



Special Feature

Korean Painting
in the Joseon Period

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Editor's Note

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For the past few years, the *Review of Korean Studies* (hereafter, *RKS*) has featured several special issues on Korean culture: History and Literature, Confucianism and Buddhism, and Ceramic Culture and Music, to name a few. And for the December issue of 2022, we figured it was a good time to return to the topic of Art, to provide the readers with an opportunity to experience the stunning visuals of Korean artistic accomplishments and a chance to understand what kind of historical meaning lies beneath them.

Nothing would seem like a better option than enlisting outstanding works on Korean painting to serve such purpose. So for a start, it was decided to invite promising Korean scholars currently engaged in studies of Joseon painting. Three scholars graciously agreed to contribute articles based on their expertise, past studies, and future prospects. *RKS* is enormously grateful for their participation in this special occasion.

Professor Yoo Jaebin at Hongik University provided us with an article entitled “Feminine Space in Court Paintings of Late Joseon Dynasty.” It focuses on several living spaces the females inhabited in the Joseon royal palaces, as well as how they were portrayed in Joseon paintings. She noticed the depiction of Queens Dowager in such paintings somewhat changed over time, reflecting evolution in their political status and their actions. Of course, she recognizes that this kind of change does not mean the elevation of females’ social status in general, but rather the increase in female-involved politics. She does, however, acknowledge that portrayals of royal gatherings and banquets became more of a public occasion, and the female spaces which had earlier been simply hidden came to be openly depicted and visualized. By noticing such changes, she overcomes the previous practice of only deeming the concept of “female painting” as paintings by females or of them as objects, and enlarges the concept to paintings of various objects or places that involved the females in any capacity, effectively displaying how the issue of gender could be discussed while

examining Joseon art.

Dr. Hwang Jung-yon, who serves as Curator at the Cultural Heritage Administration, provided us with an article entitled “The Last Majestic Ornamentation of Royal Portraits of the Joseon Dynasty: The Construction of New Seonwonjeon Hall in Changdeokgung Palace in 1921 and Court Paintings.” This Hall was a structure that served as a space to house portraits of past Joseon kings, and the inside of the Hall was revealed to the public in 2002 when repair works began. According to Dr. Hwang, all the artworks newly disclosed to the academic community at the time triggered a surge in studies on Joseon royal portraits and the inner structure of spaces that housed them. While recognizing the Hall itself does epitomize the tragic nature of the era that witnessed the fall of Joseon and beginning of the Japanese occupation, as the Hall was constructed in the wake of Japanese imperialism sweeping through Joseon and tearing down existing royal structures, she clarifies that all the cultural relics that we can find from the Hall show us the some of the finest examples of Joseon painting, which feature Joseon’s rich culture of palace art and long legacy of royal portraits.

And finally, Professor Seo Yoonjung at Myongji University provided us with an article entitled “Joseon Paintings in Japan: Cultural Biography of Objects.” It focuses on how Joseon paintings, which were artful and beautiful as they were, took on different natures and identities as it continued to circulate and be embraced by different customers, especially in foreign countries (which was, in this case, medieval Japan). Once they traveled to Japan, they were put in alien environments, viewed from different perspectives, and understood in new contexts. Sometimes even their original condition was altered and modified. Prof. Seo tries to trace all that, attempting to ascertain how their artistic nature and historic meaning was newly defined. Examination of art evolving in this manner is quite fascinating, and as a scholar engaged in such task, she also has some suggestions for future studies, such as further exploration of the important role the Joseon diplomatic envoys played, and the diverse meaning of Joseon paintings as gifts in various situations. She also asks for future cooperations between different areas of studies, such as history, literature, and art.

All these three outstanding works collected here not only capture specific aspects of Joseon painting, but also touch on important subjects: how the issue of gender can be applied to the examination of art, how art survived and prevailed under drastic conditions including colonial ruling, and how they were

perceived and kept on transforming within foreign environments. As an editor, it was truly a rewarding experience to read all these fascinating takes on not only Joseon paintings but Korean art in general.

Again, we at *RKS* wholeheartedly thank all the three scholars for sharing with us their professional views on Joseon painting. Their graceful contributions to this special occasion would undoubtedly help all the readers understand the unique nature, artful excellence, and historical meaning of several examples of Joseon painting. *RKS* will continue to endeavor hosting other excellent studies on various aspects of Korean art in the future. For the time being, please enjoy what these three experts on Joseon painting have to say.

