MANDARIN IN HIS STUDY

This portrait is of a Chinese scholar and civil servant, known as a mandarin, who lived over 150 years ago during the late Qing (ching) dynasty. Mandarins spent many years studying to pass difficult exams for their position. The term “mandarin” refers to the Chinese dialect they spoke and the post they held as government officials in the emperor’s court. In addition to writing about the history of the Chinese people and helping run the government, mandarins created poetry, music, painting, and calligraphy.

Seated on an armchair in his study, this mandarin wears a plain, black robe and hat. At work, he would have dressed in fancy, formal court robes with an embroidered crest showing his high rank, and sported a jewel knob on his hat. His feet rest on a wooden stand with rollers—a foot massager! Behind him are books and writing tools in a container, reflecting his favorite pastimes. Nearby on an antique table, there is a small, wild orchid, prized for its delicacy and a symbol of the scholar’s modesty. Look for an ancient pine tree in the painting above his head. Because a pine tree is always green, it symbolizes a long and productive life.

The large Chinese calligraphy above the mandarin means “pouring energy,” and refers to the old man’s vigor and good health. A poem, written in two parts on the back wall, describes a beautiful, chilly landscape with the purple clouds and blue skies of a clear, autumn morning. Like the orchid and the painting of the pine tree, the poem evokes thoughts of nature.

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