

Hán Gān

韩干

706–c. 783 CE—Painter of horses



Man Herding Horses by Han Gan.

Summary

Han Gan was a unique painter who early on developed his own style. His talent for painting was discovered by one of the most famous painter-poets of the High Tang, Wang Wei, who was startled by the boy's talent after he observed Han Gan drawing figures in the sand with a stick. Han Gan was eventually summoned by Emperor Xuanzong to paint images of prized horses—an exotic novelty acquired from Central Asia—in order to proclaim imperial power and to memorialize these defenders of the empire. Han Gan's most famous painting, *Night-Shining White*, is one of his few remaining paintings, and is the ultimate example of Tang horse painting. A tradition of speaking indirectly through horse imagery persists today in contemporary Chinese art.

A painter active at the court of Tang *Emperor Xuánzōng 玄宗 (r. 712–756), Han Gan rose to prominence during what is generally considered China's golden age. Until the An Lushan Rebellion of 755 shattered the dynasty's stability, Xuanzong presided over a unified empire, receptive to foreign influence and enriched by a flourishing commerce along the Silk Route. The vibrant atmosphere of the capital city of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an), then the largest, most sophisticated, and most cosmopolitan city in the world, attracted scholar-painters and scholar-poets from many provinces. One of the preoccupations of educated circles at this time was the horse, especially the famed horses of Central Asia, considered the epitome of strength and grace. Typically acquired as

*People marked with an asterisk have entries in this dictionary.



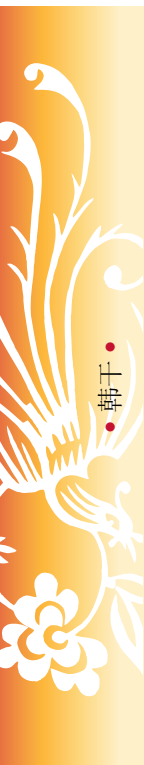
tribute or traded for silks and ceramics, these imported horses were prized by Chinese emperors. Not only was this larger breed of horse crucial for defending the empire against nomadic incursions, but having them on display projected the grandeur of imperial power. Emperor Xuanzong acquired many thousands of horses for his stables and commissioned Han Kan to paint portraits of his favorites.

Today, Han Gan is the most celebrated of the various painters summoned by Xuanzong to paint faithful likenesses of his horses. The names of other horse painters of the High Tang era, such as Cáo Bà 曹霸, (also known as Tsao Pa, eighth century), Wéi Yǎn 韦偃 (late seventh–early eighth centuries), and Chén Hóng 陈闳 (eighth century), are known to us through literary records, but their paintings have not survived. Today, Han Gan seems to stand alone as a painter of horses, but records suggest that he had rivals during his day. In fact, his contemporary, the famous Tang poet, *Dù Fǔ 杜甫 (712–770 CE), described Cao Ba, Han Gan’s teacher, as superior to Han Gan. In a dedicatory poem to Cao Ba, Du Fu said of Han Gan: “His disciple Han Gan early entered the sanctum; also competent at painting horses, he fathomed their special features. But Gan only painted their flesh, and not their bones, allowing the noble steeds’ vitality to decline and be lost” (Bush and Shih 1985, 58).

Du Fu’s belittling remark about Han Gan “only painting the flesh” dramatized his praise for Cao Ba expressed elsewhere in the poem. Another Tang source confirms that Han Gan’s contemporaries did not always rank him the highest. There was a contest between Han Gan and the painter Zhōu Fǎng 周昉 (c. 730–ca. 800) to see who could paint a more lifelike portrait of a high-ranking official’s son-in-law. The decisive voice in this painting contest was the son-in-law’s wife who decided that Zhou Fang, rather than Han Gan, truly captured the facial expression of her husband.

Han Gan’s Stature in Later Dynasties

Han Gan’s reputation rose considerably in the eyes of subsequent generations. Commenting on Du Fu’s condescending remark about Han Gan, Zhāng Yànyuǎn 张彦远, a ninth-century scholar, commented: “I wonder how Du Fu could have been considered a connoisseur of painting. Just because Gan’s horses are plump and large, [Du Fu] ridiculed them as paintings of flesh.” (Bush and Shih 1985, 58). In fact, Du Fu himself was inconsistent in his evaluation of Han Gan’s talent. In another poem, Du Fu celebrated a “dragon” horse painted by Han Gan, praising its “white flesh rich like snow” and its “movements without restraint” (Lee 1970, 450). The modern scholar Joseph Lee argues that Du Fu’s negative view



of “fleshy horses” does not mean a criticism of Han Gan’s art. Lee points out that Du Fu often used the phrase to suggest the life of decadence enjoyed by the rich and powerful. Du Fu’s apparent insult to Han Gan may have been a broad reference to what Du Fu considered the overindulgent lifestyle at court with which Han Gan was associated. In retrospect, Emperor Xuanzong is blamed for leaving the dynasty vulnerable to the would-be usurper, *Ān Lùshān 安祿山, when he became preoccupied with his favorite courtesan, Yáng Guìfēi 杨贵妃, and expensive horses.

During the Sòng 宋 dynasty (960–1279), the poet-official *Sū Shì 苏轼 (1037–1101) viewed paintings by Han Gan in the collection of his friend, Lǐ Gōnglín 李公麟 (c. 1041–1106), also a horse painter. Su Shi appreciated the poetic quality of Han Gan’s painting, and commented on how alive his paintings seemed. In a poem, Su Shi described Han Gan’s paintings as “unspoken poems,” adding that “when Master Han Gan painted horses, they really were horses.” (Bush and Shih 1985, 203). Indeed, looking at Han Gan’s paintings in Li Gonglin’s collection and reading Du Fu’s poems composed in response to them (*tí huà shī* 题画诗, “poems on paintings”) must have contributed to Su Shi’s emerging theory of scholar-painting (*wénrén huà* 文人画). Su Shi saw equivalences between poetry, painting, and calligraphy, and sought

to excel in all three categories. According to Su Shi, “judging painting was like judging horses” (Egan 1994, 283). An artisan painter concerned entirely with formal technique was like an ordinary horse. A scholar-painter who conveyed a true animating spirit (*huó* 活) in his animal subjects achieves a superior kind of lifelikeness, infusing the painted image with his own moral character.

Night-Shining White

Today, most of the ten to twenty Han Gan paintings in museum collections are later copies. Northern Song (960–1127 CE) records indicate that there were fifty-two Han Gan horse paintings extant then, but most have subsequently been lost. One painting generally accepted by scholars to be an original Tang painting by Han Gan is the famous *Night-Shining White* (*Zhào yè bái mǎ tú juàn* 照夜白马图卷), named for one of the emperor’s favorite chargers. This painting is considered the supreme example of a Tang horse painting. The horse’s head is its most admired feature. According to Chu-ting Li, *Night-Shining White* exemplifies the characteristic features of a Tang painting: “profile depiction, the schematic arrangement, the strong sense of volume, the interest in physical presence, and the emphasis on movement and action” (Li 1968, 300).

Besides the image of the horse tethered to a pole, this six-meter-long





Night-Shining White. Painting by Han Gan. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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hand scroll features more than twenty inscriptions, including one bearing a royal cipher mark from the Southern Tang Emperor Lǐ Yù 李煜 (r. 961–975). Li Yu's inscription sets forth the painting's title: "Han Gan's painting of *Night-Shining White*." An adjacent inscription by Wú Yuè 吴说, (twelfth century) reads: "Most works bearing the cipher of the Southern Tang are genuine" (Hearn 2008, 7). Other collectors' seals include that of the Qing *Emperor Qiánlóng 乾隆 (1711–1799; r. 1736–1795) and Pǔ Rú 溥儒 (1896–1963), the cousin of the last emperor of China. Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, when some artwork in the imperial collection was sold off, private collectors purchased *Night-Shining White*.

During the mid-twentieth century, the painting belonged to the Sir Percival David collection, at the British Museum in London. Since 1977, *Night-Shining White* has been housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A 1990 catalog published in Shanghai lists Han Gan's *Night-Shining White* as among China's National Treasures, even though the painting resides in a foreign museum's collection.

Han Gan's Background

Accounts differ on Han Gan's place of birth. Some say he was a native of Dàliáng 大梁 (modern-day Kaifeng,

Henan Province); others claim he hailed from Lántián 藍田 (in modern-day Shaanxi Province). At the peak of his career, from 742–755, Han Gan lived in Chang’an (modern-day Xi’an). Two mid-ninth-century texts, Zhang Yanyuan’s *Record of Famous Painters through the Ages* (*Lidài mínghuà jì* 历代名画记) and Zhū Jǐngxuán’s 朱景玄 *Celebrated Painters of the T’ang Dynasty* (*Táng cháo mínghuà lù* 唐朝名画录) offer compelling details of Han Gan’s early life. As a boy, Han Gan worked in the shop of a wine merchant. His talent for painting was discovered by one of the most famous painter-poets of the High Tang, *Wáng Wéi 王维 (701–761 CE), after the wine merchant sent the boy to collect an old account from the scholar-official. Wang Wei was startled by the boy’s talent, after he observed Han Gan drawing figures in the sand with a stick. Thereafter, Wang Wei supplied Han Gan with paint brushes and gave him a yearly allowance. He directed his studies in painting for over ten years. Under Wang Wei’s tutelage, Han Gan’s talent became recognized. Han Gan was summoned to court in 742. He was awarded the honorary title of Assistant in the Court of the Imperial Treasury. Although he was good at painting human figures, including Buddhist monks, Buddha icons, demons and divinities, and court officials, Han Gan was most skilled at painting horses. Han Gan studied under Cao Ba, who also specialized in horse painting. In time, Han Gan developed a personal style all his own.

Departing from the conventional practice of imitating the paintings of a great master, Han Gan developed his own style based on observing the horses themselves in the imperial stables. Han Gan’s independent-mindedness surprised the emperor, who noticed that Han Gan did not paint in the style of Chen Hong, the prevailing model for painting horses. When questioned by the emperor about his departure from Chen Hong’s methods, Han Gan replied: “I have my own teacher. All the horses in Your Majesty’s stables are my teachers” (Acker 1974, 262). Indeed, Han Gan’s positioning of the horse’s legs in the painting *Night-Shining White* attests to his sensitivity to the way in which horses actually move. According to Maxwell Hearn of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, such an accurate depiction of equine movement was not achieved in Western art, until Edgar Degas absorbed the insights revealed by Eadweard Muybridge’s still photographs of running horses in the nineteenth century (Hearn 2008, 9).

Folklore about Han Gan

Han Gan’s reputation for making paintings lifelike inspired vivid folklore. According to one Tang text, a beautiful horse was taken to a veterinarian to cure his lame foot. Recollecting that he had seen the horse in one of Han Gan’s paintings, the veterinarian contacted the painter. Han Gan looked through his sketches and discovered a painting that



clearly portrayed the horse in question. The artist realized that he had never completed the painting. The horse in the picture lacked a leg, and this was why the horse at the veterinarian's place was now lame. From Han Gan's painting, a real horse had come to life. According to another story, Han Gan was sitting alone with nothing to do after the An Lushan Rebellion disrupted

court life. All the magnificent horses of the imperial stables had been stolen or deployed in battle. Someone claiming to be a "Demon messenger" came to Han Gan's gate and asked him for a horse. Han Gan "made him a painting of a horse and then burned it. Days later, the Demon messenger was seen riding on a horse coming to thank him" (Acker 1974, 262).



Horse with Rider. Painting by Han Gan. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.

This story of Han Gan's horse painting coming to life has been imaginatively retold and illustrated by a contemporary Chinese painter based in France, Chen Jiang Hong (b. 1963) in his 2007 children's book entitled *The Magic Horse of Han Gan*. According to Chen Jiang Hong's epilogue, his inspiration for the children's book came when he saw a painting attributed to Han Gan entitled *Horses and Grooms* in the Cernuschi Museum, Paris. Magnificent though it is, this painting acquired by the Cernuschi Museum in the 1950s is reputed to be a fake painted in the style of Han Gan by the talented copy artist Zhāng Dàqiān 张大千 (1899–1983), according to several sources.

Appreciating *Night-Shining White*

Night-Shining White is believed to be an authentic Tang painting, not merely because of its collector's seals, but also because of the quality of the image. Here's how art historian Wen Fong, advises us to look at *Night-Shining White*:

Focusing on the horse's head, the viewers find themselves suddenly submerged in the awesome power of the artist's simple, plain brush line, discovering in it shapes and inflections that flow like phrases of music. New details and images reveal themselves, as the "heavenly" horse (or "dragon" horse) magically prepares to ascend and

fly away. This power of brushwork, which is *presentation* more than it is *representation*, is what brings viewers back into the presence of the physical "brush trace" (*bǐjì* 笔迹) of its maker. (Fong 2008, 14)

Wen Fong emphasizes the capacity of Han Gan's painting for conveying energy, movement, and the presence of the artist himself by following the traces of his brush. In Chinese painting, the line is primary. The painter "writes" (*xiě* 写) a painting in a manner analogous to calligraphy; and the connoisseur "reads" (*dú* 读) the painting as if it were a kind of text. The poetic inscriptions and collector's seals added later give the hand scroll an illustrious pedigree and offer evidence of its transmission history.

Using a minimal amount of shading, Han Gan's brushwork has endowed the horse's body with a convincing sense of solidity. The round arc of the horse's rump, its muscular chest, pricked ears, and thick mane, support Han Gan's reputation for making his painted horses appear real. And yet, as Wen Fong suggests, Han Gan's likeness transcends realism. We are persuaded that this horse is no ordinary horse, but a singular horse of superior ability.

The Dragon-Nature of Heavenly Horses

Night-Shining White depicts both an actual charger belonging to Xuanzong



and a horse of the imagination, a “heavenly horse” (*tiān xià mǎ* 天下马) of Chinese legend. These mythical horses were benign creatures, powerful enough to run for 1,000 *li* (*qiān lǐ mǎ* 千里马) (roughly 500 kilometers), and eager to serve imperial authority. They had a fiery temperament and were thought to be related to dragons (*lóng* 龙). According to Chinese myth, magnificent steeds were born of river water and could ascend to the heavens to assist rulers in finding immortality.

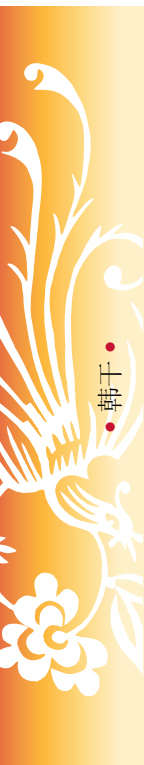
During China’s early history, the sighting of a mythical horse confirmed a dynasty’s mandate to rule. Han dynasty *Emperor Wǔ 武 (r. 140–87 BCE) heard news of incredible horses in distant lands and hoped to acquire some to add luster to his reputation. He sent his envoy Zhāng Qiān 张谦 (fl. circa 125 BCE) on a series of military missions to Fergana (modern Uzbekistan) to bring back the “blood-sweating” horses rumored to dwell in that region. The missions were costly, but the wonder horses were retrieved. (This breed of horse sweats blood in response to a parasite under their skin.) Historical writings and legends about Emperor Wu’s Heavenly Horses fired the imagination of later emperors who wished for the same. Throughout Chinese history, the presentation of an extraordinary horse by nomadic peoples to the imperial court was an event of great auspiciousness. It meant that the “barbarian” people revered the Chinese emperor and

signaled that the dynasty was secure and well governed.

The Horse in Early Chinese History

According to the sinologist Victor Mair, the Chinese have “a strained attachment to the horse” (Hessler 2006, 331). On one hand, Chinese emperors understood the fundamental importance of the horse to the maintenance of power. They put horses on a pedestal. On the other hand, the horse was seen as something foreign, that is, as an exotic novelty acquired from Central Asia. China was principally an agricultural civilization. Chinese farmers did not want to give up land for pasture, so horses were shipped off to be pastured in border regions. Compared to their nomadic neighbors, the Chinese were relative latecomers to horseback riding. In Chinese art, foreign grooms of Arab or Central Asian heritage typically accompanied horses.

The rarity of large horses in China conferred high status on those who owned them, typically, members of the ruling house or a great general. In excavated tombs, Han and Tang burial sculpture often took the form of horses, exquisitely crafted in either bronze or ceramic. According to Chinese beliefs, a deceased family member’s high status could be transferred to the afterlife, if the corpse were buried with spirit objects marking what sort of person he or she was in life. Craftsmen devoted significant



attention to creating lifelike sculptures of horses or horse-drawn chariots to accompany the burial of a high-ranking dignitary. For example, a burial site dating to the late second century CE yielded a fantastic “Flying Horse” tomb figure. Soon after it was excavated in Gansu Province in 1969, the bronze horse sculpture became the star attraction in an exhibition of Chinese art that traveled around the world. The horse is shown galloping, with one hoof stepping on a swallow’s wings, to cleverly suggest that it is actually a “Heavenly Horse,” in the midst of flight. The elegance of its form demonstrates China’s aesthetic accomplishment, even six centuries before Han Gan painted his spectacular horse paintings. Indeed, sculpture and painting in China are closely related. Carved reliefs were painted, combining the two media. The lifelike paintings of Tang masters seem “sculpted” and Chinese Buddhist sculpture “included a profound attention to outlines” (Li Song 2006, 4). Despite his insistence that he painted based on observing real horses, Han Gan’s genius surely drew upon the sophisticated sculptural tradition developed in preceding centuries.

Appreciation for Horses During the Tang Dynasty

The Tang emperors’ identification with horses was particularly strong. The ruling family hailed from a Northern clan that had intermarried with nomadic

peoples over many generations. Proud of having unified the empire on horseback, the early Tang Emperor Tàizōng 太宗 (c. 599–649 CE; r. 626–649) commissioned relief carvings in stone of the warhorses that had accompanied him in battle. The famous painter Yán Liběn 阎立本 (c. 600–673) was commissioned to create the design for the carvings. Once complete, the *Six Chargers of Emperor Taizong* was placed outside the emperor’s tomb. The care with which each individual horse was lionized in those carvings suggests a fascination with horses that culminated during Xuanzong’s time. During the first dozen years of his reign, Xuanzong increased the number of state-owned horses from 240,000 to 430,000. The most spectacular horses were matched with outstanding trainers and prepared to become the emperor’s personal steeds. According to Zhang Yanyuan, these horses were called “the horse sages of the stable manger.” They could “catch the wind and the color of their hair shone on the ground. Their bodies were relaxed and their gait serene, as if they were actually resting in bed” (Lee 1970, 451).

Puzzling over *Night-Shining White’s* Meaning

“Night-Shining White” was one of the Xuanzong’s favorite chargers, named by the emperor for its luminous white coat. Considering its high status, one would presume that the horse would be afforded superior treatment. Why, then,

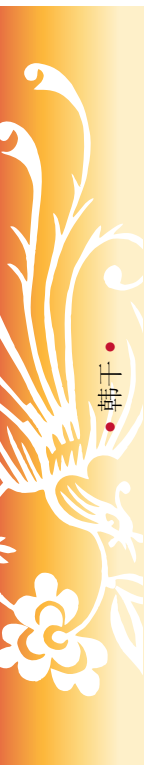


is the horse bridled so tightly in Han Gan's painting? The intensity of the horse's expression, especially its wide-eyed gaze, moves us to sympathy. The horse's rearing back against the pole suggests that it is trapped. In the Confucian, Daoist (Taoist), and Buddhist philosophical traditions prevailing at the time, there were strong prescriptions against mistreating horses. The Tang legal code enforced harsh penalties against anyone who harmed government horses. We wonder whether Han Gan has pictured here an abused horse, or simply a fine specimen displaying a feisty spirit.

Xuanzong's Dancing Horses

According to Tang-dynasty specialist Suzanne Cahill, Han Gan's *Night-Shining White* may not be in distress, but rather performing a dance routine. She suggests "that the look of controlled force that Han Gan has seized so adroitly characterizes the horse as he follows a precise and restrictive dance routine" (Cahill 1986, 93). Cahill is referring to the famous dance troupe of horses that performed at the annual festival honoring Xuanzong's birthday, called the "Thousand-Autumn Holiday" (*qiān qiū jié* 千秋节), a wish for his longevity. A mid-ninth-century chronicler provides the following account of what these dancing horses looked like and their sad fate after the An-Lushan Rebellion of 755. According to Zhèng Chǔhuì 郑处诲 in his *Míng huáng zá lù* 明皇杂录:

Hsuan Tsung once decreed that four hundred hooves be trained to dance. They were divided into companies of the Left and of the Right, and styled "So-and-so Favorite" or "Such-and-Such Pride of the Household." Occasionally there were also included excellent steeds that had been sent as tribute from beyond the border. His Highness had them taught and trained, and there was none but did not devote himself utterly to this wonderwork. Thence, it was decreed that the horses be caparisoned with patterned embroidery, haltered with gold and silver, and their manes and forelocks dressed out with assorted pearls and jades. Their tune which was called "Music for the Upturned Cup" had several tens of choruses, to which they shook their heads and drummed their tails, moving this way and that, in response to the rhythm. Then wood-plank platforms of three tiers were displayed. The horses were driven to the top of these, where they turned and twirled round as if in flight. Sometimes it was ordered that a doughty fellow lift one of the scaffolds, and the horse would [continue to] dance atop it. There were a number of musicians who stood to the left and right, before and behind; all were clothed in tunics of pale yellow, with patterned-jade belts, and all must



be youths chosen for their handsome appearance and refined bearing. At every Thousand-Autumn Festival, beneath the Loft of Zealous Administration [the horses] danced by decree.

Subsequently, when His Highness graced Shu (modern Sichuan) with his presence, the dancing horses were for their part dispersed to the human world. [An] Lushan, having often witnessed their dancing, coveted them at heart; because of this he had several sold [to him] in Fanyuang [modern Hebei]. Subsequently, they were in turn acquired by Tian Chengzi [704–778]. He was ignorant of them [i.e., of their special talent]. Confusing them with steeds of battle, he installed them in the outer stables. Unexpectedly one day, when the soldiers of this army were enjoying a sacrificial feast and music was struck up, the horses, unable to stop themselves, began to dance. The servants and lackeys considered them bewitched and took brooms in hand to strike them. The horses thought that their dancing was out of step with the rhythm and, stooping and rearing, nodding and straining, they yet [tried to] realize their former choreography. The stablemaster hurried to report this grotesquerie, and Chengzi ordered that the horses be flayed. The

more fiercely this was done, the more precise became the horses' dancing. But the whipping and flogging ever increased, till finally they fell dead in their stalls. On this occasion there were in fact some persons who knew these were the [emperor's] dancing horses but, fearful of [Chengzi's] wrath, they never ventured to speak. (Kroll 1981, 244–246)

In Han Gan's painting, "Night-Shining White" is not ornately costumed, as the horse would be if it were performing dance steps, or preparing to perform, in a pageant before the emperor. Rather, the horse is barebacked and bridled, seemingly in its stalls. If the topics of Han Gan's paintings were typically assigned by the emperor, what could this perplexing portrayal have meant? While the animal appears well-fed and well-groomed, the horse's expression is far from tranquil. Is it wide-eyed because the artist wishes to present the horse as "dragon-like," and thus, unusually vigorous? Or, is the horse showing distress at being bound so tightly to the pole? In light of what is known historically about the dancing horses' sad fate as a consequence of the An Lushan Rebellion, perhaps Han Gan's painting portrays the emperor's horse under the dominion of unappreciative taskmasters, futilely performing the old dance steps to no avail. If so, Han Gan's painting may be a lament for

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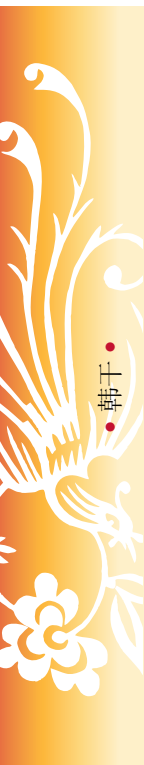
the glory days of his imperial patron prior to the rebellion, when a well-trained steed (and an esteemed horse painter) could be properly appreciated. Whether *Night-Shining White* was painted before or after the rebellion is unknown.

Perhaps the horse is dancing; but it is best to remain agnostic, because the painting that we see today is missing key parts (not the least, the horse's tail!), and its rear hooves and halter show evidence of retouching. According to Robert Harrist, a professor of Chinese art history, it may have been a preparatory study for a more complex work that is now lost. The artist's rationale for portraying the horse in just this manner probably cannot be known. Puzzling over what the horse may mean, and considering alternatives, however, enlivens our thinking about Han Gan, the painter, and the ways in which he was a product of a unique era in Chinese history. For example, horseback riding during the Tang era carried very high status. Court ladies at the Tang court delighted in playing polo, an aristocratic pastime imported from Persia. Horseback riding was a privilege reserved for aristocrats. Law prohibited artisans and merchants from riding horses. During the Song dynasty, however, Chinese enthusiasm for horsemanship waned. Riding became associated with the "barbarian" practice of mounted warfare. Confucian scholar-officials disdained martial prowess and lost interest in horsemanship. They preferred traveling by

carriage, sedan chair, or donkey, rather than by horseback.

Fat and Lean Horses in Symbolic Expression

Han Gan lived during a golden age for horse painting under imperial patronage. His name became synonymous with the highest standard for painting horses. Representing horses in art continued during later dynasties, because the idea of the horse had become an important part of the Chinese scholar's symbolic language. The condition of the horse in a painting or a poem was often meant to refer to the life of the scholar-official who created it or to whom it was dedicated. A calm, well-fed horse suggested that the scholar-official felt well treated and that the dynasty was well governed. A touchstone for this theme was the story of the ancient sage, Bó Lè 伯乐, a master at horse judging, whose keen knowledge of horse physiognomy allowed him to scout out the best horses. Bo Le was so discerning that he could detect talent that ordinary men could not see. According to Confucian teaching, an emperor should be like Bo Le, capable of ferreting out deserving scholars and putting them into service, so that their talents are not squandered. During the Yuan dynasty, the painter Gōng Kāi 龚开 (1222–1307) expressed his disapproval of his Mongol rulers by painting a severely emaciated horse. The neglected horse was shown without a master, an indication of the



painter's refusal to serve the alien conquerors and exposing his impoverishment since the fall of the previous dynasty. Gong Kai's inscription on the painting insists that the emaciated horse is still a superior steed, only it has failed to find an appropriate master.

Conclusion: Han Gan's Heirs

One of the most important painters of later times to be directly influenced by Han Gan's horse painting was *Zhào Mèngfǔ 赵孟頫 (1254–1322). Zhao participated in the Mongol administration at a time when Chinese scholars, like Gong Kai, totally rejected government service. Zhao painted a hand scroll entitled *Horse and Groom* (*rén mǎ tú* 人马图) in 1296, informed by his study of both Han Gan and Li Gonglin, the horse painter who befriended Su Shi and who was also influenced by Han Gan. Zhao's horses are shown in profile with the rounded bodies for which Han Gan was famous. The repeated motif of a contented and well-fed horse offered in tribute by a foreign groom has been interpreted by Jonathan Hay as an expression of Zhao Mengfu's allegiance to serving in the Mongol government. Zhao was not at all a literal copyist of Han Gan's style. His paintings are representative of the Chinese scholar-painters who made use of Han Gan's painting for its symbolic associations. He invoked Han Gan's style of painting horses to trigger historical associations that could

then be interpreted by viewers of the painting as oblique references to the political affairs of his day. This tradition of speaking indirectly through horse imagery persists today in contemporary China.

Shelley Drake HAWKS

University of Massachusetts, Boston

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