

God Pictures in Korean Contexts: The Ownership and Meaning of Shaman Paintings.* Laurel Kendall, Jongsung Yang, and Yul Soo Yoon. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 160 pp.

Reviewed by Liora Sarfati

God Pictures in Korean Contexts: The Ownership and Meaning of Shaman Paintings begins with a provocative question: “what do pictures want?” (see Mitchell 2005). With this initiative, the book views paintings through theories of object agency (Gell 1998) and pictures as emotion provokers (Freedberg 1989) via exerting a “sacred gaze” (Morgan 2005). Indeed, the book affirms how in Korea images of gods embody the spirits that they represent and are worshipped as such. Their handling relates to their supernatural powers and efficacy beyond mere material presence. From the 1980s, and even earlier, these pictures have gained new ways of life as the desired possession of art collectors and museums. They also became national emblems and representations of the “Korean spirit.” As such, they generated a different set of emotions in new contexts of scholarly-informed displays arranged according to modern norms in museums and galleries. In this new life, the paintings became appreciated increasingly for their craftsmanship or ancient production date, rather than the spirit depicted in them. Local and foreign scholars felt enraged observing shamans attempting to burn precious hundred-year-old paintings when it was deemed the safest manner to respect the deities and avoid misfortunes. But art dealers soon learned the profitable prospect of such artifacts and have bought and sold them for ever-growing sums of money. While the paintings began to gain respect and protection, shamanic shrines have not enjoyed the same attitude and were often demolished for construction projects.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one is an introduction that offers topical and theoretical background as well as reflexive stories of each author’s biography and interest in god paintings. The four other chapters are divided according to usage contexts. Chapter two explains how images have been used and perceived in the historical antecedents of contemporary Korean shamanism. It discusses archeological and historical traces of techniques, styles, and artists, and describes the shift in the 1970s from production by individual monks or painters to workshops staffed by professional artists. The products are mostly sold to specialized stores that also serve as mediators for orders of less frequent images or postures. Chapter three examines collectors and the process of collecting these paintings. Some collectors believe that Korean god pictures resemble Picasso’s unique style of portraying people that, according to some sources, was influenced by African ritual masks. The market for paintings consists mainly of Korean collectors and folk art aficionados, who sometimes entertain both admiration and fear of these perceived sacred and powerful objects. The path that paintings follow from being ritual objects to precious, commoditized, artistic assets is related to folklorists’ endeavors from as early as the late nineteenth century. In order to transform the painting from efficacious to collectable art, purifications and “neutralization” rites have been created. Chapter four looks at paintings used in shamans’ home shrines, conveying rich ethnographic encounters with this materialized religious practice. Chapter five discusses the manufacturing of god paintings and the commercial contexts of their creation and purchase. An important contribution of this chapter is long interviews with

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famous painters who usually shyly avoid such portrayals. The views that shamans express regarding the need for a spiritual connection between the painter and the supernatural complete the scope of this chapter. The coda lists museum displays and collections, including the Gahoe Museum and the Museum of Shamanism that are owned and directed by two of the book's authors. This is the weak point of the book because there are many museum displays of Korean shamanism and they deserve much more attention.

Reading a book prepared by three scholars with such expertise and publication history of Korean shamanism offers an enriching experience. Laurel Kendall is chair of the anthropology division and curator of the Asian ethnographic collection at the American Museum of Natural History. She has been conducting fieldwork in Korea since the 1970s. Yang Jongsung is an *emeritus* senior curator at the Korean Folk Museum and has been a researcher and lecturer on Korean shamanism since the 1980s. He established a private museum of shamanism in 2013. Yul Soo Yoon is an expert on Korean shamanic arts and the founder and director of Gahoe Museum in Seoul. A unique provision of these three curators' interest in documentation is some sixty photographs of paintings and shamanic shrines, mostly taken by the authors, all explained and contextualized in as much detail as possible. One rarely finds such a thorough depiction, description, and theoretical analysis of Korean shamanic arts.

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