EXHIBITION REVIEW

A Cerebral Art Form That Went Delightfully Astray

BY LEE LAWRENCE

Cleveland Museum of Art

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 overt message: The people, he believed, should read Confucian and other classics, avoid romance novels, Catholic writings, and other corrupting texts flowing in from China, and especially “Chinese objects to show off their highbrow culture.”

None of Jeongjo’s screens survived, but they spurred a vibrant genre that evolved in ways the king could never have imagined. For that matter, condoned, “Cheaigeori: 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. Rectangular panels 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: Cheaigeori, which means “books and kings.” The former are shown lying flat, enclosed in box-like covers and often stacked, 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 developed 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.

The CMA is the show’s last venue—previously it was at the Charles B. Wang Center of Stone 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 offshoot 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.

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 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 monkey carved on its base. Even today, some artists harken back to the cheaigeori—witness the books without titles and the amassed collectibles in Kyoung-tack Hong’s “Library 3” (1992-2001) 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.

Cheaigeori: Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens
The Cleveland Museum of Art, through Nov. 5

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