

The Export of Korean Genre Paintings to the West in the Era of Port Openings: Representations of 'Korean People' in the Collections of Western Powers

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Of the traditional Korean paintings that are found in the collections of Western museums, the most numerous are genre paintings that date from the late 19th century. Under pressure from various Western powers advancing upon East Asia, the ports of the Korean Peninsula were opened by Japan in 1876, an action which led to visits from diplomats, missionaries, travelers, and merchants from the West. These visitors brought with them a high demand for Korean artworks. Curiously, almost 1,200 of the works in present-day Western collections are paintings by an unknown artist named Jun-geun Kim (n.d.), about whom no information has been recorded in any Korean literature source. These paintings are housed in museum collections throughout Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark, Russia, Canada, and the United States. Furthermore, there are some copies of genre paintings by the well-known painter, Hongdo Kim (1745–1806) and Yunbok Shin along with works painted by artists like the obscure painter Jin-u Han (n.d.) and the Buddhist monk painter Heasan Moon (n.d.). Recently, US museums have begun purchasing polychrome court paintings and other works by famous Joseon painters that are deemed of great aesthetic value. However, most of the traditional Korean paintings that are currently found in Western collections belong to the category of genre paintings that were originally collected as folk and ethnographic objects of anthropological interest.

In the late 19th century, the Joseon kingdom was known alternately as the 'Forbidden Land' or the 'Hermit Nation'—designations made due to the country's prohibition against foreigners and that had been in use since the 1668 publication of Hendrick Hamel's journal in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Although the Joseon dynasty maintained a closed-door policy for three centuries, the kingdom opened heteronomously in 1876 and formalized exchange agreements with the West via treaties signed with the United States in 1882, the United Kingdom and Germany in 1883, Russia in 1884, and France in 1886. In order to research cultures untouched by 'modernity,' and to expand their interests overseas, these countries collected anthropological data by sending experts and diplomats to countries and regions that

were unknown or perceived as 'backward.' Thus, for a variety of Western powers, Korea became a subject of study. Some Korean objects were individually collected by diplomats, missionaries, and travelers and subsequently donated, while many others were systematically acquired by experts who traveled in accordance with the 'collecting plan' of national museums. This presentation aims to share my views about why genre paintings of the late 19th century were so sought out by Western museums and to investigate the nature, history, and significance of Jun-geun Kim's works, which comprise the largest portion of these museums' collections of the late 19th century.