The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens

Showing at the Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University (until 23 December 2016)
Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas (8 April-12 June 2017)
Cleveland Museum of Art (5 August–5 November 2017)

CURATED BY A GROUP of Korean art experts that include Byungsoo Chung (professor, Yonsei University), Sunglim Kim (professor, Dartmouth College), Jinyoung Jin (Director of Cultural Programs, Charles B. Wang Center), Sooja Kim McCormick (Assistant Curator of Asian Art, Cleveland Museum of Art), and Kwis Imants Ercums (Curator of Global Contemporary and Asian Art, Spencer Museum of Art), this collection showcases marvellous and rare examples of chaekgeori screens alongside the works of a diverse body of contemporary artists who continue the genre into the twenty-first century. Seven contemporary artists featured in the exhibition are Stephanie Lee, Seongmin Ahn, Kyungtaek Hong, Patrick Hughes, Songga, Young-Shik Kim, and Aran Kang. Initially intended as a means to maintain and promote the disciplined Confucian lifestyle of Joseon Korea against an influx of ideas and technology from abroad, King Jeongjo (1752-1800, r. 1776-1800) encouraged court painters to emphasize books as the main subjects of royal screen paintings and to embrace the power of books and the ideas contained within them. Realizing that books were vehicles of change in his society, King Jeongjo worked hard to popularize the idea of books as symbols able to transcend the tangible originals among Korea’s artisans and other elites. In the process, the value of physical books actually increased and became highly sought after. This desire for books and other commodities in Korea set in motion a significant social and cultural shift toward materialism that has continued into the twenty-first century. One can say that chaekgeori paintings not only have the ability to teach and inspire, but they also possess the power to shape the values of a society.

One masterpiece in the exhibit serves as a great example of this. The piece in question is a six-panel screen (fig. 1) that documents the image of books and collectable commodities, in both literati and folk painting, has so engaged and ensured the genre’s ongoing popularity, now stretching for more than two centuries. No other genre or medium in Korean art, in both literati and folk painting, has so engaged and documented the image of books and collectable commodities, and the changes in how we view and value them over time. And when the genre transitioned into folk-style painting, new and unexpected visual elements emerged. Folk-style chaekgeori expanded the range of subjects beyond books to express surrealistic dreams and more. For example, an unusual feature of this particular late nineteenth-century screen (fig. 2) is its depiction of clouds and a dragon. The dragon symbolizes the desire for many sons, the wish to educate them, and the hope to have them improve their social status through education. The surrealist depictions of such earthly desires is a testament to the incredible imagination inherent in folk-style chaekgeori. The exhibition also showcases how this artistic genre has been utilized by today’s artists. For example, in Aran Kang’s Digital Book Project installation, books glow, catching the viewer’s eye, yet they simultaneously invite and forbid access as embodiments of ideals (fig. 3). This aspect of her work can be directly compared to the representation of books in chaekgeori paintings, where books are symbols of ideas, inaccessible objects that ultimately surpass their original, physical meaning and being. In our increasingly paperless and digitized society, much like in Hong’s painting, serving as props for transcendent value or meaning. Books are in the background of our lives, much like in Hong’s painting, serving as props for materialism. Using chaekgeori, Hong is able to astutely critique this state of affairs. The other modern artists featured in the exhibition make similar (yet also differing) commentaries on these themes, using a genre created and promoted expressly to combat against materialism.

The significance of any work of art consists largely in the ability to carry and communicate embodied meaning. And when it comes to documenting, engaging, and comment ing on the culture of consumption, no other genre or medium in Korean art can compare to chaekgeori. By drawing on a long artistic lineage and making comparisons to the traditional form and objectives of chaekgeori with contemporary examples, The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens facilitates a better understanding of the intellectual curiosity and the desire to own commodities that animated Korean society then and that continue to animate us now—and how these powerful urges continue to be portrayed in art.

Jinyoung Jin (Director of Cultural Programs, The Charles B. Wang Center).

The exhibition The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens explores the genre of Korean still-life painting known as chaekgeori (책거리, loosely translated as ‘books and things’). Chaekgeori (Check-ah-ree, 책거리) was one of the most prolific art forms of Korea’s Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), and it continues to be used today. It often depicts books and other material commodities as symbolic embodiments of knowledge, power, and social reform. For the first time in the United States, more than twenty screen paintings dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the Joseon dynasty are on view at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University in New York.