Review Articles

Art and Socio-political Context in Southern Song and Yuan China (1127-1368)


In 1987, Jerome Silbergeld published a thoughtful assessment of the state of Chinese painting studies that outlined the different approaches to this material that were then current.1 Among the many threads of scholarship that he identified was the study of pictorial style, which encompassed both connoisseurship and examination of the development of an individual artist. Another was the study of context and patronage, including among the literati and the court. Twenty-five years later, it is striking to find both of these approaches reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, in three new books that consider artists of the Southern Song and/or Yuan dynasties and the socio-political contexts in which they created art. One, concentrating on a Southern Song court painter, revolves around the study of pictorial style, though it also considers elements of the historical and literary context and of patronage. A second, focusing on an inherently political genre of paintings and prints, emphasizes contextual elements but uses the study of

pictorial style to help situate the works of art historically. A third, centering on a literati calligrapher and painter who served Yuan emperors, achieves a balance between the two approaches. Each of these studies brings important new insights to the field.

Richard Edwards’ *The Heart of Ma Yuan: The Search for a Southern Song Aesthetic* (2011) is destined to become the definitive source for readers interested in the court painting styles of the Southern Song dynasty. The book is, in particular, a welcome addition to scholarship on Ma Yuan (1190-1235), about whom too little has been written up to this point (but see Edwards 1999, Lee 2001; 2010). It is exhaustive in scope, considering all of Ma Yuan’s familiar masterpieces as well as many lesser known works and the more questionable attributions. Though the focus is on Ma Yuan and other painters in his family, particularly Ma Lin (1216-1255), other painters of the Song era—court painters, professional painters, literati, and Buddhist monks—are considered as well: these include Zhao Lingrang (fl. ca. 1070-1100), Chen Rong (fl. ca. 1200-1262), Liang Kai (fl. 1201-1204), Fachang Muqi (ca. 1200-after 1279), Zhou Jichang (fl. 1178-1188), Lin Tinggui (fl. 1178-1188), and Zhao Bosu (1124-1182), among others.

In the preface, Edwards indicates that his primary interest lies not in what he refers to as the ‘contextual social surroundings’ (xxix) of Ma Yuan’s work, although his introduction considers Ma Yuan’s imperial and official patrons, drawing upon Hui-shu Lee’s research (1994). Instead, he is concerned with defining a Southern Song aesthetic. He structures most of the chapters in the body of the book around their thematic content: thus, we have ‘Winter’, ‘Winter into Spring’, ‘The Seasons Extended: Flowers’, ‘Water’, ‘Portraits: Buddhist’, ‘Portraits: Confucian and Daoist’, and ‘The Wider Environment and into Landscape’. The final chapter, ‘Transformations’, takes up the issue of copies, considering not only artists who work in Ma Yuan’s style, but also close copies of Ma Yuan’s paintings. Throughout, the reader is treated to the author’s erudite analyses of pictorial style, which is clearly privileged here—the effect being rather like the student’s experience of looking at artwork in the company of a renowned connoisseur, which, of course, Richard Edwards is.

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