga shogunal collection, the paintings themselves are neither described nor ranked, but rather the 177 Chinese artists active between the 3rd and the 14th century are ranked on the basis of their paintings represented in the collection. The relative ranking of these artists is especially revealing of specifically Japanese taste in painting and, further, suggests the differing aesthetic standards then being applied by Chinese and Japanese collectors. Almost half of the 177 artists—85 or 48% of the total—were active during the Yuan period, and, among those 85, a total of 47 are unrecorded in standard Chinese biographical sources for painters. These figures suggest that the Japanese monks were mainly bringing home with them paintings done by their Chinese contemporaries, and that the selections was being made not on the basis of the artist's fame—the Four Great Masters of the Yuan, for example, are not represented or mentioned at all—but rather on purely aesthetic grounds, what was appreciated and could be understood in visual terms alone.

From a Japanese point of view, only two Yuan artists were worthy of placement in the highest of the three classes: Qian Xuan, who was ranked 35th overall among the 177 artists,

and Yan Hui, who was placed one rank below the early Yuan master. Since both Qian and Yan were professional masters, this ranking may seem surprising, especially when contrasted to that of Zhao Mengfu, held in China to have been the fountain-head of much of Yuan painting but ranked by the 15th century Japanese critics as number 105 over all and in the lowest of the three qualitative ranks. This distinction was not based on familiarity, since many of the visiting Japanese monks were in fact acquainted with Zhao Mengfu, and greatly admired his calligraphy if not his paintings, but rather was the logical outcome of the revolutionary approach to painting adopted by Zhao and those who followed him. In arguing that painting *had* to be based on calligraphy, *had* to have art-historical overtones, *had* to convey social connotations or *had* to suggest political stances, Zhao Mengfu, although perhaps unintentionally, created a situation in which those viewers untutored in calligraphy or art-history, unconcerned with Chinese society, and not knowledgeable about Chinese politics, would lack the essential keys for an immediate visual understanding of a given painting, and such pictorial statements would henceforth require simultaneous verbal statements in the form of inscriptions to make clear the point of the painting. Zhao's approach worked well enough with the intended audience for his paintings, his friends and those who shared his aesthetic ideals; Qian, however, was not a high official like Zhao but rather a professional artist who depended on the sale of his paintings for his livelihood.

The high esteem in which Qian was held in Japan, and the large numbers of paintings attributed to him held in Japanese collections, constitute telling arguments for some connection between him and those foreign patrons, either direct or indirect. The present painting comes from a Japanese provenance, and is an exemplary example of the style of the master as well as of the type of work especially appreciated in Japan.¹

1. For a biography of Qian Xuan, see Howard Rogers: "Lives of the Painters: Ch'ien Hsuan, *Kaikodo Journal*, vol. 17, 2000, pp. 15-52.



Fig. 1. Ma Yuan: "Bamboo and Ducks by Rushing Stream," after Cleveland Museum of Art: *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting*, Cleveland, 1980, cat. 54, p. 71.