

Exhibition Review

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***Beyond Folding Screens 2*, The Amorepacific Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea, 26 January 2023 – 30 April 2023**

The Amorepacific Museum of Art's *Beyond Folding Screens 2* exhibition featured the quintessence of Korean folding screens from the Joseon Dynasty to the modern era. This exhibition was the second of its type to be presented in five years, with the first staged in 2018. That exhibition, entitled *Joseon, Land of Folding Screen*, showcased around seventy different thematic folding screens to provide a comprehensive overview of the traditional Korean painting format known as 'Byeongpung', which is representative of the Joseon era. *Beyond Folding Screens 2* aimed to consider Byeongpung further by revisiting the artistic value and significance of folding screens created from the Joseon Dynasty to the modern era (see illustration 1). By focusing attention on the folding screens, objects that had, until now, been presented in the background of Korean art history exhibitions (and were therefore relatively inaccessible), the museum reduced the physical and emotional distance between these objects and visitors.

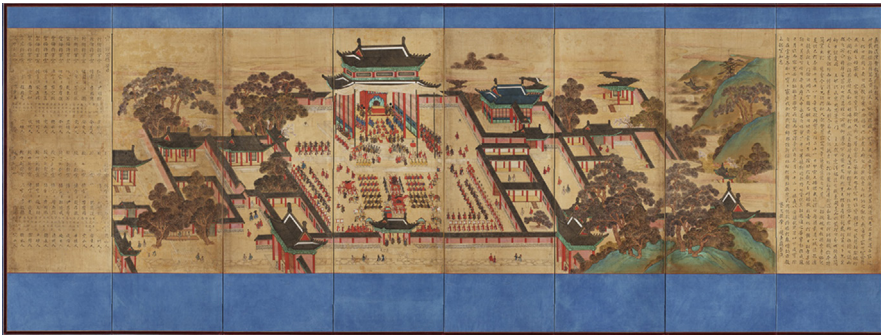


Illustration 1: King Heonjong's Wedding Celebration 1884 (Treasure No.733-2). Source: Gyeonggi Provincial Museum

The Amorepacific Museum of Art¹ distinguishes itself as a unique art institution within South Korea, aiming to bridge the realms of traditional and contemporary artistry – a rarity in the South Korean cultural landscape. In contrast to conventional art institutions in South Korea, which primarily prioritise representations of the nation, the Amorepacific Museum of Art aligns itself with a broader conceptual framework. It is grounded in the notion that 'art museums take us to new places, allowing us to see the larger world differently than we otherwise would and in turn, to learn something about ourselves' (Weiss 2022: 54). The exhibition comprised newly acquired artworks, with the Amorepacific Museum of Art amassing approximately fifty pieces for this exhibition, including twenty works from the museum's own collection and the remaining pieces borrowed from fifteen different institutions. It explored the types and characteristics of Joseon folding screens, both those produced and used in the court and for everyday households. Since the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) is marked as being a significant period in Korean history, characterized by substantial advancement in painting, folding

screens can be understood as one of many elaborate forms of Korean paintings, alongside calligraphy, scrolls, and more. Utilizing three large exhibition spaces, the exhibition explored the folding screen through three themes – civilian, royal court and modern folding screens, based on their usage and creators.

At the entrance to the exhibition hall, ‘civilian’ screens were displayed, which captivated the viewers’ attention. These screens are characterized by their abundance of humour and playfulness and are devoid of distinct rules or regulations in how they were created. By positioning these screens at the start, the exhibition was imbued with a sense of freedom. Additionally, a beam projector in the central part of the exhibition hall illuminated the intricate details of the screens, enabling visitors to enjoy the finer elements of the screens in a spacious setting (see illustration 2).



Illustration 2: First section of the exhibition view with digital beam projector in the centre of the exhibition. Source: picture taken by the author.

The second thematic section of the exhibition featured royal folding screens, which evoked a sense of grandeur. These screens, crafted according to stringent rules due to their production and use within the royal court, were exhibited in a more standardized style to create a solemn ambience befitting the royal milieu. To encourage prolonged contemplation, the section featured sofas for visitors to sit and relax (see illustration 3).

The arrangement of the space in this section allowed visitors to appreciate the distinctive characteristics and aesthetics of folding screens and differentiate between the civilian and royal court settings. Additionally, by separating modern folding screens to form a distinct category in the final section, the exhibition encouraged visitors to explore a facet of Korean modern art that evolved with the advent of a new era. This approach to exhibition planning ‘offered a subtle mixture of common and individual stories to the visitors without relying on symbolic guidance cues such as signposts’ (Sutton 2000, quoted in Zisch *et al.* 2014: 221). Modern folding screens were exhibited in a contemporary manner, a departure from the atmosphere created in the previous exhibition spaces, thereby presenting the works in a way that challenged

preconceived notions of traditional Korean art. This space utilized environmentally-friendly exhibition installations, featuring an experimental steel structure prominently placed in the centre of the exhibition hall (see illustration 4). This offered viewers the opportunity to observe the front, back, and sides of the folding screens from various angles, creating a well-defined distinction from the ways in which the traditional screens were displayed. By incorporating a modern atmosphere in the spatial design, the exhibition enhanced a connection between the traditional Korean painting and visitors.



Illustration 3: Second exhibition space view with carpets and sofas. Source: The Amorepacific Museum of Art

Folding screens have often played a 'supporting role' and have typically served as backgrounds in conventional art history exhibitions, placed behind the main stage, illuminating specific figures, places, or events rather than being the focus of attention. Perceiving folding screens as artworks with inherent meaning can be challenging, and their large scale can make it difficult to create an ideal viewing environment. However, in this exhibition, the museum drew attention to the folding screens themselves, re-evaluating their value and significance as visual mediums. With its high ceiling, the spacious area allowed visitors to comfortably and leisurely appreciate the beautiful and sophisticated aesthetics of traditional Korean art without being distracted by the idea of representing Korean traditional culture or the nation. This approach stands in contrast to more traditional art exhibitions where artworks are often displayed within distant showcases or large display racks. The museum minimized the physical distance between the folding screens and the viewers, albeit behind the glass of a showcase, to allow for a close examination of the brushwork, colour palette, and intricate and vivid details contained within the screens. Narrowing this distance allowed for a closer and more immersive experience of the unique aesthetics of folding screens.



Illustration 4: Designed structure made from reusable materials. Source: Photo taken by the author.

The museum also made efforts to explore exhibition strategies that are environmentally-friendly, minimize waste and utilize reusable materials. This aligns with Robert R. Janes' (2024: 92) provocation that 'museums have obligations, not rights or privileges', emphasizing the belief that:

[E]very museum, irrespective of size and type, can make the connection between the collections and knowledge they hold, and the issues and challenges that confront society now. Museums must move beyond their conventional preoccupations and start examining the competing, societal questions that will guide a new future (Janes 2024: 85).

In the 2018 exhibition, display cases were constructed from wood, and display glass was sealed with silicone. In the case of exhibitions involving traditional art, display cases are commonly created for single use, consequently generating a significant amount of waste. For this exhibition, it felt crucial that the museum conducted a comprehensive review of the existing spatial structures and materials to reduce waste generation and carbon emissions, and to align with the museum's overarching vision. Moreover, instead of acquiring new pieces for its own collection, the museum borrowed more than half of the exhibition objects from

external sources, thereby reducing future storage. Newly designed structures were made from sustainable materials and included reusable steel structures and modular frames, allowing for permanent use in future exhibitions and significantly reducing post-exhibition waste.

What emerged from the exhibition is not the mere presentation of the excellence of Korean traditional art, but rather an attempt to enhance the connection between historical objects, contemporary audiences, and contemporary social issues. Utilizing digital technology, which was seamlessly integrated with the delicate and finely crafted painted folding screens, the exhibition successfully encouraged viewers to engage more closely with the artworks, not just physically, but also emotionally and intellectually. Given the nature of folding screens, there was a risk of the exhibition appearing 'flat'; however, by arranging the exhibition in an open central space with digital screens, comfortable seating and catalogues nearby, a more relaxed atmosphere was created, inviting visitors to immerse themselves more fully in a new world. By unveiling the stories embedded in the visual representations of the screens and their significance to Korean lives today, the exhibition's role was expanded to become an opportunity not only for the public to have a unique glimpse at the function of the screens and their subject matter, but also for the museum to move beyond its traditional remit and play a greater role in generating a more sustainable future.

Notes

- ¹ The Amorepacific Museum of Art has a 40-year history, originating in the Pacific Museum, founded in 1979 as a private institution for the extensive collection curated by the chairman of Pacific Cosmetics. Notably, while the company primarily operates within the cosmetics industry, it has diligently accumulated a diverse array of traditional Korean art objects, encompassing cosmetic tools, ceramics, jewellery, and artifacts emblematic of traditional tea culture. This eclectic collection stands as a testament to the company's overarching vision and its intrinsic ties to its core business. See <http://apma.amorepacific.com/index.do>, accessed 1 September 2023.

References

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