



*Auspicious
Beauty*

KOREAN FOLK PAINTING

KOREAN FOLK PAINTINGS, OR *MINWHA*, DURING THE JOSEON DYNASTY (1392-1910) REVEAL SOME ESSENTIAL VALUES OF KOREAN SOCIETY. USUALLY PLACED IN A ROOM IN FOLDING SCREEN FORMAT OR HUNG ON WALLS IN SCROLL FORMAT, THIS GENRE ILLUSTRATES VARIOUS SUBJECTS SUCH AS SCHOLARS' EQUIPMENT, CHARACTERS RELATED TO CONFUCIAN VIRTUES, AND NATURAL THEMES SUCH AS BIRDS-AND-FLOWERS AND A RANGE OF OTHER ANIMALS. THESE *MINWHA* NOT ONLY DECORATED THE ROOMS OF MANY HOUSEHOLDS BUT WERE ALSO UNDERSTOOD TO BRING GOOD LUCK, WARD OFF EVIL SPIRITS, AND DEPICT MORAL VIRTUES. IN CONTRAST TO HIGHLY REVERED *LITERATI* PAINTING BY *YANGBAN*, OR UPPER-CLASS SCHOLAR-GENTLEMEN, *MINWHA* RECEIVED LITTLE RESPECT AS AN ART FORM BUT CONTINUED TO ENJOY STRONG SUPPORT AMONG THE GROWING MIDDLE CLASS DURING PERIODS OF POLITICAL STABILITY. *AUSPICIOUS BEAUTY: KOREAN FOLK PAINTING* INTRODUCES POPULAR THEMES DEPICTED IN *MINWHA* AND DISCUSSES THEIR MEANINGS, FUNCTIONS AND THE ROLE OF PATRONS IN THEIR CREATION.



Joseon Korea faced many changes politically and socially, which brought about new experiences in cultural life as well. After overthrowing the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), the kings of the Joseon dynasty professed Confucianism over Buddhism, which had been the state religion of Goryeo Korea. Under Confucian ideology, social order, education and pragmatism became the fundamental ideas holding the nation together. As the Joseon government embarked on an ambitious plan to reform the nation into an ideal Confucian society, able rulers such as King Sejong (r.1418-50) systematically realized this vision with the inception of the National Code, or *Kyongguk Daejon*, (completed in 1474), and the invention of the Korean alphabet, *hangeul*, in 1443. This invention, first published in *Hunmin Jeongeum* ("The Proper Sounds for the Education of the People") in 1446, caused a great ripple effect, especially enriching the lives of the middle class. It spurred literacy among the general public, and with growing literacy, the cultural trajectory of Joseon reached far beyond the intellectual activities of *yangban*. As a vernacular language, *hangeul* was quickly adopted by upper-class ladies and less educated men outside of *yangban* circles. Their writing soon extended its reach throughout the middle classes with the aid of printing, triggering the birth of popular literature. In a parallel trend, the middle class also began to appreciate painting, previously patronized only by the upper class; classic motifs and themes were modified to meet the demand of this lively new patronage



Shin Saimdang (1504-1551); **Sogwa-do (Painting of Vegetables-and-Fruit)** (Detail); Korea, Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), 16th century; Ink and mineral pigments on paper; Loaned by Isao Saito

Paintings of flowers-and-butterflies, *whajeop-do*, and paintings of vegetables-and-fruit, *sogwa-do*, demonstrate how women, as both audience and artists, played a role in the revitalization of the bird-and-flower theme in the Joseon period. Lady Shin Saimdang (1504-1551), mother of the noted Confucian Scholar Lee Yi (1536-1584), was one of the most renowned masters of this genre, and her paintings, featuring fine and delicate brushwork, would have adorned a lady's room of the upper or affluent middle class with serene beauty and wishes for a successful marriage. Flowers with butterflies imply conjugal harmony as the flower symbolizes the female and the butterfly the male, and fruits with many seeds, such as watermelons, suggest a wife's desire for fertility.



Screen of *Whawhe-do* (Painting of Flowers-and-Rocks) (Detail); Korea, Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910); 19th century; Ink and mineral pigments on silk; Pacific Asia Museum Collection; Gift of Dr. Don W. Lee in loving memory of his parents, Lee Bum-Soon and Min Young-Eui; 2009.16.4

The eight-panel screen of flowers-and-rocks is another prime example to discuss function and meaning. Folding screens were an integral part of Korean household furnishings for centuries as guards against drafts, room decorations, and partitions to separate esteemed guests from others in large family banquets. It may have decorated women's quarters to fill the household with auspicious symbols of wealth and eternity, which peonies and rocks represent. It is also likely that the screen was used for a

wedding ceremony or to decorate the newlyweds' room since the flower and the rock—the latter also symbolizing the male—carry a patron's wish for conjugal harmony. A screen such as this would have been prepared as part of the wedding dowry and cherished as a family heirloom for generations.

Animals with extraordinary powers were another popular subject in *minwha*. The dragon was believed to epitomize cosmic forces, as it does in many East Asian countries. An image of a dragon, or *yong-do*, would decorate royal palaces to represent the authority and dignity of a king, and when hung in a man's study, it would glorify his status as the head of household. It was also placed at the entrance to a house to bring good fortune and ward off evil. Being a water spirit, the dragon amidst clouds (cover image) was understood to bring rain for an abundant harvest. *Yong-do* were often paired with *ho-do*, paintings of tigers, to ward off malevolent spirits and misfortune at New Year. Besides the auspicious power the tiger embodies, this animal has occupied a special place in Korea, and various portrayals of the tiger, in addition to the ferocious and noble ones, can be found in *ho-do*. As a messenger of the Mountain Spirit, who had been worshiped since the dawn of Korean history, tigers often appear as a friendly character,



Hojak-do (Painting of Tigers and Magpies); Korea, Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910); 19th century; Ink and mineral pigments on paper; Loaned by Keith J. Mautino

rather than a fierce animal. Sometimes the tiger is depicted as rather dim-witted and accompanied by a magpie, reflecting the popular folklore of an ungrateful tiger betraying the woodsman who saved it from a trap. In the folk story, the magpie rescues the woodsman by luring the tiger back into the trap. Some *ho-do* portray a tiger defeated by a small and weak rabbit parodying the laypeople's wish to overpower *yangban* in a rigid social caste system.



Chaekkori (Painting of Scholars' Equipment); Korea, Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910); 19th century; Ink and mineral pigments on paper; Pacific Asia Museum Collection; Gift of Mr. & Mrs. R. William Johnston; 2003.12.1

Perhaps the most unique subject widely depicted and loved in *minwha* in the late Joseon period would be *chaekkori*, or paintings of scholars' equipment (*chaek*, meaning books, and *kori*, meaning materials). This genre reflects the highest values of *yangban*—the pursuit of knowledge and education guided by Confucian ideology. The emergence of *chaekkori* coincides with the growth of the *yangban* class and societal stability, which stimulated the trade of luxury goods, including scholars' items, with Qing Dynasty China (1644-1912). *Yangban*

would hire professional artists to depict newly acquired books and tools, such as brushes and ink stones, to boast of their possessions as well as their accomplishments as learned men. Although the royal family and *yangban* were major patrons early on, this subject soon attracted the middle class as a new audience who subsequently became patrons. Whereas *chaekkori* for *yangban* manifested their accumulation of knowledge and wealth, *chaekkori* for the middle class instilled the value of education in their children. Confucian Joseon Korea was a meritocratic society that promoted social mobility via the national civil exam, and *chaekkori* expressed the parents' wish for their sons to pass the exam and encouraged them to focus on their studies.

Moonja-do, or paintings of Chinese characters, also have Confucian themes. Through the characters for Confucian virtues, such as loyalty and filial piety painted for screens, the intended lessons were able to reach the broader public. Accompanying each character was an image related to each virtue, helping even the illiterate understand the moral values of each character. Thus, artists of *moonja-do* would follow the already established framework or templates for characters rather than creating new compositions. The most common format of *moonja-do* was a screen with eight or ten panels, but many were dismantled and framed as independent pieces when they were sought after by western collectors in the mid-twentieth century.



Screen of Moonja-do (Painting of Chinese Characters) (Detail); Korea, Late 19th-early 20th century; Ink and mineral pigments on paper; Loaned by Sang Nam

Auspicious Beauty illustrates the hidden meanings of *minwha* and aims to help the viewer better appreciate this underrepresented genre of Korean art. By looking at these paintings and learning about their patronage, one might wonder how some paintings done for upper-class *yangban* or by an elite female artist such as Lady Shin were categorized as *minwha*. The term '*minwha*' was first coined by the Japanese philosopher and scholar Yanagi Muneyoshi (or Yanagi Soetsu) (1889-1961) in the 1920s when he initiated the Mingei (Folk Art) Movement in Japan. Yanagi used the term *minwha* (literally meaning 'the paintings of the people') to refer to a group of paintings that were created for commoners by commoners in the Joseon period and was the first to shed light on this relatively unknown genre. However, subsequent studies of *minwha* by Korean scholars came to include a broader range of works than the term implies because artists at this time often moved freely between upper and middle-class patrons, and most subject matters were enjoyed by both classes, making it difficult to judge whether it was made for *yangban* or the general public. Regardless of the term's implications, *minwha* are a distinctive product of the Joseon society, embodying religious ideas, societal values, popular myths and humor of the people, and are a great measure of the cultural and intellectual diversity and dynamism of the Joseon period.

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COVER IMAGE

Yong-do (Painting of Dragons) (Detail); Korea, Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910); 19th century; Ink and mineral pigments on paper; Loaned by Robert Nicolais



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