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EXHIBITION REVIEW

‘Chaekgeori: Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens’ Review: Painting a Backdrop for an Educated Ruler

With royal roots, these objects expanded in popularity and range from trompe l’oeil paintings of filled bookcases to idiosyncratic still-life compositions that defy the laws of physics and optics.

By Lee Lawrence

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Cleveland

For some 200 years, Korean kings broadcast their heavenly mandate by sitting before a painted screen showing five mountains flanked by a red sun and a white moon. But King Jeongjo, who reigned from 1776 to 1800, invoked another source of authority: books. Besides amassing a large library and overseeing the publication of more than 4,000 books, he commissioned screens depicting bookcases brimming with tomes. Rising behind the throne, they reinforced an oft-expressed concern: People, he believed, should read Confucian and other classics; avoid romance novels, Catholic writings, and other corrupting texts flowing in from China; and eschew using “Chinese objects to show off their highbrow culture.”

Chaekgeori: Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens

*The Cleveland Museum of Art
Through Nov. 5*

None of Jeongjo’s screens survive, but they spurred a vibrant genre that evolved in ways the king

could never have imagined nor, for that matter, condoned. “Chaekgeori: Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens,” at the Cleveland Museum of Art, illustrates styles artists developed as their patronage expanded from court officials to rich merchants in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Eight- and 10-paneled screens range from trompe l’oeil paintings of filled bookcases to idiosyncratic still-life compositions that defy the laws of physics and optics.

They all share the same subject: Chaekgeori, which means “books and things.” The former are shown lying flat, enclosed in box-like covers and often stacked, with perhaps one volume askew or open, as though the reader has just set it down. Although the books in Jeongjo’s screens reportedly bore titles, these do not (scholars have found only one exception). People would have nevertheless immediately recognized the large-format books with abstract patterns as Korean and the smaller ones enveloped in brocade as Chinese. They would also know that most of the “things” were imported from China: the bronzes and incense burners, calligraphy brushes and ink stones, ceramic bowls and vases, lacquer boxes and carved jade seals, paintings rolled up and partially unfurled.



Eight-panel Chaekgeori from the late 1800s PHOTO: SONGOK MEMORIAL HALL, SEOUL, KOREA

The CMA is the show's last venue—previously it was at the Charles B. Wang

Center of Stony Brook University in New York and the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas. It was co-curated by scholars in all three institutions, and only the catalog has the full complement of works. Still, the nine large screens and two paintings in Cleveland's iteration effectively convey the galvanizing variety of a quirky off-shoot whose origins owe much to China.

Every year, some 200 to 300 Korean officials and technocrats (painters among them) accompanied court envoys to Beijing's Forbidden City, where they saw "cabinets of many treasures," including Western innovations such as the reading glasses we see in a number of screens. Visiting Koreans also marveled at European perspective and trompe l'oeil techniques in paintings by Jesuit missionaries. What Koreans saw in China didn't stay in China. Back home, artists got busy.



Kyoungtack Hong's 'Library 3' (1995-2001) PHOTO: KYOUNGTACK HONG

Since people would have viewed screens while sitting on cushions or low platforms, it behooves you to crouch. The perspective, for one, will snap into place. Look straight on, and you might spy a painting, a frog, or slippers tucked beneath low tables. Glance up at a bookshelf painting, and you see the underside of upper shelves. You also get a better feel for the painting's overall impact. As in much of East Asia, screens served as portable décor to imbue a

space with mood or message. Some act as symbolic portraits—in one, a woman's perfume and cosmetic containers jostle with glasses, ink brushes, books and other signs of erudition—while others set a celebratory tone with bright colors, flashy patterns, and symbols of good fortune.

More appealing even than their meaning is their inventiveness. In one style, exemplified by an embroidered screen, books and precious items float against a plain background, filling the air around us like thoughts. In the "stacked" or "table" style, artists created still lifes, sometimes reversing the principles of linear perspective so that books appear to be zooming toward us. And in the "bookcase" style, some artists found a way to sign their work while preserving the fiction. As two pieces in the show illustrate, they depicted a stone or jade seal, turned on its side, revealing the painter's moniker carved on its base. Even today, some artists harken back to the chaekgeori—witness the books without titles and the amassed collectibles in Kyoungtack Hong's "Library 3" (1995-2001) and "Library—Mt. Everest" (2014).

King Jeongjo would have bemoaned how far from his ideals the genre would stray. Had he known, he might never have required that top-tier court painters excel in this genre (a practice that lasted until 1879). And Korea's elite and wealthy might never have commissioned such works.

—Ms. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.



Kyoungtack Hong's 'Library—Mt. Everest' (2014) PHOTO: KYOUNGTACK HONG

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