

‘*Chaekgeori*: The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens’

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The unfolding of a Korean screen invites viewers into a distinct world. More than room dividers or baffles against drafts, Korean folding screens create—and are an integral component of—ceremonial settings for significant events intended to encourage transcendent experiences. Folding screens may be displayed both outside and indoors, at weddings, important birthdays, scholarly examinations and business meetings, as well as spiritual and seasonal celebrations like the full moon festival (K. *daeboreum*).

A particular genre of Korean folding screen is known as *chaekgeori*, a term that, loosely translated, means ‘books and things’. It is these books and certain other items discussed below that form the subject-matter displayed in *chaekgeori* screens. First appearing in around 1783, *chaekgeori* screens blossomed in popularity during the later periods of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), and have continued to evolve up to the present day.

Despite an abundance of the genre in Korea, opportunities to view *chaekgeori* screens in the Americas are relatively few, as only a handful are held in Western collections. Because of the fragile nature of the paper and cloth employed to make folding screens, even these few are infrequently displayed and only on view for a limited time. The astonishing diversity within the *chaekgeori* genre is revealed by a groundbreaking exhibition, ‘*Chaekgeori*: The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens’, and the accompanying publication, both of which feature many masterworks (Fig. 1).

The exhibition was conceived by the famed folk painting specialist Byungmo Chung of Gyeongju University together with Sunglim Kim of Dartmouth College. The majority of screens displayed in the exhibition are loans from both private and public collections in Korea and were brought to the US with the support of Korea Foundation and Gallery Hyundai by Jinyoung Jin, director of cultural programmes at the Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University, New York, where the exhibition was on view from 29 September to 23 December 2016. It then travelled to the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas (15 April–11 June 2017) and The Cleveland Museum of Art (5 August–5 November 2017).

A number of distinctions set Korean screens apart from their neighbours. Unlike paired Japanese screens, Korean screens are created as individual works intended to stand alone. Korean screen panels are often narrower than those in Chinese or Japanese screens. Six- and eight-panel screens are most commonly found, but two-, four-, ten- and even twelve-panel screens exist. Screens may also be commissioned in a range of heights. The larger (both taller and having more panels) demonstrate excess and prestige with their monumentality. Usually the screens are paintings on paper, mounted with cloth borders stretched on wood frames (see Figs 1–4, 6–7). A potentially more expensive screen would be embroidered rather than painted (see Fig. 5). Older examples may also have a short foot, similar to the Chinese tradition and unlike the Japanese screen format that is without feet.



Fig. 1 Installation of the exhibition 'Chaekgeori: The Power and Pleasure of Korean Screens' at the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, 15 April–11 June 2017 (Image courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas)

Korean screens were explicitly intended to create specific settings that, among other things, alluded to the owner's status; thus, the screens themselves reveal their social uses. In the case of *chaekgeori*, one's cultured self is projected and amplified through the types of precious possessions that are rendered in the imagery—with a special emphasis on books.

Literary culture in Korea has some intriguing distinctions. Korean paper-making dates back to the 3rd century, following closely on Chinese production. In fact, paper production became so prolific it is used in large quantities in Korean architecture, covering walls, windows and floors in buildings. Korea also demonstrated considerable printing prowess: decades before the Gutenberg Bible was printed in 1454–55, the earliest known book printed with movable metal type was the *Jikji* (*Selected Teaching of Buddhist Sages and Seon Masters*), printed in 1377 in Korea. Additionally, the 81,350 wood printing blocks carved in the 12th century that detail the core writings of Mahayana Buddhism (the *Tripitaka Koreana*) have remained housed in the temple Haeinsa in southern Gyeongsang province, South Korea since 1398.

Despite the clear ability to mass-produce books, they were not widely available in Korea. Several Joseon rulers closely controlled access to books, making them precious. It is significant that although books are the very namesake of *chaekgeori* they are very rarely specified by title within the screen's imagery. The generic rendering of large volumes of books reflects a shrewd political reality, a 'Policy of Impartiality' (Tangpyeongchoek), as the rise of this art form connects with political tensions about different philosophies of life. Blank books display erudition without publicly naming books that might be in temporary political favour, only to fall from favour later—one could be punished for owning or reading books that might reflect views contrary to those in power. In the Korean context, the rise of *chaekgeori* coincides with the 18th century 'Northern Learning' movement (Bukhak) promoted by social reformers interested in greater interactions outside Korea, which encouraged international intellectual exchange, trade, modernization and science (Chung, 2017, pp. 64–65).

King Jeongjo (r. 1776–1800) promoted *chaekgeori* at the highest level, even using it as part of his formal regalia on occasion—placed behind his throne instead of the traditional *irworobongdo* mountain screen.



Fig. 2 *Chaekgado* eight-panel folding screen (detail) Korea, late 19th century Ink and colour on paper, 119 x 408 cm (overall) Korean Folk Village, Yongin (Image courtesy of Dahal Media, Seoul)

Fig. 3 *Chaekgado* eight-panel folding screen By Jang Hanjong (1768–1815), late 18th century Ink and colour on paper, 195 x 361 cm (overall) Gyeonggi Provincial Museum, Yongin (Image courtesy of Dahal Media, Seoul)



Between 1784 and 1788, *chaekgeori* was named one of the major subjects in the formal examination of court painters, and remained so until 1879 when the exams ceased.

Following the king's lead, the earliest examples of *chaekgeori* screens, painted by male painters, were for elite male consumption. The early examples also showcase a modern, foreign-derived painting technique, namely forced perspective with trompe l'oeil, expressed through shelving (Fig. 2) and, more rarely, through shelving seen through an open curtain (Fig. 3), intimating that one might be able to reach for the showcased contents. *Chaekgeori* screens that feature shelves are called *chaekgado*. The trompe l'oeil shelves and curtains, as well as the precious things depicted, are reminiscent of earlier European paintings of *Kunstkammer* or *Wunderkammer* (cabinets of curiosities), a precedent discussed by Sunglim Kim and Joy Kenseth in their catalogue essay (Kim and Kenseth, 2017, pp. 19–23).

Several scholars have traced the introduction of trompe l'oeil *chaekgeori* to Korean observations of both the 17th century fashion for *duobaoge* (curio display shelves) and trompe l'oeil paintings in China, which appeared not only in hanging-scroll and handscroll formats, but also in scene illusion paintings (Ch. *tongjinghua*) installed in some of the pavilions of the Forbidden City (ibid., p. 25 and McCormick, 2017, pp. 51–60). Such works were initiated by immigrant Jesuit painters to the Chinese court beginning in the 17th century, the most famous being Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining; 1688–1766). Shortly thereafter, these techniques were mastered by Chinese artists themselves. Many Korean diplomats saw these wonders in China, including the trompe l'oeil ceiling paintings at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Beijing (Kim and Kenseth, 2017, pp. 26–27).

Items initially favoured for depiction on *chaekgeori* screens were often, like trompe l'oeil painting and the *duobaoge* format of the shelves, relatively exotic imports, but not only from China. Interestingly, the classical revival visually demonstrated by featuring ancient Chinese bronzes and ceramics (Lee, 2017) is presented side-by-side with items that at the time echoed cutting-edge technologies, such as spectacles, clocks and tobacco pipes, reflecting the then new fashion of tobacco smoking (Fig. 4). The concurrence of a Korean interpretation of Chinese neoclassicism with the introduction of new technologies parallels in many

ways the contemporary 18th century neoclassicism in European and American arts during the Age of Enlightenment.

Typical groupings of items in early *chaekgeori* screens combine paintings of books with classical Chinese items such as jades, coral, scrolls and scholar's stones (K. *bakgodo*) (see Figs 2, 3 and 5). Also featured were the 'four friends of the scholar's studio' (K. *munbang sav*: paper, brush, ink and inkstone) and the 'three friends of incense' (bronze tripod incense burner, incense box, and chopsticks and spade, which are counted as one item). Some of the symbolic meanings of these items were also updated. For example, the cutting-edge technology of a timepiece (such as a pocket watch or carriage clock) coupled with a peacock feather replaced an earlier pairing of the peacock feather and coral branch (Fig. 5)—both representing bureaucratic promotion.

With the rise of the *jungin*, or upper middle class, of technocrats and merchants, the popularity of the *chaekgeori* genre developed beyond the rarefied confines of the Korean court to appeal to a broader following. As the market for these paintings expanded, both the format of the way that precious items were showcased and what was displayed evolved. The greatest change was that the shelves disappeared. Instead, 'books and things' were placed upon individual tables (Figs 6 and 7) and/or viewed through a window (see Figs 4 and 7), or floated in space (see Fig. 5). Tabletop *chaekgeori* suggest the flexibility and intimacy of Korean usage of space, in contrast to the Chinese *duobaoge* shelving. Window-view *chaekgeori* employ a framing device for each panel that loosely references lattice (K. *munsal*) folding doors. The extraordinary monochromatic example illustrated in Figure 7 takes this window-view format to an even higher level by employing a layered trompe l'oeil effect created by a floral pattern that suggests one is looking through a gauze or paper curtain hung over the window. Interestingly, 'floating' or 'isolated' *chaekgeori*, like the example in Figure 5, survive in the largest number even though they require far greater visual literacy on the part of the viewer, as there are no shelves, tables or window frames to provide spatial context.

In addition to these changes, the types of items rendered in *chaekgeori* expanded in later periods with greater patronage at many different social levels. Many of the earlier Sinophilic objects receded, along



Fig. 4 Tabletop *chaekgeori* eight-panel folding screen (detail) Korea, late 19th century
Ink and colour on paper, 55.7 x 253.6 cm (overall)
Sungok Memorial Hall, Mokpo
(Image courtesy of Dahal Media, Seoul)



Fig. 5 Isolated or floating *chaekgeori* eight-panel folding screen (details) Korea, late 19th century
Embroidery on silk, 166 x 308 cm (overall)
Korean Folk Village, Yongin
(Image courtesy of Dahal Media, Seoul)

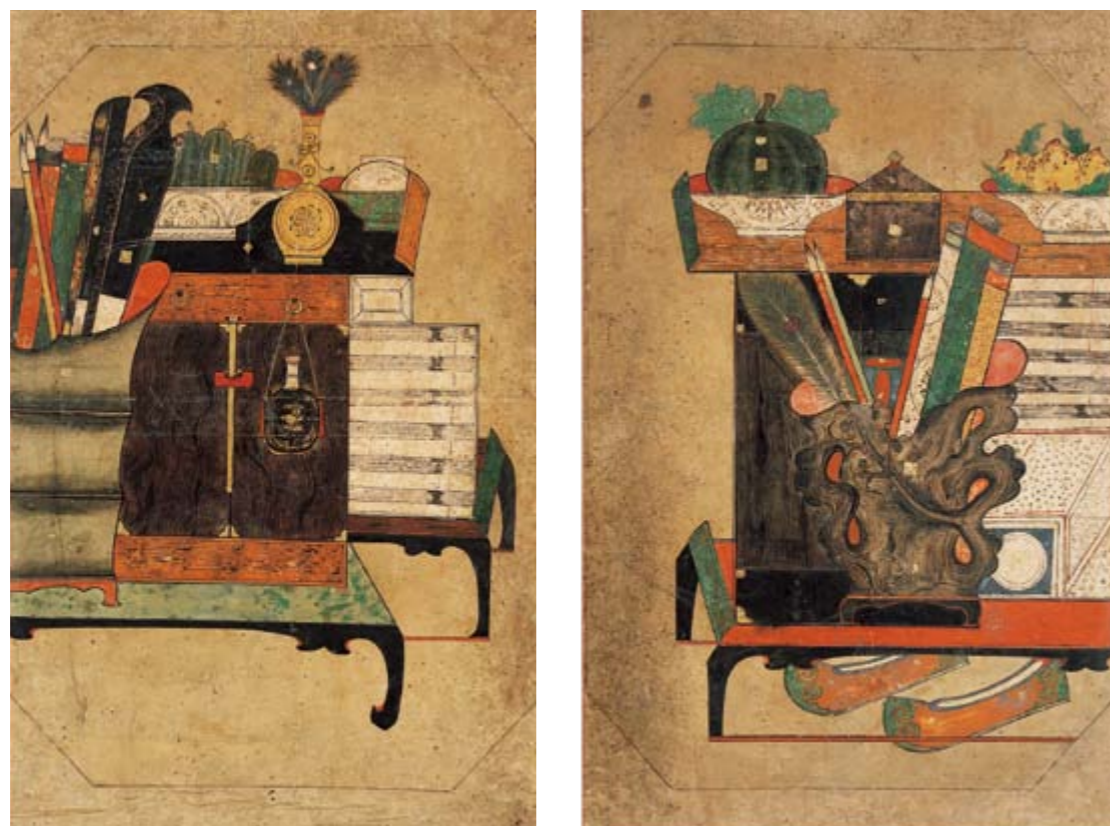


Fig. 6 Tabletop/window frame *chaekgeori* eight-panel folding screen (details) Korea, late 19th century Ink and colour on paper, 47.3 x 244 cm (overall) Private collection (Image courtesy of Dahal Media, Seoul)

with the bibliophile's dense construct of books, and 'all-in-one' or multi-purpose screens emerged, which combined books with other genres of decorative and auspicious paintings. For example, images of auspicious creatures (K. *seosudo*: dragons, phoenixes, hundred-year-old birds, fish and so on), vessels and cut flowers (K. *gimyeong jeljido*), ideographs of Confucian virtues (K. *munjado*), the ten symbols of longevity (K. *shipjangaendo*), flowering plants (K. *hwa hwe hwa*), birds and flowers (K. *hwajhwa*), landscapes such as views of the Xiao and Xiang rivers (see Fig. 4), an abundance of fruits and vegetables, as well as musical instruments join symbols of a literati lifestyle, all harnessing the power of auspicious imagery and its symbolic meaning (see Figs 6 and 7).

Among the cornucopia of represented fruits and vegetables, newly introduced exotic foods (like painted corn) are found in some of the screens, along with the frequently depicted Buddha-hand citron, pomegranates, melons, eggplants and other fruits that represent abundance. In addition to auspicious imagery, commonly found throughout the decorative vocabularies of East Asia are a number of Korea-specific items, such as amuletic five-colour brushes (used to avert calamities), decorative knives (K. *jangdo*), spoons and elements of Korean dress (see Figs 6 and 7). The introduction of ever more Korean items into the subject-matter of the screens was emphasized in particular at the Spencer Museum of Art, where historical Korean objects—such as a moon jar, a dragon vase, a man's hat (K. *gat*), a cloth wrapper (K. *pojagi*) and a flute—were displayed with the *chaekgeori* screens (see Fig. 1).

aspect of *chaekgeori* (Chung, 2017, pp. 66–67).

The examples illustrated in this article also demonstrate the varied range of colours employed in a *chaekgeori* palette. While earlier examples feature mineral pigments, the increased popularity of *chaekgeori* coincided with the 18th century introduction of new synthetic pigments and access to a greater variety of imported mineral pigments. Rich blues, greens and browns fill the shadowed shelf backs (see Figs 1–3), while bright pinks, purples, oranges and greens made from both imported and domestic mineral and synthetic sources enliven later popular examples (see Figs 4 and 6). Perhaps most surprising, however, is the use of monochrome in the screen in Figure 7. This choice seems inspired as much by sepia photographs as by ink painting, and employs colour (or rather the lack of it) to introduce yet another trompe l'oeil effect.



Fig. 7 Tabletop/window frame *chaekgeori* eight-panel folding screen (details) Korea, late 19th century Ink on paper, 49 x 280 cm (overall) Private collection (Image courtesy of Dahal Media, Seoul)

In the expansion of the genre, *chaekgeori* developed beyond its initial gendered usage—made by and for men—to include screens that were made by and featured items used by women. In particular, embroidered examples, such as that shown in Figure 5, were made by women. Items of female apparel—particularly women's shoes and winter caps (K. *nambawi*) (Fig. 8; see also Figs 6 and 7)—are displayed in a number of screens in the exhibition and publication. Along with gender-neutral signifiers of the acquisition of knowledge, like books and glasses, additional feminine references include mirrors (K. *gyeongdae*), fans, perfume bottles and furniture styles (see Figs 6 and 7). Like the 'male' *chaekgeori*, this is a dual reflection and projection of the female intelligentsia. In his essay, Byungmo Chung makes a close observation and discussion of the female



Fig. 8 *Nambawi* (woman's winter hat) Korea, late 19th century Silk and fur, 35 x 23 cm (overall) Newark Museum Gift of Iris Barrel Apfel Collection in memory of Samuel Barrel, 1992 (92.431) (Image courtesy of Newark Museum)

More recently, artists have continued to be inspired by and to evolve the *chaekgeori* genre. The work of contemporary artist Kyoungtack Hong (b. 1968) was showcased in the exhibition. In his painting *Library—Mt. Everest*, irregular bookshelves become the framing mechanism and window for the photo-realistic mountain landscape (Fig. 9). In this work, Hong has moved from traditional Chinese landscape themes like 'Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers' (see Fig. 4) to a globally recognized landscape. The books on the shelves remain nameless, but are in the Western bound codex format. Instead of Chinese bronzes, there are a metal chalice, candelabra and small dog taken from Western forms, and instead of a phoenix or dragon, the owl (symbol of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom) is introduced.

The exhibition 'Chaekgeori: The Power and Pleasure of Painted Screens' and its catalogue not

only offer new, cohesive research, but also inspire new avenues of academic inquiry. In a broader global and temporal context, the explosion of dynamic global trade in the 18th and 19th centuries is demonstrated in Western-style trompe l'oeil still-life painting that similarly displays exotic foreign goods—including Chinese ceramics. While the catalogue discusses earlier 17th and 18th century European paintings as well as 18th century Chinese precedents as models, given that so many surviving *chaekgeori* date from the 19th century, it would be helpful to look at parallels in 19th and early 20th century Chinese and Western paintings. For example, Chinese *bapo* ('eight broken') paintings like those exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 'China's 8 Broken: Puzzles of the Treasured Past' (17 June–29 October 2017) and the work of artists like John Frederick Peto (1854–1907)



Fig. 9 *Library—Mt. Everest*
By Kyoungtack Hong (b. 1968), 2014
Acrylic and oil on linen, 194 x 259 cm
(Image courtesy of the artist, © Kyoungtack Hong)



Fig. 10 *Still Life with Books, Candle, Inkwell, Pipe and Lard Oil Lamp*
By John Frederick Peto (1854–1907), late 19th–early 20th century
Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 70 cm
Newark Museum
Bequest of Dr. Donald M. Dougall, 1954 (54.196)
(Image courtesy of Newark Museum)

(Fig. 10) offer rich comparisons for this early global trend, allowing profound economic, philosophical and political readings through this particular art historical mode.

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