# Imperial Salukis

*Speedy hounds, portrayed by a Chinese emperor*

"Chinese emperors were expected to be cultured gentlemen, whether they were or not," says Robert D. Mowry, Dworsky curator of Chinese art at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum. They were meant to paint, and do fine calligraphy, and to collect. "A few emperors did turn out to be talented artists," says Mowry, "and several were magnificent collectors."

The Sackler's *Two Saluki Hounds,* in ink and light colors on a paper album leaf, is the work of the fifth Ming emperor, Zhu Zhanzi, who is usually known by his temple name, Xuanzong, or by the name of his reign, Xuande. An inscription indicates that the album leaf was "playfully painted [by the] imperial brush" in 1427. In later years, other cultured gentlemen who collected or viewed it added the profusion of their red seals. Some of these reveal that the painting was in the imperial collection in the eighteenth century.

Xuanzong was "the only Ming emperor who displayed genuine artistic talent and interest," says Mowry. "He specialized in paintings of animals, especially dogs. He is often grouped with artists of the Zhe school, since they were active at court during his reign, but his ink depictions of bamboo and orchids as settings for his animals make his works something of a hybrid between the Zhe and the scholar-amateur schools."

Xuanzong was born in 1399 and reigned from 1426 until his death in 1435. "It was during his short reign that blue-and-white porcelain reached its apogee, in terms of both aesthetic merit and technical finesse," says Mowry. The Sackler houses several exquisite examples of such Xuande-period porcelain to keep the hounds company.

Dog-lover Vita Sackville-West called the Saluki, or gazelle hound, "an incomparably elegant and ancient race." It was first bred in the Near East, but had already set paw in China by Tang times (618-907). According to the Saluki Club of America, the first of these hounds recorded stateside was brought by clipper ship from Thebes in 1861 by Horace N. Fisher (a Harvardian, A.B. 1857, LL.B. '59). According to the breed standard, the larger male stands 23 to 28 inches at the shoulder. The Saluki is a hunter and can gallop after prey at 40 miles per hour. Its expression is "dignified and gentle with deep, faithful, far-seeing eyes." It is sensitive and intelligent, but if it is off its leash outdoors, do not expect it to come when called, especially if there is a gazelle in sight.

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