

Introduction of European art in Korea during the eighteenth century

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Abstract

Long closed off from the foreign world, during the seventeenth century Korea had very limited cultural exchanges with Europeans, fewer than those maintained with its neighbours Japan and China. Feeling the need to modernize, it began to open up at the end of the century through contacts with Westerners, which nevertheless remained indirect and sporadic. The introduction of Western artworks in the late eighteenth century, produced in a world whose existence had often been unknown, translated into growing interest for some aspects of European culture and the Christian religion, which can be felt in different fields of Korean artistic production, painting in particular. This period saw both the blossoming of a truly Korean culture, as well as the development of genuine exchange between the Far East and Europe, well before the opening of the first Korean port to Western ships in the late nineteenth century.

Article

The beginnings of the introduction of European art in Korea date back to 1645, when Crown Prince Sohyeon, who had been held hostage up to that point in China following the Manchu invasion, brought back to his country a series of European scientific and religious objects offered to him by the German Johann Adam Schall von Bell. Suspicion on the part of conservative courtiers, who considered these imports to be “harmful” to Confucianism, led to their destruction after the prince’s death. It therefore took until the late seventeenth century for European painting to be truly introduced in Korea, owing to the reforming atmosphere of the Jingleong era. Considered as the golden age of Korean culture, it began with the reign of King Sukjong (1674-1720) and reached its height during the reign of Jeongjo (1776-1800). It was also the moment when the doctrine of the Silhak school spread widely through scholarly society. This doctrine emphasized the acquisition of knowledge and new practices, in an effort to remedy Korea’s under-development in comparison to China and Japan.

This internal context explains the resumption of diplomatic and commercial relations between the two countries. China played the role of intermediary in the introduction of Western products in Korea. Between 1637, the year of the last Manchu invasion of Korea, and 1894, which saw the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war for control over the kingdom, Korea’s Joseon Dynasty sent ambassadors to China, most of whom were interested in European sciences and arts, and especially frequented

Beijing's four churches. These were the primary locations for meeting European missionaries, and where scientific objects and paintings imported from Europe were exchanged. European works of art regularly reached Korea through these Korean ambassadors sent to Beijing, such as the engraving on copper by Pieter Schenck depicting a *Landscape of Soltaniyeh*, or the one based on a drawing by Giuseppe Castiglione representing the *Assault on the camp located at Gadan-Ola*, in the *Conquests of Qianlong Emperor* series.

The diffusion of such works in Korea made new pictorial practices possible and enabled Korean painters of the late eighteenth century to borrow elements from Western painting, perspective and chiaroscuro in particular. While Europeans used these techniques to create vast illusionist landscapes extending into the distance, Koreans preferred to use multi-point perspective to create an infinite landscape based on a subjective view: they did not seek to render the depth of space, or the distancing of elements as they appear in reality. They paid even less attention to light effects, because they did not traditionally consider the effect of relief in painting. As a result, their compositions are far from producing the impression of reality given by the naturalist European style. However, it is evident that Korean painting evolved in the late eighteenth century towards a more objective and realist manner, notably in certain paintings by Kim Hong-do (1745-1806?). This artist appreciated the new European technique as a way of achieving pictorial realism, in an effort to modernize traditional practices. For instance, in his landscape painting *Cliff at Ongchon*, produced in 1788, he partially applied the technique of atmospheric perspective, which rendered the landscape's distance through the gradation of the black ink. He also suggested the effect of depth by drawing the rocks and mountains in different sizes based on real distance.

In addition to these stylistic evolutions, European influence also led in the late eighteenth century to the appearance of new pictorial genres that were not practiced by traditional Korean painting. During the Joseon dynasty, the group portrait, still life, and especially the still life on bookshelves became established as new genres, adopted after the introduction of European art in the eighteenth century. Among them, still life on bookshelves, which appeared during the reign of King Jeongjo (1776-1800), used European pictorial technique to represent books, symbols of erudite knowledge, and objects of great value imported and collected by these scholars. It is a genre of painting in which knowledge and beauty combine, enabling a learned person to attain the ideal of a scholar's cultured life. This Korean genre expresses the desire to simultaneously possess precious objects and exhibit universal knowledge within a single space, something that can be found in both the East and the West. This notably brings to mind European canvases representing a *studiolo* in fifteenth-century Italy, a cabinet of curiosities during the sixteenth century, and later a collector's cabinet, following the practice developed in Antwerp during the second half of the seventeenth century. All of these genres of painting in Europe and Korea were essentially interested in the relationship between objects and space, following an exploration developed in Europe since the Renaissance as part of *trompe-l'oeil*

paintings. Adding intellectual preoccupations to the visual dimension, these images could make the viewer dream beyond real space and give the illusion of the reality of objects placed in a simulated space. Among these points in common, still life on bookshelves—a genre that became typically Korean through the emphasis placed on books, and their staging in the symbolic space belonging to the scholar—was certainly new at the time, and represents one of the best indicators of the introduction of foreign culture in Korea, as well as the influence it had on Korean art.

Parallel to the development of landscape and genre painting, Korean art evolved during the eighteenth century by integrating within its traditional culture novelties borrowed from Western practices. The painters of Korea, who on their own initiative introduced European contributions into their works, succeeded in creating “modern” Korean painting during the eighteenth century, before the subsequent upheavals of the nineteenth century. Most of the research conducted by historians has focused on these upheavals, to the detriment of the eighteenth century, which was nevertheless important in the crosscutting artistic history of Europe and Korea.

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