

Korean Folk Art

Folk paintings are an invaluable part of Korea's cultural heritage and convey the mythology, religion and views of the Korean people. They are the artistic expressions of individuals who drew paintings to decorate homes and to celebrate joyful family occasions, such as weddings and sixtieth birthdays. It has been said that the tradition of folk painting endured for so long because they "touched the soul of the people."

One is easily charmed by Korean folk art. The unknown artisans who created folk paintings had an optimistic outlook on life. In their agrarian society "they perceived a miraculous order of the universe that they attempted to express." They used symbolism to convey their feelings of happiness, anger, love and delight in everyday life. Humor and satire are important elements of the paintings.

In Korea, folk art has traditionally been viewed as a secondary art form despite its rich tradition and widespread popularity. Due to this misperception, *minhwa* ("folk painting") has been devalued or misunderstood and compared unfavorably with the tradition of the aristocratic class known as *muninhwa* ("scholarly painting"). Recently, *minhwa* has begun to attract serious scholarly attention and is beginning to enjoy long overdue recognition as an important genre with its own distinctive aesthetic qualities and historical significance.

Folk paintings are grouped into two major categories of folk belief: wishing for good luck and repelling evil spirits. Every folk painting contains people's wish for happiness. Folk paintings have two underlying themes: longevity and blessings for all people. Wishing for longevity, artists displayed paintings of the sun, clouds, pine trees, bamboo, cranes, deer, turtles, water and rocks. The peach and the pomegranate meant plentiful offspring, long life and bountiful happiness.

Koreans believed in the *yin* and *yang* and that people's life included both good and evil. They also believed that folk paintings possessed shamanistic powers to protect them from war, disease and famine. Paintings of animals could drive away evil spirits. The animals most frequently depicted were the tiger, dragon, the unicorn and the turtle. The tiger was the most popular motif in this category. Tigers were believed to prevent natural disasters such as fires, floods and wind and even their skin, bones, claws and whiskers could exercise mystic powers. The dragon would also protect people from evil forces together with symbolizing the king and royal authority.

Some additional symbols: fire (benevolence), grain (life), mountain (dignity), magpie (a harbinger of good news), pheasant (fidelity), bamboo and the pine tree (longevity), chestnut (filial piety), peony (wealth), turtle (endurance), unicorn (mercy), lion (power), duck (fidelity) and deer (honor and success through scholastic endeavor).

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