

## **Shamanic Paintings of Chosŏn Korea: Tracing History from Collections back to Sacred Ritual Objects**

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Chosŏn Korea produced a large and varied repertoire of paintings of Shamanic spirits that can be broadly classified according to their function, protective power and appearance. Commissioned by a shaman, the paintings were used in his/her shrine or as portable devices used in rituals outside the shrine at the request of clients. Rituals were performed to ensure good fortune but also to determine the cause of a misfortune in the most significant events in one's life: birth, marriage, illness and death. As the seat of the spirits, and as such imbued with special power, the paintings allow the shaman to communicate with them and resolve such matters.

However, with the modernization of Korean society, the original meaning and identification of some of these figures are becoming increasingly difficult to assess. A spirit that fulfills several different roles can be classified into multiple categories. In addition, some spirits carry different names according to geographical provenance. Their study is, therefore, a challenge for art historians as the paintings are often undated and removed from their original context. The once decried paintings have today entered museum collections as their historical importance is being recognized, but this has also removed an essential component of their analysis; the relationship between the painting, the seat of the spirit, and the shaman during periods of ritual. Drawing from paintings kept in western collections, this presentation will address methodological issues pertaining to the iconographical study and identification of shamanic spirits by first investigating the religious and ritual context in which the paintings were used, then the multi-layered difficulties and limitations intrinsic in the study of them once they have been removed from their original contexts and become "unanimated".