

# Mysticism & Simplicity

Korean art show opens doors to the world of Far East shamanism and everyday life.



An illustration, one of the paintings on display at the UOMA. The show opens Friday with a reception from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

By Jack Clifford  
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Through artistic simplicity sometimes emerge beauty and appreciation. Charles Lachman relied on that perspective when he put together the first major exhibit of the new century at the University Museum of Art, "The Realm of Revelation: Vision and Imagination in Later Korean Art."

As the museum's associate curator of Asian art, Lachman says that his overall aim with this show was to enlighten the public on certain multi-layered aspects to Korean art.

"What I came up with, looking through things and thinking about the exhibit," he says, "was the way in which, tigers for instance, or landscapes — which might seem like very prosaic kinds of things — actually represent sacred places or people who have special powers."

"The Realm of Revelation" exhibit opens Friday with a free reception from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the UOMA. Throughout the next three months the museum will offer lectures and other events designed to further educate the public on Korean culture, especially late 19th and early 20th century periods when these pieces were created.

"Most of the art in this show, from a sociological point of view, represents a different segment of Korean society than was represented in ["The Fragrance of Ink"] show we had here a few years ago," Lachman says, referring to a 1997 UOMA exhibit. "Most people, if they've seen any Korean painting, what they've seen is this more refined, ink painting that's in the mainstream Chinese or Japanese scholarly tradition."

The focus of this current exhibit is geared more toward the folk art realm, the curator says. Most of the paintings and drawings on display were never really meant to be preserved as artwork per se but instead might have been used during special occasions.

"The tiger and magpie themes have been very popular in Korean art for a long time, but they're basically New Year's kinds of themes," Lachman says. "You would paste them up in your house, but they weren't really kept or collected. Sometimes a painted example, which you would find in an upper class home, might be mounted as a scroll and would more likely be preserved."

Approximately 20 percent of the artwork in "The Realm of Revelation" is from the UOMA private collection, with the rest on loan from Robert and Sandra Mattielli, art collectors who live in Portland. The Oregon couple spent 30 years in Korea, until 1988, and collected local artifacts and farming implements, along with more aesthetic pieces. The Mattiellis sometimes utilized rather interesting ways of gathering their wares.

"[Robert's] 'collecting' included going through recycle piles and other forms of rescue work as well as becoming a trusted friend of a number of itinerant dealers who searched out old stuff in the villages," a museum press release states. "This kind of serendipitous collecting probably no longer exists in modern Korea."

Good thing Mattielli succeeded when he did. Besides paintings, the current exhibit consists of traditional folding screens, hanging scrolls and fans, plus several intricately folded prints.

University graduate students Josh Tollefson and Cara Forler created a video for the exhibit titled "Unfolding Beauty: A Brief History of Screens." The short film, which took about six weeks in research and production, will play regularly in the gallery.

"The video is used to put the screens

into context, how they were used in the homes or how they functioned in religious ceremonies," says Tollefson, who is seeking a master's degree in printmaking. "Until this project, I thought they were just decorative, but they actually had a wider use in a more spiritual realm."

The screens were just re-mounted — previously they were in the UOMA collection as just loose sheets — and this is the first time that they'll be on display in the museum.

Lachman has divided the museum's exhibit space into three separate areas: maps and charts, folk art and what he calls the "hell and paradise room." The hell concept is depicted in paintings that relate to everyday, judicial settings one might find in a Korean court system.

"In Buddhism there's this idea that after you die, for a number of days you have to keep appearing before judges of these different hells," Lachman explains. "Officials have these scrolls which have all the deeds of your life written out, with all of the misdeeds, so each judge decides what your punishment is going to be. These scenes [on the paintings] are cast in sort of an every day kind of way."

Paradise seems to be the place to reside in Korean culture, at least according to one artist's rendering. In one specific painting on display — Lachman points out that almost all of these artworks are untitled — traditional elements used as symbols of

longevity, such as deer, turtles, cranes, mushrooms and the sun, combine with more human forms to create a utopian landscape.

The painting portrays various gods of longevity coming to attend a banquet hosted by the Queen Mother of the West, who is the Chinese goddess of longevity.

"She's supposed to dwell in this sort of paradise land," Lachman explains, "where they have these great, huge peaches and if you take a bite it will confer immortality on you."

Immortality or personification of natural spirits are recurring themes throughout most of the "The Realm of Revelation" exhibit. The ideas are not directly represented but instead use symbolism. Even in today's Korean culture, Lachman says mountains, rivers, trees, even rocks, can be seen as having an aura or presence within them.

In turn, those "mountain spirits" are transformed via an anthropomorphic manner, through shamanistic practices. Although most of the practitioners are women, Lachman points to a painting illustrated with a male figure.

"At first look, you have what just looks like some

old guy sitting out in the woods," Lachman says. "But the fact that he's depicted in a particular way, holding this fan, with the tigers sort of tamed by him, all of these are indications of his special powers."

"So this very abstract form, the spirit of this mountain, came to be represented as an old man and tigers."

Lachman recalls that the 1997 "Fragrance of Ink" exhibit was one of the most popular shows the museum has ever held, as he remembers huge crowds showing up to view the more "fine art" pieces. Even though this show spotlights a less elegant form of Korean art, Lachman doesn't expect a drop-off in attendance.

"I'm very excited about [this exhibit] because it's a chance to bring up a number of things that we haven't had on view very often," he says.

The Museum of Art is open from noon to 8 p.m. Wednesday and from noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday. Suggested admission is \$3. Museum members, students, University employees and children are admitted free.

## MusEvenings! line-up for "The Realm of Revelation."

In conjunction with "The Realm of Revelation" exhibit, the Museum of Art will host a series of free weekly MusEvenings! programs and other special events. Unless otherwise noted, all programs will begin at 6 p.m. at the UOMA.

**Jan. 19** — Gallery talk: Robert and Sandra Mattielli, Portland art collectors, "Collecting Korean Art."

**Jan. 26** — Lecture: Kyung Gregor, Eugene art collector, "Women in Korean Culture."

**Feb. 2** — Lecture: Song Nai Rhee, University courtesy professor of cultural anthropology and former dean of Northwest Christian College, "The Choson Kingdom: Historical Background, Ideology and Society."

**Feb. 16** — Gallery Talk: Charles Lachman, University associate professor of art history and curator of "The Realm of Revelation."

**Feb. 23** — Lecture: Hattie Mae Nixon, Museum of Art docent and textile expert, "The Floating Skirt and Other Korean Textiles."

**Feb. 26** — Korean Art and Culture Family Day: Free event from 1-3 p.m., with activities that include storytelling, creating paper-cuts and Korean screens, music and tours led by the museum's teen docents.

**March 1** — The Korean film "Why Has Bodhi-harma Left for the East?" will be shown at the UOMA.