



Archiving and Contextualization: Exhibitions and Researches on Korean Painting Since 2000

Introduction

History of exhibitions on Korean paintings held in museums testifies that the scope of studies on Korean painting history has expanded and that museum as a public space and institution has been well-established in our lives.

Studies on Korean art history have reposed on the methodologies of modern art history; despite its short history as an academic discipline compared to that of other fields of humanities, it has made great strides in virtue of active efforts undertaken by academia and museums. The year 2000, especially, was a meaningful year as it was the 50th anniversary of establishing the Art History Association of Korea and launching the academic journal on art history, *Misuljaryo* (*National Museum of Korea Art Journal*). The Art History Association of Korea was initiated as an academic gathering of people interested in archaeology and fine arts and grew as a representative academic society in the field of Korean art history. Likewise, the academia of Korean art history went through a dual process of fundamental archiving projects and in-depth interpretations on multi-faceted phenomena of Korean art history in a short time period.

Based on the accumulated research outcomes, the number of special exhibitions on Korean paintings has sharply risen since 2000, and their subjects and contents have been differentiated according to selected themes. Relocation of the National Museum of Korea to Yongsan, opening of the National Palace Museum of Korea in 2005, and launch of the Jangseogak library in the Academy of Korean Studies in 2011 all served as a momentum for the growth of Korean painting history as they broke new ground for consistent special exhibitions and publication. Moreover, the National Museum of Korea launched an English academic journal entitled *The International Journal of Korean Art and Archaeology* as an international channel for sharing such achievements.

In this text, major exhibitions on Korean painting till the early 20th century held by the National Museum of Korea and various institutions since

2000 are scrutinized in terms of their themes and characteristics, together with critical research outcomes associated with those exhibitions.¹

Painter-specific Studies

In Korean art history, paintings and calligraphy best express an individual painter's style and competence. Therefore, a fundamental research process involves assembling the collection of each painter, listing his or her bibliographic information such as signatures and epilogues, identifying authenticity, production period, and painting style, and organizing them. However, investigations on individual works of each painter are not thoroughly conducted yet, so systematizing the research scope and process is necessary. *Studies on Korean Painting History* by Ahn Hwi-joon, published in 2000, was significant in that it provided a comprehensive framework of Korean painting history as it was a compilation of 28 papers written by the author.

Various solo exhibitions held in this time period became an impetus to archiving scattered works and resources. *Special Exhibition of Painting of Chang Seung-eop*, held at the Seoul National University Museum in 2000, had great significance as it took a comprehensive approach on the paintings of Chang Seung-eop whose eccentric character had always been more emphasized than art historical analysis.

In 2006, exhibitions on Kim Jeong-hui were held almost simultaneously. They include *A Great Synthesis of Art and Scholarship: Paintings and Calligraphy of Kim Jeong-hui* at the National Museum of Korea, *Special Exhibition of Kim Jeong-hui* at the Kansong Art Museum, and *150th Anniversary Exhibition of Chusa Kim Jeong-hui's Death* at the Seoul Calligraphy Art Museum of the Seoul Arts Center. Each exhibition reflected each institution's capacity and unique perspectives. Not only his calligraphy, but also other achievements and profound studies in epigraphy, Buddhist studies, poetry, and painting by Kim Jeong-hui

1. For details of the anthology for Korean art history from 2000 to 2018, see Lee 2001, 412-15; Park 2003, 477-83; Chung 2005, 365-69; Park 2007, 363-69; Park 2009, 271-77; Jang 2011, 327-39; Jin 2013, 371-78; Kang 2016, 421-28; Kim 2017, 431-39; Yoo 2019, 415-22. For Korean painting exhibitions in the museums, including the National Museum of Korea after liberation until 2005, see S. Lee 2007, 86-117.

were presented.

Meanwhile, *Paintings of Late Joseon Dynasty* at the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, in 2006 and Sochi *HeoRyeon, the Master of the Southern School Painting* at the Gwangju National Museum opened up opportunities to provide multi-faceted perspectives on painters and calligraphers of the late Joseon dynasty period, who established their own domain and philosophy beyond Kim Jeong-hui's sphere of influence.

A Painter's Life: Kang Sehwang and Literati Culture at the National Museum of Korea in 2003 displayed Kang Sehwang's accomplishment as a painter and a critic of the period who led the field of literature and arts through establishing the social network crossing the demarcation of social status. Moreover, *Gongjae Yun Du-seo, Encounter with a Great Master in the*

Late Joseon Dynasty at the Gwangju National Museum in 2014 showed the pioneering works of Yun Du-seo, not only in genre paintings, but also in astronomical geography, mathematics, and military tactics (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the Kansong Art Museum held various exhibitions introducing its collections on some prominent painters, such as *Danwon Kim Hong-do* and *Hyewon Sin Yunbok* in 2000, *Exhibition of Gyeongjae Jeong Seon* in 2004, *Exhibition of Hyeonjae Sim Sa-jeong* in 2004.

Likewise, special exhibitions on an individual painter and calligrapher opened a new chapter of Korean art history by leading archiving and multi-layered interpretations. Particularly, *Dictionary of Korean Painters and Calligraphers through the Centuries* published by the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage in 2011 was a collaborative

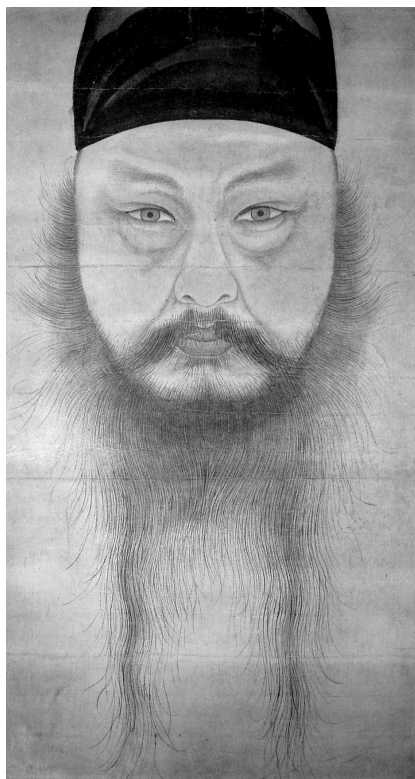


Figure 1. Yun Du-seo, Self-portrait, Joseon 18thc. Ink and color on paper, 38.5×20.5cm, National Treasure No. 240, collection of Haenam Nogudang

achievement of a number of researchers that provided recent research outcomes extensively (National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage 2011).

Real-scenery Landscape Painting

Landscape paintings have been one of the major research topics in Korean art history. Beyond general stylistic or artist-based studies, the scope of researches has been expanded to include exhaustive investigations on certain details of paintings or analysis on social, cultural, or philosophical backgrounds of paintings. Exhibitions on landscape paintings were frequently held, but it is worth noting the special exhibitions on real-scenery landscape paintings in particular.

The Chuncheon National Museum hosted *Our Land, Our True-view Landscape* in 2002. In this exhibition, various landscape paintings, documentary paintings, or pictorial maps that were not used to be included in the category of real-scenery landscape paintings were actively presented, which was a new trial and contribution to diverse perspectives on real-scenery landscape paintings. The Seoul National University Museum's exhibition entitled *Artists on Journey* in 2004 contemplated how painters embodied real-sceneries.

Studies on real-scenery landscape paintings in this time period did not automatically concede the generally-accepted thesis on real-scenery landscape paintings being exclusive characteristic of Jeong Seon. Therefore, researches on real-scenery landscape paintings before Jeong Seon were conducted, and extensive studies on real-scenery landscape paintings, including pictorial maps, throughout the whole Joseon dynasty period were carried out (Yoon 2000; Park 2006; Park 2014; Lee 2019).

In addition, the identity of Jeong Seon as a painter was reconsidered. *Gyeomjae Jeong Seon* by Choi Wan-soo is an extensive compilation of academic reports, composed of three volumes (Choi 2009). Based on Joseon-Sinocentricism prevalent in the late Joseon dynasty period, real-scenery landscape paintings by Jeong Seon were identified as landscape paintings with authentic national identity of the Joseon dynasty, and Jeong Seon was regarded as a master of paintings.² On the other hand, there was an argument that Jeong

2. *Joseon*-Sinocentricism claims that Joseon is what Sinocentricism is.



Figure 2. Installation View of Exhibition, *Through the Eyes of Joseon Painters, Real Scenery Landscapes of Korea*

Seon was not a scholar painter, but rather a professional painter who painted almost everyday to cope with flooding orders. Such argument raised a necessity for more objective and impartial perspectives on Jeong Seon with approaches based on social and economic history (Jang 2010).

Likewise, *Through the Eyes of Joseon Painters, Real Scenery Landscapes of Korea* held at the National Museum of Korea in 2019 introduced newly investigated paintings on a large scale and focused on creators of paintings by presenting diverse perspectives of how a painter perceived real-scenery (Figure 2). This exhibition presented real-scenery paintings on abstract concepts and *fengshui* principles, sketches drawn throughout the itinerary, and unique works that recomposed real-sceneries based on the painter's observation and memory. They contributed to the reconsideration of a previous dichotomous perception on idea and landscape.

International Influence on and by Korean Paintings

Interest in the relationship between international influence and Korean paintings has been persistent since 2000. The popular topic of “international influence on art” has contributed to the understanding of universality and

distinctiveness of Korean art and its status in East Asian art through studies on the foreign elements that influenced Korean art and the means of their adoption and response. These discussions were exhaustively shared in a symposium, “Beyond Boundaries, 2008 International Symposium on Chinese and Korean Painting,” hosted by the National Museum of Korea in 2008.

Academic researches on this topic include studies on the intellectuals’ awareness of Western painting techniques during the late Joseon dynasty period, how they applied those techniques in their own paintings (Yi 2000), and the influence of Chinese calligraphy on Korean paintings in the same time period (Hong 2005). Also, not only the paintings associated with Joseon envoys to Japan that were already studied to a certain extent, but also those of Joseon envoys to Imperial China were examined in terms of cultural exchange in East Asia (Jung 2012). In 2011, the National Museum of Korea opened an exhibition, *Joseon Painters as Envoys to China*, to introduce relevant paintings and calligraphy.

Meanwhile, aside from the genre of paintings, there was also a research that focused on East Asian characteristics of paintings during the Joseon dynasty period. Previously, the analytic framework of understanding the paintings based on the influential relationship among Korea, China, and Japan was widely accepted; however, a new outlook asserted that the dynamics between universality of East Asia and distinctiveness of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese cultures should be concurrently considered.

In this light, an exhibition *Landscapes: Seeking the Ideal Land* in 2004 displayed landscape paintings that reflect utopian ideals of Korea, China, and Japan to demonstrate both universality and distinctiveness through the comparison of painting topics shared by East Asian countries.³ A joint exhibition in 2008, *Tigers in East Asian Art: Korea, Japan, China* by the National Museum of Korea, the Tokyo National Museum, and the National Museum of China, was also meaningful in that it allowed a deeper understanding in traditions and acculturation of tiger arts in East Asia.

3. For the English version of the catalogue, see *Landscapes: Seeking the Ideal Land* published by National Museum of Korea in 2016. Also, Park Hae Hoon’s *Paintings on Eight Scenic Views of Korea* (2017) shares a similar perspective.

Portraits

Studies on portraits have produced the most remarkable research outcomes in the painting history since 2000.

A special exhibition at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in 2001, *Seokji Chae Yongshin*, exhibited the portraits painted by Chae Yongshin who showed innovative approaches of embracing Western painting techniques and utilizing photographic techniques.

The Seoul Museum of Art hosted *Picturing Spirit: Portraiture in East Asia* in 2003. This exhibition served as a great opportunity to compare portraits of East Asia and enhanced this public interest on portrait paintings. *Joseon Royal Portraiture: King Taejo's Image and the Gyeonggi Royal Portrait Hall* was held at the Jeonju National Museum in 2005. It was the first opportunity to disclose the royal portrait of King Taejo, the iconic venerated figure as the king who established the Joseon dynasty, in public. At the same time, the significance of the royal portraits was reviewed in terms of the relationship among ritual ceremonies, architecture, and locality.

The publication of the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea in 2006, *Korean Portrait Paintings, Encountering with People in History*, accelerated the interest in portraits. Also, a special exhibition *Unhyeongung Palace People* held at the Seoul Museum of History in 2007 displayed the imperial portraits of the Great Han Empire, and the Gyeonggi Provincial Museum displayed its collection of the portraits at the exhibition *Portrait, Draw the Eternity* in 2008. These trials led to wider opportunities to look at the various portraits of the kings, meritorious vassals, noblemen, and high priests from the Joseon dynasty period to the Great Han Empire period.

The National Museum of Korea (2007-2009) published the serial catalogue, *Korean Paintings and Calligraphy of the National Museum of Korea*, for three years in a row since 2007. This publication introduced 108 items from its collection. Thanks to the digital archiving of existing data, the discovery of new resources, and the thorough understanding on the backgrounds based on literary sources and pedigrees, more diverse studies could be conducted. Multi-faceted aspects of portraits, including the creation process, subsequent history, and relevant groups of painters, were considered. *Portrait Sketches of the Joseon Period* exhibited at the National Museum of Korea in 2007 presented the behind-the-scenes process of portrait painting, broadening the perspectives on portraits.



Figure 3. Installation View of Exhibition, *The Secret of the Joseon Portraits*

Newly published books on the portraits bolstered the public understanding (Cho 2007; T. Lee 2007), and researches that analyzed the portraits in social and political context suggested new directions for the studies (Cho 2004; Kang 2010). Moreover, a special exhibition at the National Museum of Korea in 2011, *The Secret of the Joseon Portraits*, offered an opportunity to assemble research outcomes and draw attention from the public again (Figure 3).⁴

Studies on the portraits have actively taken new approaches, applying new methodologies or emphasizing semantic context, thereby stepping further from stylistic analysis.⁵ Such outcomes were visualized in exhibitions; in other words, a virtuous circle of researches and public representations worked best in the category of portraits.

Court Paintings

The court painting has been in the limelight in the study of painting history along with portrait paintings since 2000. Park Jeong-hye's *A Study of*

4. An English catalogue for this exhibition is available (National Museum of Korea 2012).

5. Volume 5 of *The International Journal of Korean Art and Archaeology* (National Museum of Korea 2011), with a focus on the portraits, was composed of English journals on the royal portraits, noblemen's portraits, and draft paintings.

Documentary Painting of Court Ceremony in the Joseon Dynasty published in 2000 is a comprehensive work that brought attention to the court paintings (Park 2000). Along with this publication, Kang Gwan Sik's *A Study on the Court Painters of the Late Joseon Dynasty* (2001) illustrated the institutional basis for the court painter system and their paintings, highlighting the reality of painting activities under the initiative of the country (Kang 2001).

Based on such studies, various special exhibitions on court painting could be held. First, *The Documentary Paintings of Choson Dynasty: Ceremonies Held in Imperial Palaces and the Customs of Nobleman*, held at the Korea University Museum in 2001, was significant in that this exhibition selected documentary paintings as the subject in earnest. The documentary paintings of the court and *jiehua* (a type of ruled-line painting style 界畫) were exhibited, becoming an opportunity to enhance the official painting activities by the court painters. A special exhibition at the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in 2011, *The Court Painters of Joseon Dynasty*, highlighted various work scopes of the court painters beyond their professional activities.

The Decorative Paintings at the Court of the Joseon Dynasty of the Chuncheon National Museum in 2004 explored the functions of the court paintings concretely. Various color paintings employed in the palaces were previously classified as one type of folk painting before this exhibition, but here, they were named as “decorative court paintings.”

The exhibition *Decorative Paintings of Joseon Paintings* at the National Palace Museum of Korea in 2009 contributed greatly to understanding court painting by featuring its use in terms of architectural space. *Scenes of Banquets and Ceremonies of the Joseon Period* in 2009 was also an important exhibition that underscored the meaning and function of paintings by presenting the ritual celebration ceremonies and feasts based on various documentary paintings, the royal protocols, and other records of the Joseon dynasty (Figure 4).⁶

The Return of the Ogyujanggak Uigwe from France: Records of the State Rites of the Joseon Dynasty exhibited at the National Museum of Korea in 2011 displayed the Uigwe, the Royal Protocols of the Joseon dynasty, returned from the National Library of France (Bibliothèque nationale de France). Most of the exhibited materials were the sole copy made for the royal inspection, so this

6. For the English catalogue of this exhibition, see National Museum of Korea 2011.



Figure 4. Installation View of Exhibition,
Scenes of Banquets and Ceremonies of the Joseon Period, in 2009

exhibition became a milestone of studies on the *uigwe* and its utilization. It promoted understanding of various resources, including the court paintings, in terms of the relationship between ritual ceremonies and space. Ultimately, the anthologies for the *uigwe* studies were published as well.⁷

Mounting is the final step in production of paintings and calligraphy, so it has a direct impact on aesthetic quality of the finished work. The National Palace Museum's *The Finishing Touch: Works of the Brush and Their Mounting* in 2008 offered an opportunity to compare mounting works for paintings and calligraphy produced in the royal palaces of the Joseon dynasty with those of China and Japan. The Amore Pacific Museum of Art hosted a special exhibition *Beyond Folding Screens* in 2018. Focusing on the form and function of folding screens, it provided a multi-layered perspective on paintings.

A special exhibition *Korean Folk Painting and Screens* held at the National Folk Museum of Korea in 2006 put emphasis on the relationship between folk

7. National Museum of Korea's series of anthologies of academic essays on the *Ogyujanggak Uigwe* include *Current Status and Prospect for the Royal Protocols of the Joseon Dynasty* (2012), *Bookbinding of the Ogyujanggak Uigwe* (2014), *Funerary Rites of the Ogyujanggak Uigwe I* (2015), and *Funerary Rites of the Ogyujanggak Uigwe II* (2018).

paintings and dwelling space. Paintings decorating the dwelling space of the common people were defined as “folk painting,” and they were distinguished from practical decorative paintings of the palaces. It was meaningful to reassess the definition of folk painting and review the blurred distinction between the court paintings and folk paintings.

Changes in the Field of Art: Commercialization, Secularization, and Modernization

There were studies and exhibitions focusing on the chronological transformations of paintings that emerged with changes in overall society and economy during the late Joseon dynasty period. With regard to genre painting, Jung Byung Mo's *Korean Genre Painting* is a representative book, published in 2000. The National Museum of Korea held a special exhibition *Genre Paintings of Joseon Dynasty* in 2002 and displayed not only the genre paintings that were influential in the late Joseon dynasty period, but also other documentary paintings or Buddhist paintings that reflected some characteristics of genre painting.

As to researches, a number of books were published in virtue of studies on the emergence of painting and calligraphy collectors, patrons, art markets, and middle-class painters and their distinctive perspectives in artistic beauty (Lee 2017; Hwang 2012; Kim 2015). Amid the accumulation of these research achievements, *The City in Art, Art in the City*, held by the National Museum of Korea in 2016, highlighted the middle-class “urban culture” that was developed since the 18th century (Figure 5). It was based on opinions that the culture of the Joseon dynasty cannot be explained solely by “Confucian aesthetics of temperance and frugality.” Under the categories of urban landscape, urban sentiment, and urban aesthetics, this exhibition attempted a comprehensive reconstruction of paintings, ceramics, crafts, and historical resources to feature how the art itself and the field of art were altered by urbanization. It has significance that demonstrated the issue of how the socio-economic environment transformed the content and style of art.

On the other hand, *Modern Transition in Korean Calligraphy and Painting*, a special exhibition at the National Museum of Korea in 2019, rather focused on more modern time period, an imbroglio when the East and the West,



Figure 5. Installation View of Exhibition, *The City in Art, Art in the City*

the Old and the New, and the Traditional and the Modern co-existed. This exhibition represented the art explored by painters and calligraphers. Exhibited contents were not limited to artworks, but covered various printed matters such as illustrations in newspaper, thereby presenting modern transformations in the perspectives of visual culture.

Conclusion

As presented above, since 2000, the theme of special exhibitions has reflected a more comprehensive perspective by not only introducing artifacts, but also consolidating and contextualizing academic achievements in a specific field. Exhibition and academic research are interdependent, and therefore, a substantial and meaningful special exhibition can be held when there is a virtuous cycle between the two domains.

Meantime, the research of Korean painting history has attained a great academic achievement in both quantity and quality, but the task of systematic archiving is still a critical ongoing task. In this regard, organizing special exhibitions has contributed to the accumulation of fundamental resources by collecting and publicly presenting pertinent artifacts in each field.

Since the mid-20th century, Korean society has undergone a rapid compressed development, and museums are no exception. Museums in Korea have two tasks: a fundamental process of systematizing data and a response to the constant demands for special exhibitions that can provide new interpretations. It is a remarkable phenomenon that special exhibitions are evolving as a venue for arousing public interest and synthesizing academic achievements, and collaboration with academia is becoming more important in order to cultivate a more holistic view on the contents.

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