

## Sun, moon, and immortal peaches

A recent Korean exhibition that toured various major museums in the United States, titled "Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor and Simplicity," highlighted the continuity of the arts during the lengthy Choson dynasty (1392-1910). A display of court arts demonstrated how this was maintained. The key was the adoption of neo-Confucianism over the widely-espoused and consequently, influential Buddhism favoured by the previous Koryo dynasty (935-1392). The majority of artefacts and works of art produced were highly symbolic and designed to enhance the mystical aspects of Confucianism. The court Bureau of Painting came under the Ministry of Rites, which closely supervised any works produced for the court. Many of these were didactic works that illustrated the king's virtue, benevolent rule, and moral rectitude.

Contemporary Korean architecture was simple and practical—most houses and palaces were constructed in wood on solid stone bases. The main reception hall, with its wooden floor (*taech'ong*) was flanked by rooms with a heated floor (*ondol*); ceilings were low to retain the heat. Most of the walls, except those on the side facing north, consisted almost completely of sliding or folding doors, with lattice designs covered with translucent, white paper. Hence, there was little permanent hanging space for pictures, and a need to shield the occupants from draughts. Folding screens, known as *pyongp'ung* or "protectors from draughts," were the perfect solution, and these presented artists with abundant space for their talents. Despite the rigid stratification of Korean society, each social group commissioned illustrated screens for both ritual and domestic use. The more simple ones used paper or linen as a base, but the royal commissions preferred the richest materials and greatly favoured silk. Our knowledge of Korean court paintings is largely derived from these screens, because more of them have survived than the hanging scrolls or fan paintings.

Artists working for the Bureau of Painting were subject to a rigid examination system, similar to that of the Confucian scholars who formed the backbone of the Choson administration. Whereas the latter were mainly drawn from the *yangban*, the land-owning aristocracy,

artists could be drawn from the lower levels of society, based on merit. However, they were not permitted to sign their creations and many of the court works were the result of a collective effort. As many of the screens were more than three metres high, this is hardly surprising, in the interests of speedy execution. Court artists were also denied any individual artistic expression, having to paint to set formulae, frequently having to copy exactly earlier works that were deteriorating and in need of replacement. Such copying and the lack of different schools presents the art historian with a nightmare that is difficult to unravel.

Screens were an essential part of royal regalia and kings and queens used them to delineate sacred space and in a cosmogenic sense to enhance their position. Our cover illustration is a magnificent example of this genre. Brilliant mineral colour has been used lavishly—known as *tang-cha*e (Chinese colours), these mineral pigments were costly, many having to be imported from China. They were fixed with either animal glue or fish glue, both of which rendered them insoluble to water, and assured their brilliance. The composition is a tribute to longevity and alludes to a mystery world, much favoured by the Koreans. The almost perfectly symmetrical red sun symbolizes the king (and *yang*, the male positive principle) and the white moon stands for the queen (and *yin*, the female negative principle); the workings of the universe result from the interplay of these two principles. This theme is a Taoist one and recurs throughout Korean art, yet no Taoist temple existed in Korea during this period. The composition is a complicated allegory for immortality—the rocky crags, waves, and abundant peach trees are all Taoist metaphors for longevity and immortality, and refer to the mythical Islands of the Immortals that rise from the waves of the Eastern Sea. Added to these are the bright red and yellow *pulloch'o*, sacred fungi, sprouting from the craggy, cuboid rocks at the bottom of the composition. Even the spume from the foaming waves has been given zoomorphic characteristics.

The ripe peaches allude to a certain sexual symbolism related to the main long-life symbolism: for

among the ways Taoists hoped to achieve immortality was by fathering numerous sons and grandsons. Male sexual prowess, and its female stimuli, were thus of great concern to them, which accounts for why, in the words of one commentator, "Korean depictions of the *Peach of Immortality* frequently exaggerate its natural form so that the cleft suggests a vulva and the pink tip suggests a breast and nipple. Korean folk artists sometimes intentionally carry this exaggeration to the point of humorous parody."<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to see the craggy mountains as the Korean Diamond Mountains or *Kumgang San*, regarded as sacred to Buddhists, Shamanists, and Taoists alike, for they are depicted in a similar manner to those in a scroll painting of Kim Ch'ang-up (1658-1721), which is now housed in the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>2</sup>

The didacticism of this brightly coloured screen, rich in symbolism, would have been immediately apparent to any official at the royal court, and would have engendered a reverential mood in the onlooker. Executed in a strictly two-dimensional form, this pair of screens would have been not only highly decorative, but also very useful.

### References

1. Moes R. *Auspicious spirits: Korean folk paintings and related objects*. Washington: International Exhibition Foundation, 1983.
2. Moes R. *Korean art from the Brooklyn Museum Collection*. New York: Universe Books, 1987.

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### **Sun, Moon, and Immortal Peaches**

Pair of four-fold screens, colour on silk  
Each four-fold screen measures 330.3 x 273.4 cm  
Korean, Late Choson Period: 18th/19th century

From the collection of the Royal Museum, Seoul

Illustration courtesy of the Arthur M Sackler Gallery,  
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