Special Feature

A Museological Exploration of *One Hundred Boys at Play* beyond Korea

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"Myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things:
in it, things lose the memory that they once were made."
(Barthes ([1957] 1972)

A Korean Folding Screen in a U.S. Museum

In 2023, with generous support from the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation (OKCHF), Denver Art Museum's (DAM) valuable Korean painting collection, *One Hundred Boys at Play*, was sent to Korea and under conservative treatment (Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation 2023). After returning to Denver, this painting is planned to be presented in the Korean gallery at the DAM in 2026.

Collaborating with Korean experts on the treatment of these polychrome folk folding screen panels—not only working with conservation specialists but also engaging in the entire process of securing financial support—offers a

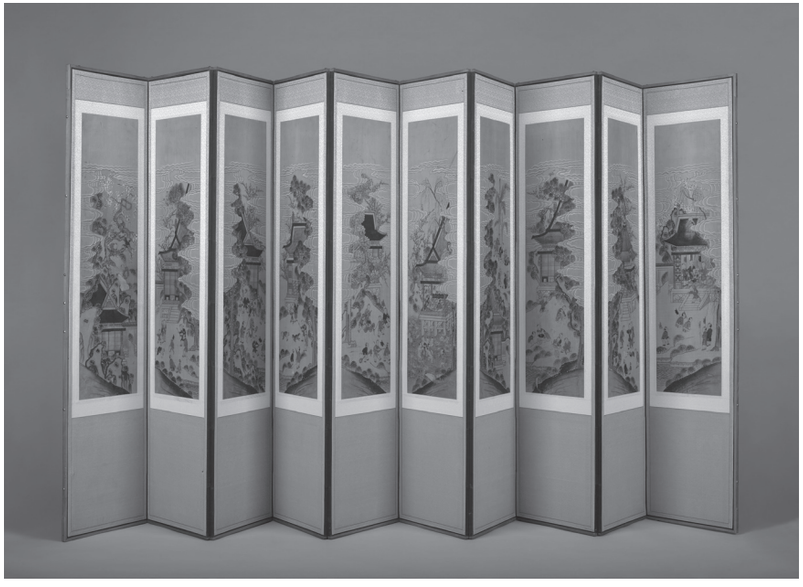

Figure 1. *One Hundred Boys at Play*, 1800s, Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), Korea, ink and colors on silk, Denver Art Museum: Museum exchange, 1970.36, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

unique opportunity to reconsider their complex significance within the Korean gallery at the Denver Art Museum in the United States. Their meaning emerges as part of the Korean painting exhibition in an encyclopedic museum outside of Korea, arising from both the historical and aesthetic value of the works and the way these values are framed to resonate with contemporary viewers. This painting, as a typical example of Korean paintings displayed outside of Korea, serves as a case study for understanding the varying interpretations and values assigned to such works in different institutional, spatial, and historical contexts, as well as the different desires projected onto the object on view.

Founded in the late 19th century, the Denver Art Museum has become one of the prominent cultural institutions in the region, presenting Asian art—including Korean art—for over a century ("About Us"). Although it is one of the largest art museums between the West Coast and Chicago, with over 70,000 objects representing world cultures, its Korean collection is limited to approximately 400 objects, among which premodern paintings number only in the twenties. While one of the DAM's few Korean paintings is a valuable resource for displaying Korea's pictorial tradition, the ten-fold screen *One Hundred Boys at Play* may not be considered the best option regarding artistic quality according to conventional Joseon painting value systems. Framed with white and gray-green brocade borders in a mid-20th-century style, each of the ten panels of this late 19th-century painting illustrates groups of boys absorbed in play within a beautiful and mystical garden. The painter of this work follows the iconography relatively faithfully, but the brushstrokes, coloring, and figures are simplified. During the late Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), such folding screens were extensively produced as domestic decoration and later defined as folk paintings derived from royal court art. These paintings convey the cultural emphasis on valuing male offspring and the desire for prosperity among one's descendants. The number "one hundred" is considered auspicious in East Asian culture, symbolizing abundance.

Consequently, depicting one hundred boys was trendy at the time. Such paintings were traditionally displayed in children's rooms, women's quarters, and expectant mothers' chambers, and at wedding ceremonies to invoke blessings of prosperity and numerous offspring. This theme was popular among Koreans during the 19th and 20th centuries and foreign collectors who began visiting Korea in the late 19th century. In contrast, Korean art historiography has focused more on the Goguryeo (37 BCE–668) tomb paintings, Buddhist paintings

from the Goryeo period (918–1392), and the paintings and calligraphy produced by court or literati painters during the Joseon dynasty.

The primary goal of this study is to examine how this cultural product from the Joseon dynasty embodies multiple layers of value within the ever-evolving discourse of Korean art and the museum context in which it is exhibited. These layers include its visual significance within Korean art history, its cultural relevance as a reflection of Korean societal values and material culture, and its museological value as part of the global narrative of art collecting and exhibition practices. By situating the painting within both art historical and museological contexts, this paper assesses the parameters of the current situation. It explicates the complex interplay between the painting's original production value and its scholarly significance within Korean art history. Additionally, it considers how the painting's exhibition outside of Korea—particularly at the Denver Art Museum—affects its value and reception.

A Few Premises

This exploration employs a critical theoretical framework to examine the exhibition of the painting as an observable socio-cultural phenomenon. Drawing on Hooper-Greenhill's (1995) observations about exhibitions as signifying systems shaped by hidden social logics such as myths, this analysis focuses on the practices of the Denver Art Museum. By scrutinizing the museum's architecture, collection arrangements, and the selection of objects in the Korean gallery, the research aims to uncover the underlying agendas of the stakeholders.

The perspective that museums are social and cultural institutions with political and ideological functions is, today, no longer considered "'new' museology," a term introduced by Peter Vergo in the 1980s. Vergo (1989) emphasizes that collecting carries politically solid, ideological, or aesthetic dimensions. All museum activities—such as acquisition, juxtaposition, and the arrangement of objects—are deeply linked to the society's value system in which the museum is rooted. Ultimately, according to Vergo, this new museology questions the purpose of museums, a topic that had scarcely been addressed before. In the following studies focusing on visitors (Hooper-Greenhill 1992) and the significance of collections (Pearce 1994), museums are considered as

messages or media within the context of mass communication. These studies aim to define how museums construct and transmit systems of value through their collections and exhibitions. Simultaneously, museology becomes critical within postmodern and postcolonial anthropological contexts. A significant change is the repositioning of visitors, who are no longer seen merely as "passive receivers" but as "producers of meaning" in the exhibition process (Davallon 1986).

Although the aim is not to establish or evaluate a communication model in the Korean painting's display within a museum setting, this study adopts a visitor-centered approach through communication theory, specifically semiotics, and regards the exhibition as media. The socio-semiotic approach to exhibitions, as discussed by French scholars such as Jean Davallon (1992), enables an examination of exhibitions as media. From a communicational standpoint, exhibitions share the attributes of media.[1] This perspective involves "considering [the exhibition] as a device that produces meaning intended for an audience" (Davallon and Flon 2013, 20). In this research, the *exposition-média* (exhibition-media) is approached as a site for producing social discourse on the objects or knowledge it exhibits. The concept of the *expo-média* allows for the extension of museum studies beyond operational modes such as research and conservation. It encompasses their inception and evolution across different eras and territories, highlighting how exhibitions function as media that communicate and construct social meanings. This aspect forms the foundation of the methodological approach, addressing the knowledge about Korean art and culture that visitors acquire from the gallery, which is socially, culturally, or ideologically constructed through museal discourse.

Adopting a communicational perspective permits a focus on questions related to exhibitions' socially defined characteristics and functioning. This approach shifts attention from the museum's internal processes to how exhibitions operate as media devices producing meaning for a visitor. This socio-semiotic framework is crucial for understanding the role of exhibitions in shaping and reflecting societal values and ideologies. It underscores the importance of considering exhibitions not merely as displays of artifacts but as active participants in communicating and constructing cultural and social

1 According to Davallon (1992), within the exhibition space—a constitutive dimension of the museum as a medium—a social link is established between social actors and exhibits during the visit.

meanings. Through this lens, the research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on how museums and exhibitions influence and are influenced by the social contexts in which they exist.

Another framework to consider is the social construction of knowledge. Exhibitions are studied within their broader cultural and social frameworks, considering how they reflect and impact societal values and identities. Berger and Luckmann (1966) propose that the production and social circulation of knowledge allow it to be considered a social fact. This hypothesis necessitates revisiting the objectified, institutionalized, and appropriated knowledge by visitors through the various socialization processes present within the museum context. It is essential to emphasize that all human knowledge develops, is transmitted, and is maintained within a societal framework. This understanding of knowledge formation emerges notably from the sociology of knowledge. According to this discipline, the notion of knowledge is presented, followed by a discussion of how the museum generates a culture transmitted through its collections and exhibitions. An extensive body of knowledge has accumulated and confronted the pre-existing understandings of past societies. Aware of this situation, philosophers have highlighted that knowledge is neither pre-given nor complete but constantly evolves. In other words, knowledge does not constitute an immutable truth but is a fact established by social demand.

Mannheim's sociology of knowledge aims to study the relationships between individual ideas and the broader societal context, considering how knowledge interacts with social factors external to existing understanding. Building on this view, Berger and Luckmann emphasize the processes by which individuals are socialized into various discursive realms within society. These realms of discourse are seen as temporary crystallizations within the ongoing social flow of meaning production and circulation (Keller 2007, 299). From this perspective, the current analysis examines this moment of crystallization in the relationships and dynamics of contemporary knowledge surrounding the painting and anticipates its impact on in-gallery communication.

A Korean Object[2]

As the first step of this analysis, I describe the pictorial work from the perspective of current art historical scholarship. *One Hundred Boys at Play* paintings are consistently referred to in publications as either a type of Korean folk painting or court painting. However, there are very few studies dedicated exclusively to this specific subject matter.[3]

This object is one example of the genre "One Hundred Boys at Play," depicting many children playing various games in a garden with fantastic rocks, trees, and pavilions, symbolizing a wish for many descendants and prosperity. Its production began in the late 18th century and increased in the 19th century in Korea. It was used not only in the royal court but also among the ordinary people, often as a wedding screen or interior decoration. Most of the play scenes align with the themes of *Yeonghido* 嬰戲圖, a Chinese painting depicting young children at play. Each panel expresses the feeling of the seasons, following the East Asian painting tradition of composing a set for spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The garden background, ornate buildings, rocks, and trees are also similar to those of Chinese *Yeonghido*. The motifs used in the play scenes symbolize wishes for many sons, wealth, prosperity, career success, and longevity. The games depicted on the Denver Art Museum's screen include both actual children's games played in China and Korea and symbolic representations of children's play.

The screen at the Denver Art Museum is a typical example of 19th-century representations of this genre, featuring large pavilions, various trees, and a rich array of symbolic subject matter. Believed to have been painted in the late 19th century, it closely follows the popular iconography of that time. It doesn't include the Korean elements and the freer iconography seen in later works. Similar screens are housed in several institutions, including the National Folk

2 I deliberately chose the term "object" to refer to this *museum's holdings*. The term itself serves as an exploratory tool for examining the various scopes attributed to this piece. To describe it as a "selected thing of the physical world to which cultural value has been ascribed" (Pearce 1993, 4), I avoid using terms at this stage that may carry social constructs imposed on it, as I intend to explore those in detail later.

3 For a general explanation of the theme "One Hundred Boys at Play," refer to Chung 2012, 2017; Yi and Kim 2015; Park et al. 2012. For the origin and history of its iconography, see Yoo 2023. For the iconography of each panel, see Kim 2001, 2004, 2006; Moon 2018.

Museum, the National Museum of Korea, the Seoul Museum of History, the Seoul National University Museum, and the Horim Museum. This particular screen, however, is a simplified version, with fewer children and fewer types of trees compared to other examples, giving the painting surface a somewhat spacious or loose appearance. While gold embellishments decorate some architectural elements, the overall coloring technique has not been meticulously executed. Nonetheless, the brushwork and coloring techniques indicate a level of skilled training. The quality of the silk used and the folding screen format suggest that the original owner of this painting was a wealthy family from the late Joseon period.

Panel 1: *General Play*

A wish for a career in the military

Ten children are playing general, with one dressed as a military officer seated in a pavilion. Around him, children holding flags stand, while another child is seen descending the stairs to greet two children acting as messengers. The messengers are on their knees, delivering something. Other children with flags surround the scene. The flags inscribed with the character "yeong" 令 are military command flags (*yeongjagi*), used to transmit military orders in the Joseon dynasty, which indicates that the children are playing a general game, expressing a wish to become a military officer. The plum blossoms behind the rocks and the willow tree suggest the seasonal setting is early spring.

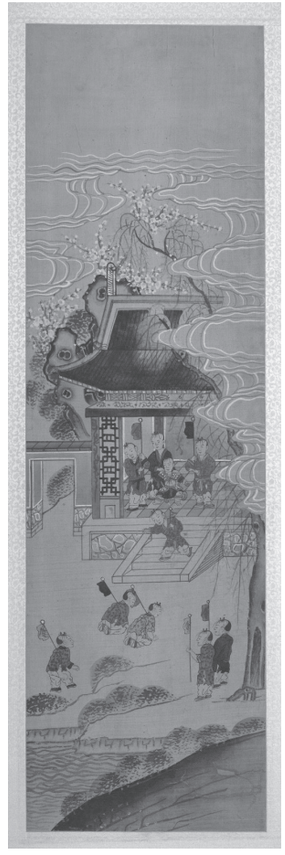

Figure 2. The Painting's First Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum
Note: The narrative of the painting begins from right to left.

Panel 2: *Cockfighting*

A wish for success in the civil service exam

Eight children gather in front of a hexagonal pavilion, watching two roosters in a cockfight. The apricot tree behind the pavilion signifies mid-spring. The cockfight can also be interpreted as a wish for success in the civil service exam, as the rooster's comb resembles a crown, symbolizing academic excellence and official status.

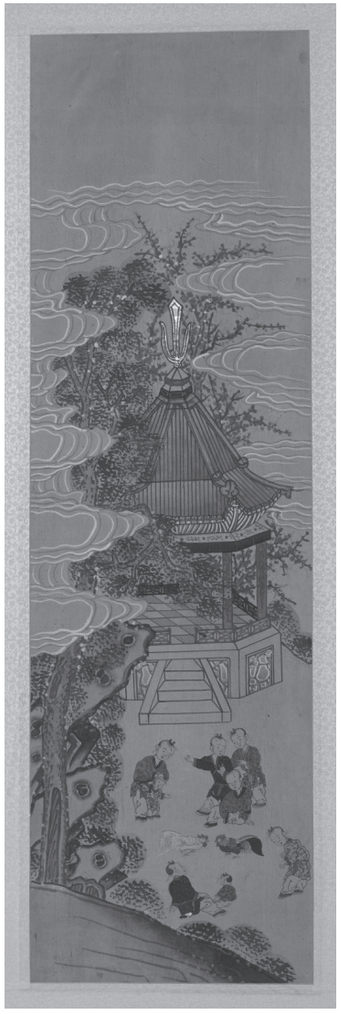

Figure 3. Second Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 3: *Dragonfly Catching*

A wish for wealth, prosperity, and longevity

Nine children are catching dragonflies with round fans in the courtyard before a pavilion. The ornate, gold-lacquered pavilion reflects a desire for a wealthy and prosperous life. This scene is also sometimes depicted with butterfly catching, where the butterfly symbolizes marital harmony and longevity up to the age of eighty.

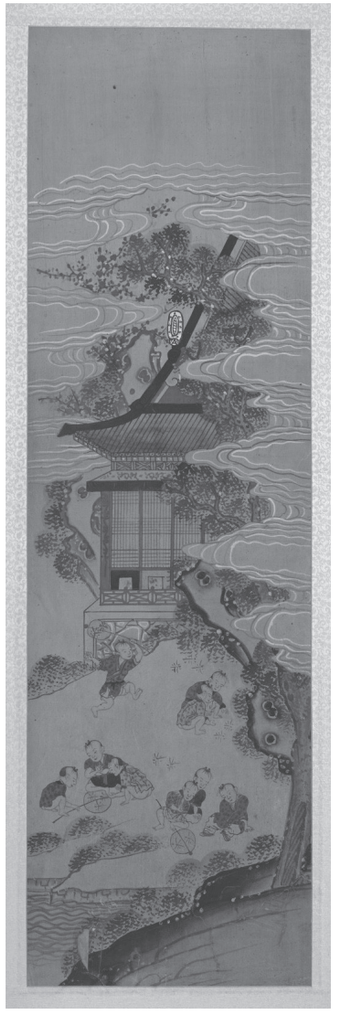

Figure 4. Third Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 4: Napping under a Banana Tree and Bird Play

A wish for a career in the literary field

A child is napping under the broad leaves of a banana tree in the courtyard while three other children playfully tickle him with grass. In the center, four children are playing with birds. The banana tree suggests a summer setting and is associated with a literary symbol derived from a Tang dynasty scholar who, being poor, wrote on banana leaves instead of paper, symbolizing scholarly pursuits.

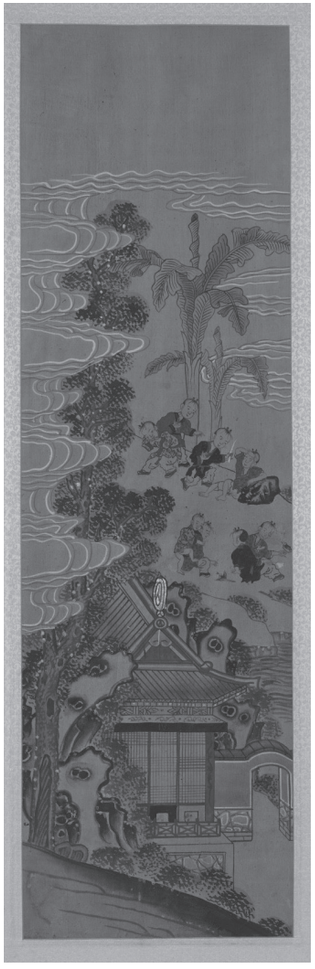

Figure 5. Fourth Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 5: Lotus Pond

A wish for fertility

Two children are seated in a pavilion overlooking a lotus pond, playing a game that seems to involve offering something to a Buddha figure. The lotus represents fertility, with many seeds symbolizing the hope for many descendants. Below, six children play in the pond, grabbing for lotus flowers, further reflecting a wish for numerous and prosperous children. The willow trees add to the summer atmosphere and symbolize hope for many male children. The pond filled with blooming lotus flowers embodies abundance and prosperity.

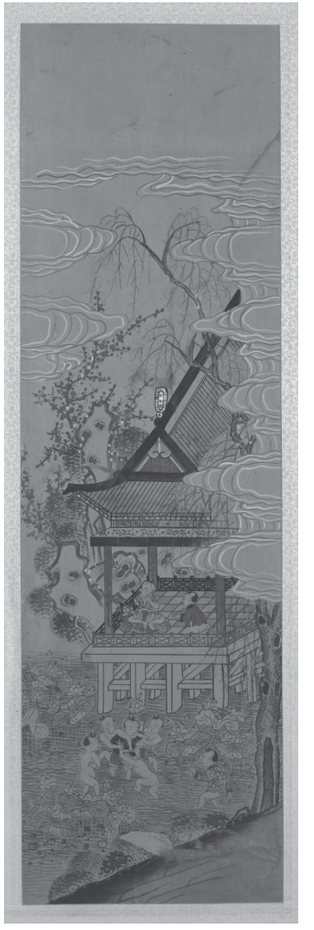

Figure 6. Fifth Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 6: Procession of Officials

A wish for success in the civil service exam

Eight boys mimic an official's procession, with three others pulling and pushing one child sitting in a wooden cart. A child holding a flag leads the group. Below, children march alongside the cart, with one boy riding a hobby horse, another drumming, and others waving flags. This typical scene from Chinese children's paintings symbolizes the desire to pass the civil service exam and obtain a government position. The child riding the hobby horse signifies achieving a position in government, while the procession reflects the wish for immediate fertility.

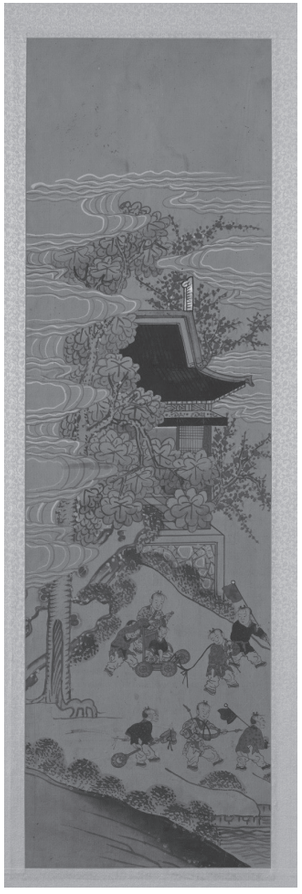

Figure 7. Sixth Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 7: Dog Play

Eight children are playing with a dog, and one child is wearing trousers with an open back. The dog seems to substitute for a monkey (as later depicted in Panel 9's Monkey Play), and in other works, various animals, such as deer, can replace the monkey in play.

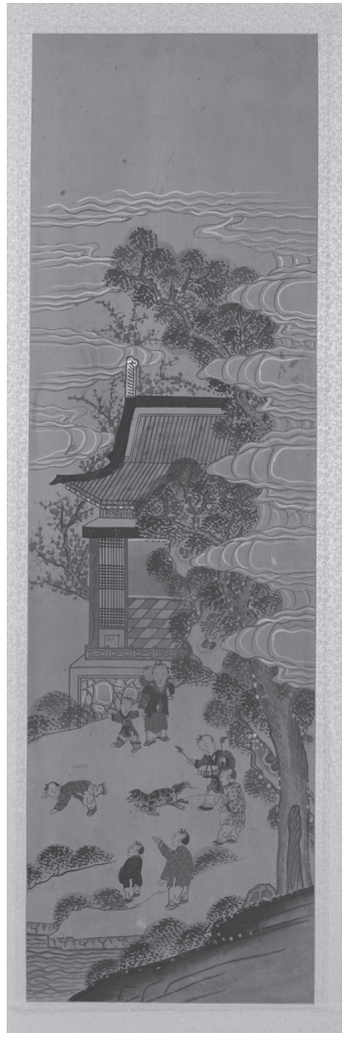

Figure 8. Seventh Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 8: Procession of Officials

A wish for success in the civil service exam

A child riding a goat under a parasol is surrounded by children beating drums and holding flags, mimicking a procession. This panel shares the same theme as Panel 6, symbolizing a wish for success in the civil service exam and obtaining an official position.

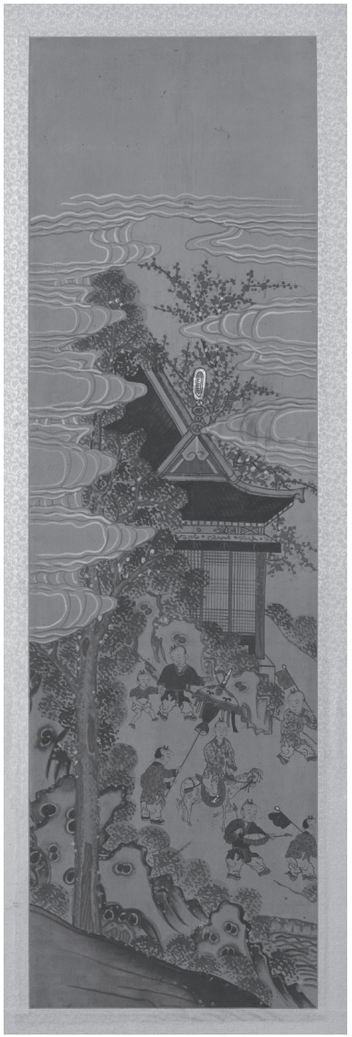

Figure 9. Eighth Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 9: Monkey Play

A wish for success in the civil service exam

Eight children are playing with a monkey in front of a pavilion, a variation of the dog play in Panel 7. The monkey traditionally symbolizes wisdom and is associated with being ennobled in the future (猴 in Chinese).

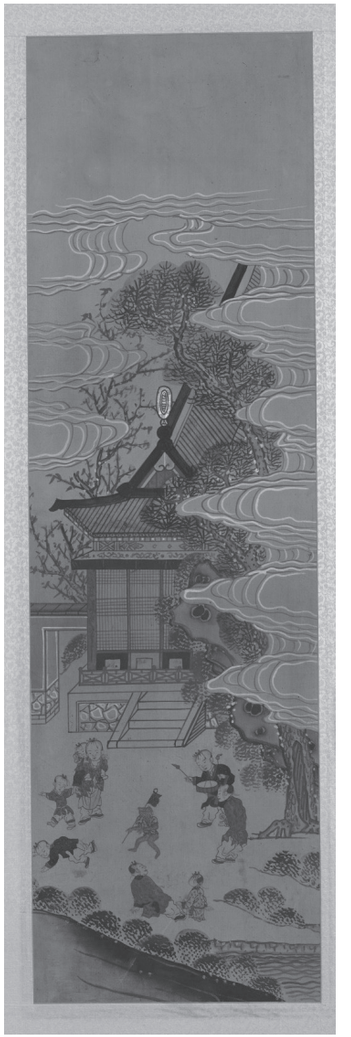

Figure 10. Nineth Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Panel 10: Plum Blossom Picking

A wish for success in the civil service exam

Four children climb a tree in the courtyard behind a pavilion to pick plum blossoms while one collects fallen petals. Climbing the tree symbolizes passing the civil service exam, and the four children represent a Chinese folktale in which five sons all pass the exam. The children's winter hats indicate that the season is winter.

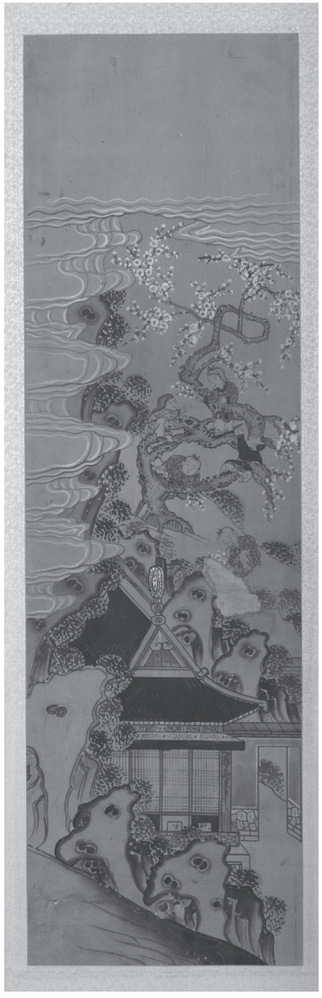

Figure 11. Tenth Panel, photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy of Denver Art Museum

Its Place

In sum, from an art historical perspective, this painting is classified as a typical Korean folk painting, likely created in the late 19th or early 20th century, and is of average quality.[4] Next, the matter of whether it occupies space as a physical object will be examined, and this aspect will be explored in relation to the museum space it occupies—both in terms of the physical environment and its social structure.

After undergoing conservation work in Korea, the piece will return to the Denver Art Museum and, for the first time since entering the museum's collection in 1970, it will be presented to the public.[5] It will likely be displayed in the Korean Gallery on the fifth floor of the Martin Building, where the DAM's Asian permanent collection is displayed. When interpreting the meaning of this object, it is also informative to consider the specific context of the Denver Art Museum, particularly its Arts of Asia Galleries and the exhibition narrative within the Korea Gallery, which play an essential role in the mode of the signification of the object in question. This study acknowledges the importance of recognizing the diverse historical and cultural contexts that imbue this work with its specific values. Operating on the hypothesis that the museum visitor actively constructs meaning and that meaning is generated in the gallery through the interaction between the object and the viewer, this analysis critically reflects on the conditions of artistic production, circulation, and reception. By doing so, I propose alternative interpretative frameworks that encourage a reconfiguration of the representation of Korean art in U.S. museum displays.

The history of the Denver Art Museum began in 1893 as the Denver Artists' Club, initially serving as a space for local art enthusiasts to display their

4 In other words, the painting cannot be considered a national treasure or a masterpiece of Korea, and it would likely not be displayed in prestigious museums in Korea. However, the question of how to assess the quality of an object in the context of Korean art remains a significant topic of discussion. This judgment is based on reviewing relevant art historical materials, comparisons with similar paintings in other museum collections and their evaluations, and my prerequisite knowledge of Korean art history.

5 Although it is one of about twenty Korean paintings in the museum's collection, it has not been displayed for a long time due to the distortion of the folding screen frames. The screen could not be fully folded or opened, making it unstable for positioning in the exhibition gallery. This instability was the primary reason for requesting and securing conservation support from the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation.

work. The institution moved between several temporary locations, including the public library, a downtown mansion, and a Denver City and County Building section. The name "Denver Art Museum" and the establishment of a formal collection took shape in the 1920s.[6] Its "encyclopedic" museum collection, which refers to a museum that collects objects from across the world and throughout history, similar to the concept of a universal museum, began during this early stage.[7] Notably, in 1925, the museum became the first major institution to create a dedicated Native American Arts Department, recognizing indigenous artifacts as art rather than mere anthropological or historical curiosities. The museum acquired significant European art in the 1930s, spurred by donations from Horace Havemeyer. Today, it also houses the most extensive collection of art produced in Latin America between the 1600s and 1800s in the United States. With over a century of collecting, the museum's holdings span thousands of years and include objects from Africa, North and South America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, encompassing a wide range of media such as photography, textiles, architecture, and design. The museum's Asian collection, which includes Korean art, began in 1915 when Walter C. Mead donated Chinese and Japanese art to the citizens of Denver. In addition to acquisitions by the museum, over 7,000 pieces, including artifacts dating back to 4000 BCE and contemporary works, have been donated by more than 400 donors from Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. The diverse Asian artworks from China, India, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and the Himalayas are currently on permanent display on the fifth floor of the Martin Building.[8]

DAM's opening dates closely align with those of other American universal survey museums, which are defined as institutions that display works from a wide range of cultures with the mission of fostering Americans' basic literacy in art and culture. These museums are conceived and institutionalized within the framework of modern European art history. Despite changes, the museum maintains an intriguing layout, organizing its permanent galleries according to universal ontological categories commonly found in such institutions. In

6 For more on the museum's early history, see Harris 1996.

7 On many pages of the Denver Art Museum's website, they describe themselves as an encyclopedic museum and emphasize their encyclopedic collection. For the most comprehensive discussion on the term "encyclopedic museum," see Grau 2021.

8 The history of Asian collections is thoroughly explored in two key periodicals—*Arts of Asia* and *Orientations*—on Asian art. For this, see Lanius and Otsuka 2007; Jiao 2016.

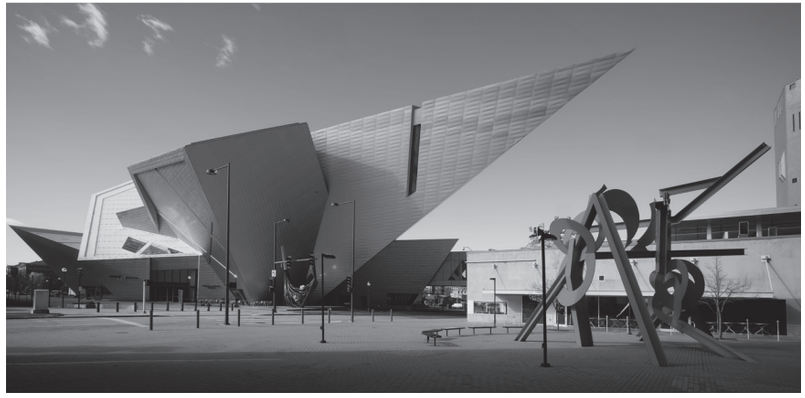

Figure 12. Frederic C. Hamilton Building at Denver Art Museum, photo by Jeff Wells and © Denver Art Museum

2016, the Hamilton Building, designed by architect Daniel Libeskind, was inaugurated, followed by the renovation of the Martin Building, originally designed by Gio Ponti in 1971 and reopened in 2021. These two buildings span over 350,000 square feet and house 12 permanent galleries representing various regions, genres, and media.

The Hamilton Building's hyper-futuristic architecture serves as the primary exhibition space for post-1900 European and American art, including modern and contemporary works. Smaller galleries dedicated to the arts of Africa and Oceania are also located there. These spaces are also significant venues for special presentations and traveling exhibitions.

Meanwhile, the Martin Building, a more classic structure, focuses on premodern and non-European collections within its seven stories. This division implicitly raises the persistent question of "what is art?" The museum's archiving and classification strategies reflect the broader tradition of Western modernity, where such practices have been central to cultural institutions. Such discourses of power are geopolitical in nature. They can, by extension, become civilizational in their reliance on binary oppositions between cultures, which inhibit any transcultural understanding of contemporary cultural production. Geopolitical power arrangements in the artistic context are defined along much the same lines as the *Maginot Line*, with a significant division at their core. This evidence of artistic separation gives the interaction between different artistic cultures an air of civilizational distinction, predicated on tensions between developed and

Figure 13. Lanny & Sharon Martin Building at Denver Art Museum, photo by Christina Jackson and © Denver Art Museum

underdeveloped, reactionary and progressive, regressive and advanced, and avant-garde and outmoded. This discourse is a legacy of classical modernity, which, through these distinctions, perpetuates the dialectical and ideological competition and hegemony often found in art and cultural spaces (Enwezor 2003, 58).

DAM's Korean art collection began in 1932 with William H. Downs' donation of Joseon dynasty furniture, and it grew significantly in 1992 with a donation from Alfred H. Platt and his wife. In the early 1990s, Kay E. Black, a Denver native, served as an advisor on Korean art, facilitating research in

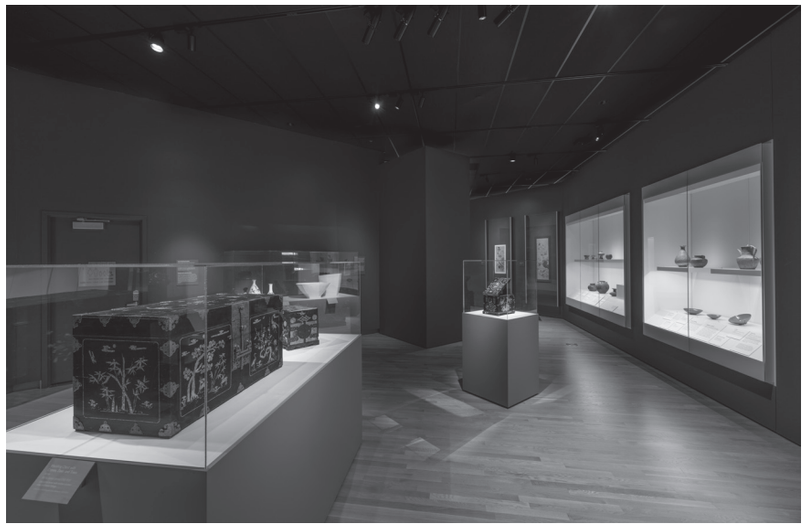

Figure 14. Korean Gallery at Denver Art Museum, photo by Christina Jackson and © Denver Art Museum

the field.[9] The Denver Art Museum's Korean gallery is currently housed in the Martin Building alongside other encyclopedic collections. In 2021, with the support of the Korea Foundation (KF), the gallery more than doubled in size. It reopened, showcasing selected works from the museum's collection of over 400 Korean objects in its permanent exhibition. This expansion reflects broader trends in the collecting and display of Korean art in foreign museums. While Korean art has long been included in the "Far Eastern" collections of the West, appreciated for its aesthetic qualities and as referential material about neighboring Chinese and Japanese art, its collection and display have often been shaped by an ethnological perspective. Korean collectors and institutions have frequently sought examples of painting, ceramics, and other art forms to comprehensively represent the country's artistic heritage. The DAM collection mirrors this effort, with works ranging from traditional paintings to contemporary pieces, striving to cover a wide array of genres and periods.

The Korean gallery is part of the broader Arts of Asia galleries, which are

9 The history of the Denver Art Museum's Korean collection is detailed in Kay E. Black's (1993) article, "Korean Surprises in Denver."

divided along national and cultural boundaries: Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Himalayas, South Asia, and West Asia, with Buddhist art housed in the South Tower, and East Asian art—including Chinese and Japanese collections, along with the Bamboo Collection—displayed in the North Tower. This arrangement implicitly asserts the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms. At the same time, a centrally located gallery titled "Linking Asia" opens up the space by bringing together objects from various regions to emphasize their interconnectedness. However, grouping artworks from different Asian cultures under one category can obscure individual objects' specific cultural and historical contexts.

While the Korean gallery is part of this larger Asian grouping, it is well known that the government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) has significantly secured space for Korean art in foreign museums. Denver's Korean gallery, for example, is supported by the Korea Foundation, and from 2023 to 2026, the museum will host a series of exhibitions as part of the National Museum of Korea's (NMK) Overseas Korean Gallery Support Program. The Korean gallery represents the intersection of a European-curated perception of Asian art and Korea's desire to promote its culture internationally. Thus, the gallery can be redefined as a permanent space for Korean art and culture, ensuring Korea's visibility in overseas museums.

The development of such galleries aligns with South Korea's broader cultural diplomacy efforts. According to the *Study on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Development Plan for the Korean Gallery of Overseas Museums* by Korea Culture & Tourism Institute (2011), this program incorporates multiple objectives: 1) fostering interactive international cultural exchange, 2) enhancing Korea's national branding through museum displays, and 3) strengthening Korean museums' international exchange networks. Since the 1990s, opening permanent Korean galleries in major museums worldwide has been a key part of South Korea's national agenda. For instance, in 1992, the Korea Foundation, established a year earlier, contributed £1.2 million to the British Museum, enabling the opening of a separate Korean gallery in 2000. Earlier, in 1992, the Korea Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum was opened in collaboration with the National Museum of Korea and the Samsung Foundation. This ongoing project continues today. Recent examples include the opening of a permanent exhibition space for Korean art and crafts at the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, Poland, in collaboration with the National Folk Museum of Korea, and a new Korean gallery at the Asian Art Museum in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, Germany, in collaboration with the National Museum of Korea.

However, the establishment of Korean galleries abroad has faced criticism in Korea. Concerns have been raised regarding the quality of the exhibits, the need for coherent narratives, and inaccurate information about Korea. Compared to galleries dedicated to Japan and China, these exhibitions have sometimes provoked a sense of inadequacy. Nevertheless, museum exhibition spaces are sites for presenting knowledge about objects and their associated cultures and reflections on where these objects are collected and displayed. For this reason, analyzing the objects, information, and narratives presented in Korean galleries abroad within the broader context of foreign museums is essential, rather than viewing them solely as unilateral projections of South Korea.

Foreign museums' collection practices often reflect non-Korean collectors' preferences or a general lack of interest in Korean art in the regions where these institutions are located. As a result, the formal qualities valued within Korea often need to be adequately represented and appreciated. Korea's desire to be recognized internationally, particularly in European and North American societies, became evident in blockbuster exhibitions such as 5,000 Years of Korean Art in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These exhibitions aimed to present an idealized version of Korean art abroad, showcasing "a distinctly indigenous lineage of artistic production, unbroken and singularly individualistic, as evidence of parity with China and Japan" (Lin 2016, 384). This narrative, however, can be understood as a myth in the Barthesian sense, where the historical complexity of human actions is reduced to simplistic essences. As Roland Barthes ([1957]1972, 142) describes, "In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity; things appear to mean something by themselves." Such myth-making often resulted in the marginalization of Korean art in foreign museums, relegating it to small, exoticized gallery spaces filled with mediocre artifacts that supported nationalist discourses through formalist aesthetics. DAM has been an example of this approach to the presentation of

Korean art galleries.

However, the narrative of a "clean-cut" national art form is undergoing transformation. In today's globalized world, with increasing numbers of Koreans abroad and the growing prominence of diasporic and contemporary Korean artists, the representation of Korean art once focused solely on objects, with significant historical and cultural value, has evolved. Postcolonial frameworks emphasize the continuity of artistic traditions while accommodating contemporary forms, including craft and modern artworks. The simplistic portrayal of Korean culture as an "exotic other," relegated to peripheral museum spaces, no longer holds in the postcolonial era. In the face of postmodern movements, the essentialized past is becoming less central. Museum spaces are now tasked with generating new narratives and creating fresh memories of Korea that move beyond the exoticized past, opening up possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of Korean art in a global context.

Its Trajectories

Similar to much of Korea's overseas cultural heritage, the *One Hundred Boys at Play* folding screen has an incomplete provenance regarding how they came to be in a U.S. museum or how they were moved and relocated within the Korean peninsula before eventually arriving in the U.S.[10] The concept of *object biography* gained significant importance in the 1980s. Objects do not have fixed or intrinsic meanings; their roles and functions shift as they move through different social, cultural, and economic contexts. The values attached to objects are contingent and fluid, shaped by human practices and the broader systems within which they circulate (Kopytoff 1986). This framework has prompted scholars to reconsider how objects in museums are understood, especially those that have crossed time and space, acquiring different meanings within various value systems. It also calls for a more critical engagement with the histories of

10 The current conservation project includes deconstructing and reconstructing the materials composing the object and conducting a series of material tests to analyze the backdrop and pigments. These investigations will not only help establish the object's date of creation but will also provide insights into its past "social life" by revealing how it was made, used, and preserved over time. The final report will be completed in early 2025, with the results integrated into the new display narrative.

dispossession and power imbalances—colonial, military, and economic—that have often facilitated the acquisition of these objects. As Bénédicte Savoy (2017) argues, museum objects should not be appreciated solely for their aesthetic or historical significance. However, they must also be contextualized within the asymmetrical power relations underpinning their collection and displacement.

In the 1960s, *One Hundred Boys at Play* surfaced in an Asian art gallery in New York before being transferred to a museum collection in 1970, along with other Asian objects, including a piece of Joseon-period lacquerware. Although there is no documented evidence of the transfer of ownership or the specific context in which this occurred, we can infer how its meaning and function have evolved. When the screen was initially created, it served as furniture within residential spaces in Korea during the Joseon period, dividing or decorating interiors and symbolically conveying the owner's wishes for prosperity and fertility. Before or by the 1960s, however, the screen had shifted from being a functional item within a household to being viewed as an artwork or souvenir representing Korea. It was sold to the gallery, where it was recognized as part of Korean artistic heritage and later entered an institutional collection as an example of Korean art. Today, *One Hundred Boys at Play* is part of several prominent museum collections, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Honolulu Museum of Art, and the Grassi Museum. The widespread presence of similar screens in overseas institutions suggests that such paintings were produced in large numbers during the 19th and early 20th centuries in Korea, likely for wedding celebrations and decorative purposes. Western collectors' interest during this period reflects the growing international interest in Korea, which contributed to the dispersion of these decorating furniture into major museums abroad as representations of Korea's cultural artifacts or examples of traditional Korean painting.

A Painting of Limited Artistic Merit

Within the Denver Art Museum context, the painting enters a broader narrative surrounding Korean art and culture while preserving its original socio-historical significance. The museum's role in preserving, interpreting, and displaying the artwork raises critical questions about how institutions communicate the complex values embedded in non-Western art to diverse audiences. These

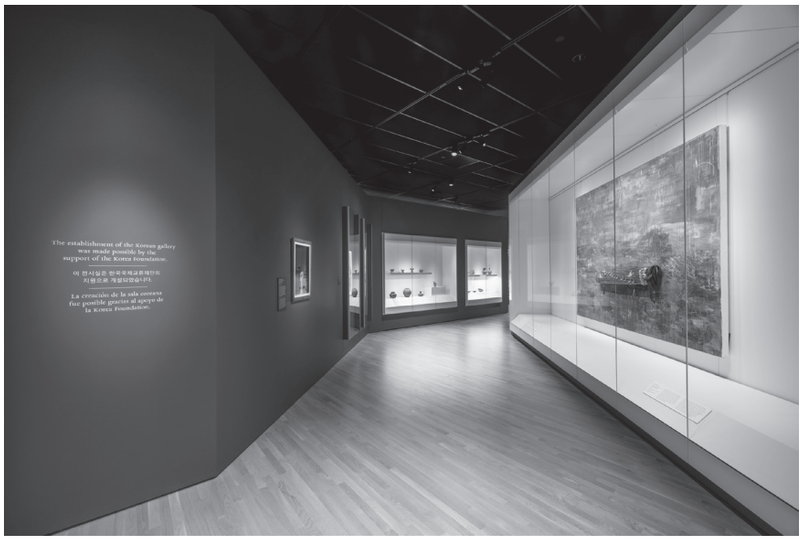

Figure 15. Display Wall Case in the Korean Gallery at Denver Art Museum, photo by Christina Jackson and © Denver Art Museum

audiences, whose understanding of art may be more aligned with modern European art concepts, are rooted in early art historiography. This framework typically emphasizes form, beauty, and the moral or intellectual elevation of the viewer, privileging painting, drawing, sculpture, and architecture from the Western canon as "high art" while relegating objects from extra-European contexts, including functional, decorative, or applied arts, as inferior due to their perceived lack of cultural prestige and aesthetic purity. Such distinctions marginalize non-Western and European folk artistic traditions.

In this context, presenting a Korean folding screen within the art gallery space may be seen as an attempt to elevate objects typically categorized as utilitarian or decorative into the realm of "pure" fine art.

However, despite the museum's "assimilating" strategies to align non-Western art with familiar Western art forms, it remains questionable whether audiences accustomed to these hierarchical distinctions will perceive a piece of Korean painting furniture as "fine art"[11] (Karp 1991, 11).

11 In his article, Karp (1991) discussed two strategies museums often employ when exhibiting "other cultures": exoticizing and assimilating. The latter involves presenting objects that appeal to the audience's sense of familiarity and the natural. For example, an extra-European object displayed in a fine art museum vitrine is criticized for merely assimilating the aesthetics of other cultural traditions into a specific moment within the museum's own cultural framework. Karp advocated for a more reflective approach to exhibition strategy that critically engages with these complexities.

In the case of the *One Hundred Boys at Play* folding screen, as a folk painting, it has been marginalized within Korean art historiography. This marginalization stems not only from the influence of early European art historiography—which dominated the discipline at its inception—but also from the biases of the contemporary elite art community at the time of its creation. Regardless, in the DAM Korean gallery, the *One Hundred Boys at Play* folding screen can be displayed as a selected example of Korean painting; its placement in this context raises questions about its suitability for such a setting. In Korean art history tradition, this work has been categorized as folk or polychrome painting, which has long been regarded more as a form of decorative or folk art than high art painting. As the curator, Wang Shinyoun (2023, 19), noted in the catalog for the exhibition Korea in Color: A Legacy of Auspicious Images, recent research and exhibitions on folk and polychrome painting can be seen as efforts to redress the imbalance in the historiography of Korean painting.[12] This invites the question: what constitutes "fine art" in the context of Korean painting?

In its country of origin, Korea, this folk-art object of the late 19th century would likely not be displayed in a fine art museum such as the Denver Art Museum.[13] The original context of this painting is deeply rooted in Korea's cultural and artistic traditions, which valued different genres and mediums differently based on elite tastes and their ideological connections to Chinese culture. Historically, the artistic canon in Korea, as in many other countries, was shaped by elite preferences that prioritized certain art forms—such as literati paintings, calligraphy, and Chinese-influenced works—over more vernacular forms, such as folk painting.

Monetary value can be gauged through insurance values and auction prices. In contrast, art-historical value is established through inclusion in significant art history texts, the collecting practices of past connoisseurs, and

12 This exhibition, which explores the tradition of Korean polychrome painting, opened at the San Diego Museum of Art in 2023 after presenting the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Gwacheon, South Korea, in 2022.

13 The intriguing history of folk-art exhibitions shows that folk art was introduced relatively late in Korea's national museums, which play a leading role in shaping the country's art historical narrative compared to private institutions (Eom 2006).

selection for prestigious exhibitions. Throughout much of Korea's history, noble tastes and the elite's reverence for Chinese culture have heavily influenced the classification and appreciation of art. In the Joseon dynasty, aristocrats favored paintings that conformed to the values of the literati—scholarly paintings with literary and philosophical elegance. Folk paintings, such as *One Hundred Boys at Play*, which were often designed for use in everyday life and the interests of ordinary people, were considered inferior and categorized as "low" art, far removed from the realm of fine art.

The genre of folk painting, known as *minhwa*, was often derogated as "vulgar" by the ruling class, as it contrasted sharply with the scholarly paintings that adorned the study (*sarangbang*) of literati men.[14] These elite paintings and calligraphy were revered for their literary and aesthetic refinement. The famous scholar Jung Yak-yong (1762–1836), for example, dismissed folk paintings sold in art markets during the Joseon period as "insignificant" (Kim 2015, 45). Calligraphy and painting collections during this period typically included rubbings, Chinese paintings, and ancestor portraits—items that reflected the scholarly and intellectual concerns of the time rather than folk art (Hwang 2012).

This tradition of marginalizing *minhwa* persisted in early 20th-century Korean art historical publications, both by Korean and foreign scholars. For example, in his work, Eckardt (1929) contextualized Korean art history within modern art historiography, covering various forms of Korean art but essentially sidelining folk painting. Instead, he focused on Buddhist sculpture, ceramics, tomb murals, and works by named artists. Likewise, art historians like Kim Yong-jun ([1949] 2001) and Sekino Tadashi ([1929] 2003) focused on portraits, literati paintings, and court art in their respective publications, while largely ignoring *minhwa* as a subject worthy of serious scholarly consideration. Even An Hwak's *Joseon Art History Overview* ([1940] 2020) criticized armature literati painters for lacking artistic quality while offering little attention to folk painting. Similar instances can be found in early English-language publications on Korean art from the 1950s to 1970s, which played a role in shaping the intended image of Korean art for foreign audiences.

This marginalization of *minhwa* was reflected in the major exhibitions

14 For further information on literati painting in Korea, see Yi 2008. For the term "minhwa," see Won 2021.

of Korean art abroad in the 1950s and 1970s, where such works were notably absent.[15] Typically, folk paintings were collected and displayed in folk museums or private museums rather than significant institutions dedicated to fine art. It was in the early 2000s that marked a shift in the institutional recognition of this genre within the broader art historical narrative. In summary, there are better examples than this object for illustrating the original context of art-making and the traditional artistic values of Korea as they existed during its creation. Its presentation as a painting form only partially captures the cultural and historical significance that persisted in that period and today.

Most Quintessentially Korean Painting

In the mid-20th century, a new social construct emerged within the discourse on Korean painting. Folk painting, which was previously marginalized due to its divergence from the aesthetic values of Neo-Confucianism, the dominant philosophy of the time—began to gain recognition as an art form. While the scholars, *seonbi*, of earlier centuries celebrated art that idealized past China, their successors in the 20th century, including art collectors and enthusiasts predominantly from the same social class, continued to perpetuate these ideals. Many modern art historians, influenced by Western methodologies, adhere to this intellectual framework, referring to themselves as *seonbi*. As a result, folk art, often produced for a broader audience for domestically decorative purposes, has been systematically excluded from national art historical narratives, which privilege elite, male-dominated literati traditions.

The attempt to subvert established values aligns with the reevaluation of folk painting as a culture of the lower classes, reflecting the broader resistance against the existing system in Korean society from the 1970s to the 1990s. This movement led to the belief that the culture of the lower classes is the most authentically Korean. The belief that there was an art form created and consumed by the common people, representing an indigenous form of art, was propagated.[16]

15 Such exhibitions mainly include *Masterpieces of Korean Art* and *5,000 Years of Korean Art*.

16 The reception history of the term *minhwa*, or the historiography of *minhwa* in Korea, is not the primary focus of this paper, so it is mentioned only briefly. For a more in-depth discussion, see Hong

Among the various arguments, the most exciting and relevant to this exploration is the claim that folk painting is the most authentically Korean art form, mainly because foreigners viewed it as a prime example of Korean identity. Chung Byung-mo, one of today's leading researchers and enthusiasts of *minhwa*, wrote in his article that foreigners often regard folk painting as the most authentically Korean art form; examples include not only Yanagi Sōetsu 柳宗悦 (1889–1961), who was the first to use the term *minhwa* but also the fact that many covers of overseas publications on Korean painting feature *minhwa*, rather than Goguryeo tomb murals or Jeong Seon's true-view landscapes (Chung 2017, 19). In another article, he claims that "*minhwa* contributed to both the popularization and globalization of Korean art" (Chung 2023, 26), tracing this history back to ethnologists who, during their missions in Korea, purchased folk paintings and brought them back to their home countries as representations of the most Korean pictorial expression.

Indeed, this context of trade with foreigners is crucial, as many of these objects now form a significant part of Korean collections outside of Korea, shaping a distinct landscape for Korean art galleries abroad. Although these works held little value within the traditional fine art painting canon, they were often collected during ethnographic missions by those attempting to understand "Korea" from an external perspective. A notable example of this practice can be seen at the Musée Guimet, where French adventurer Charles Varat (1832?–1893) played a key role. Similarly, German diplomat Paul Georg von Möllendorff (1847–1901) gathered over 400 Korean artifacts between 1883 and 1884 for the Grassi Ethnographic Museum in Leipzig. Meanwhile, Bernardau collected comparable items for the Smithsonian Museum in the United States.

The *One Hundred Boys at Play* folding screen in the DAM, while not explicitly part of these early ethnographic collections, nonetheless belongs to the broader genealogy of Korean objects collected by Western institutions.[17] Initially, folk paintings like those found on folding screens were consumed by

2006; Kho 2013, 2017.

17 This foreign interest persisted, as evidenced by *minhwa* being referred to as "Yankee Mookie" in the Korean art market until the mid-20th century, due to the majority of buyers being Westerners (Kho 2017, 7). The painting at the DAM, likely purchased in Korea and transferred in the 1960s, is part of this broader context.

Figure 16. Display of Japanese and Mexican Folding Screens at the Denver Art Museum, photo by and © of Ji Young Park

Korea's burgeoning wealthy middle class in the 19th century (Yun 2018, 303). However, these objects functioned as cultural artifacts for foreign collectors, symbolizing distinctly Korean aesthetic and cultural characteristics. The folding screen, intended as furniture and decoration, was designed to divide spaces or block views. Over time, the institutionalization of this genre has followed two parallel courses: one in Korea and the other in foreign museums. This divergence highlights a fundamental difference in how Korean folk art and Western art traditions were treated, with Western art often privileging individual artistic genius. In contrast, Korean folk art emphasizes collective aesthetic values and communal cultural expression. For instance, *One Hundred Boys at Play* does not bear the signature of an individual artist, a common feature of Korean folk paintings, which prioritize collective aesthetic consciousness over individual authorship.

The evolving discourse surrounding this folding screen also tells how external categories have been imposed on Korean art. In encyclopedic museums like the Denver Art Museum, objects such as the folding screen can be found in Korean galleries and Japanese or Latin American contexts, reflecting a shift in how cultural objects are categorized. What was collected initially as a cultural product has now been reframed as a visual tradition representing an entire culture. In these institutions, any material capable of representing a particular culture's artistic practices at a given time is now considered "art," expanding the boundaries of what can be considered an art object in the context of the encyclopedic museum.

One Hundred Chinese Boys

As a work created by a Korean painter and used within Korean culture, the *One Hundred Boys at Play* folding screen displayed in the Korean gallery represents Korea's unique visual tradition to visitors, many of whom may have little cultural knowledge about Korea. Strikingly, visitors who attempt to identify the national identity of the figures in the painting based on their attire may mistakenly assume it to be Chinese. This issue is particularly relevant for Korean or Chinese visitors, who are familiar with the differences in traditional costumes between the two cultures and come to the museum to learn more about their own heritage or that of their neighbors.

Some Korean folk paintings depict figures dressed in imaginary Chinese costumes and hairstyles, engaged in activities set within an idyllic Chinese palace garden featuring balustrades, ponds, exotic rocks, and plants. As part of the larger Sino-phone world, Korean painters were heavily influenced by Chinese art in terms of technique and iconography. The idealized time and space depicted in these works, rooted in Confucian philosophy, often represented a "Chinese-looking" world, which aligned with the broader aspirations of the Korean elite during the period.

Confucianism, the dominant philosophy when these paintings were created, prioritized archaism—a core principle that emphasized reverence for past generations and admiration for historical figures and deeds from previous Chinese dynasties, often portrayed in *gosa* (historical figure paintings). This respect for ancient sages profoundly influenced the spiritual and aesthetic world of Korean artists of the time (Heo 2013).

Despite the strong influence of Chinese aesthetics, Korean painters also sought to create a distinctive style by incorporating local sentiment and themes.[18] This search is one of the bases of Korean art history writing. In exhibitions where art is organized by nationality, Korean objects are often displayed as examples of national-style art, particularly in Korean galleries, which seek to emphasize the uniqueness of Korean culture. When preserved in a museum setting, these works of art occupy a conceptual space very different from their original context in Korea.

For example, thanks to previous research on this subject matter, we know that one feature of Korean iconography distinguishing itself from its Chinese counterpart is the background settings, which often include splendid pavilions and mysterious spaces (Kim 2001). The iconography of the general play (Panel 1), as well as depictions of monkey play (Panel 7), dog play (Panel 9), and bird play (Panel 4), were uniquely depicted only in the Joseon dynasty (Moon 2018).

However, for audiences unfamiliar with East Asia's shared cultural history, these paintings are often mistaken for Chinese works. This creates tension in the museum space, where objects intended to represent "Koreanness" visually clash with their Sino-influenced iconography. In a museum context, vision plays a central role, and proper textual explanations are necessary to guide audiences in

18 For more on the influence of Chinese art on Korean painting during the late Joseon period, see Jungmann 2014; Park 2018; Seo 2015.

understanding these works.

This raises important theoretical questions about visuality in museums, the subject-object relationship, and how modern audiences, who are not part of the historical Korean worldview, interpret such works.[19] More than simply presenting these paintings as indigenous Korean art without acknowledging the Chinese influence or making the simpler decision to exclude such objects from the Korean gallery limits cultural understanding and risks narrowing the interpretation of Korean culture. The museum faces a framing challenge due to its inherent role in creating boundaries; in a space where visual elements dominate despotically, it must convey the nuanced story that, while the boys in these paintings wear ancient Chinese attire, the works themselves reflect the dreams and aspirations of the Korean people at that time.[20]

These paintings were highly popular in 19th-century Korea. Nevertheless, the most challenging aspect is crafting a narrative that, regardless of the figures' cultural identity, the iconography of these works should be understood within Korea's broader cultural and artistic traditions. For example, depicting children at play highlights the importance of family and community during the Joseon period and reflects the strong influence of Confucian values on Korean society.

At the Outset

This study serves as a practical tool, through analysis, for better organizing the upcoming *One Hundred Boys at Play* display in the Korea gallery at the Denver Art Museum. Exhibiting Korean paintings is a vital mission for the museum. Due to the fragile materials, the limited number of surviving works, and the need for regular rotation to protect them from light exposure, the museum requires a substantial collection to properly present Korea's pictorial tradition. This ensures that visitors do not get the impression that Korea, unlike other cultures displayed in parallel in a world culture museum, did not produce

19 For more detailed relationship discussion about vision and its viewer, see Mirzoeff 1999.

20 Constructing such a narrative is highly problematic from both Korean and Chinese nationalist perspectives. On the Korean side, it threatens the cultural autonomy that Korean studies scholars have sought to assert for over a century. From the Chinese side, it raises concerns about the appropriation of another culture, a topic that has recently sparked conflict between the two countries, especially on social media, over premodern cultural traditions.

significant pictorial works.

This exploration highlights the complexities involved in exhibiting *One Hundred Boys at Play* within the context of Korean painting in an encyclopedic museum. Like similar works, painting is valued not only for its aesthetic qualities but also for its cultural and historical significance (and sometimes political agenda), reflecting the various (and often contradictory) meanings and values attributed to the object.

I underscore the need for a nuanced exhibition strategy that avoids the trap of over-contextualizing the painting as insignificant folk art or, conversely, diminishing its cultural importance by relegating it to a secondary level within Korean painting history. The challenge is to present such works in a way that acknowledges their layered meanings without oversimplifying, exoticizing, or assimilating them for a foreign audience.

By ensuring that *One Hundred Boys at Play* is not dismissed as a "cheap" or inferior representation of Korean art, carefully balancing aesthetic appreciation with cultural context and preventing the painting from being misidentified as Chinese due to its figures, we can preserve and convey the richness of Korean visual traditions to the audience. This research, which explores the painting's varied significations, marks the first step in achieving that goal.

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Abstract

This paper explores the cross-section of meanings and values attributed to the Korean pictorial work *One Hundred Boys at Play*, now part of the Denver Art Museum's permanent collection, examining its potential for evolving interpretation. As this object prepares for its upcoming display in the Korean gallery of an encyclopedic museum in the United States, this study serves as a preliminary curatorial step. It aims to illuminate the artwork's multiple meanings for contemporary viewers, contextualized within the historical and societal frameworks in which these significances were constructed.

Keywords: *One Hundred Boys at Play*, Korean folk painting, Korean overseas cultural heritage, reflective museology, encyclopedic museum

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