

Xie Chufang, *Fascination of Nature*, a handscroll painting



China Yuan dynasty, dated AD 1321

This is a rare example of a signed and dated painting from the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). The subject matter is that of animals and insects feeding off each other. A toad lies in wait for ants, which in turn are dismembering a butterfly; a dragonfly attacks a smaller insect which the lizard is hunting, and the cicada seems destined to be eaten by the mantis. The colophons tell us of the deeper significance of the subject matter: the beauty and brightness of the natural world cover up the confusion and disorder caused by the fight for survival. It reflects the dilemma faced by many Chinese of the period: whether to work for the Mongols and survive, or to remain loyal to the fallen imperial dynasty and starve.

Height: 281.000 mm Width: 3529.000 mm

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This painting belongs to a category known as *caochong* ('plants and insects'), which dates as far back as 1120 in the *Xuanhe huapu*, the catalogue of the Imperial Collection of the Northern Song dynasty. The vibrant colours are balanced by the plain ink of the artist's dedication and colophons. This combination of the twelfth-century 'academic' style with the traditions of 'scholar-amateur' art reflects the revivalism of earlier styles by Chinese painters under the Mongol regime, recalling the glorious past. However, little is known about the artist, Xie Chufang, except that he might have come from Piling in Jiangsu

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Province, a centre of production for *caochong* painting.

The signature of W. [William] Butler and the date 1797 are written inside the original silk cover; the painting is thus the earliest example of a Chinese painting that has been documented in a British collection. The scroll probably arrived in Britain through the East India trade or as a present given to a member of a diplomatic mission. In the nineteenth century, the scroll belonged to Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872). In 1946 it was acquired by Lionel and Philip Robinson, well-known book-lovers, from the sale of the Phillipps' library.

R. Whitfield, *Fascination of nature: plants* (Seoul, Yekyong Publications, 1993)