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**Imagination and Reality: Landscape and the Folk Culture of Joseon Dynasty Korea**

The *Five Peaks Screen* of Korea’s Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) is, in presentation and form, one of the most iconic pieces of its period (Fig. 1). Its formal qualities, including a non-naturalistic insistence on compositional symmetry, bright fields of color, stylized natural elements, and heavy line, instantly engage the viewer. The imagery gathered significance as each new painter painstakingly replicated it for the many years that it was featured in public and private royal contexts. In fact, its presentation complements the painting’s intense visuality: Yi Song-mi notes that the image was placed behind the king’s throne in the main hall of the capital city’s primary royal residence.1 After centuries of meticulous reproduction and prominent display, the formal qualities of the *Five Peaks Screen* grew out of the canvas and gathered meaning in the dynamic culture of the Joseon state even as the visual elements of the painting remained captivating and timeless.

Doubtless an important image in the conceptualization of ritual arts in Korea, the *Five Peaks Screen* nevertheless evades systematic scholarly study in terms of both formal elements and cultural setting. The use of heavy line and bright, flat color planes, as well as its iconic, repetitive character, assigns the *Five Peaks Screen*, by default, to the *minhwa*, or folk art, genre. Along with the *Five Peaks Screen*, this grouping of images includes a diverse range of subjects of diverse media produced for patrons from all social classes loosely grouped by their exclusively Korean background. In recent years, the variety in formal and contextual elements of

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images in this genre has led scholars to reevaluate its utility. Kumja Paik Kim articulates this general dissatisfaction with the concept of minhwa when she argues that, “The time has come now to stop considering all Korean paintings in vivid palette as folk paintings. Each work must be given a close visual analysis in regard to the complexity of composition, the mastery of brush methods, the quality of colors, and the size of the painting.”

In order to begin to address this problem of genre, I would like to analyze the formal construction of the Five Peaks Screen as a case study for Kim’s proposed reevaluation of Korean folk arts. Although the image has socioeconomic consequences that influenced its composition, in this paper, I will resituate the Five Peaks Screen in the artistic tradition of East Asian landscape painting. When considered in the context of literati painting traditions and relevant popular landscapes, it becomes clear that the design of the Five Peaks Screen coheres to traditional aesthetics to emphasize the ability of artwork to inform and influence life and ritual rather than to comment on or reflect reality.

In evaluating the Five Peaks Screen in terms of its relationship to the context of contemporary painting traditions, it is necessary to know when the screen was conceived. Because it was reproduced as a ritual object from its inception, and there is no specific mention of its first conception in the records of the Joseon dynasty, disagreement exists as to when it was first used. For our purposes, there are two valid possibilities. The first is that, as Hongnam Kim has suggested, the Five Peaks Screen was used from the beginning of the dynasty as a part of the program of the new regime’s interest in Neo-Confucian visuality. This hypothesis is particularly valid, as it emphasizes the importance of tradition and ritual to the Yi family and the Confucian bureaucracy that legitimized and economically enabled their rule. The alternative to this date is

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3 The reference is explained in Yi, 19.
one proposed by Yi Song-mi, who notices that the *Five Peaks Screen* is not mentioned in the detailed records of the Joseon dynasty until 1688. Although Kim’s proposal is more valid in terms of its consistency with the national ideology and the historical background of the nation, I will conduct a formal analysis of two demonstrative pieces of scholarly painting from each possible era in order to determine both the significance of this tradition to the composition of the *Five Peaks Screen* and if the contemporary academic styles can be shown to inform our understanding of image’s timeline.

If the founders of the Joseon dynasty conceived the design of the *Five Peaks Screen*, their most immediate point of reference would have been the painting traditions that are realized in An Gyeon’s *Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land* (1447, Fig. 2). According to Ahn Hwi-joon, An Gyeon was a court artist whose work laid the ground for later generations of Korean landscape painters. In the *Dream Journey*, An develops a signature style for the early and mid Joseon periods with the jagged, layered mountain peaks that insistently reach toward the sky. In fact, the painter develops his landscape with such strong, vertical brushstrokes that the texture of the mountains becomes divorced from the composition, detailing their specific peak but not participating in the compositional harmony of the entire piece; the insistent verticals also break up the horizontal narrative of the handscroll. An’s style, then, may be said to be strong and insistently vertical, if disjointed.

By the seventeenth century, the alternative date for the conception of the *Five Peaks Screen*’s design, Yi notes that painting in Korea had achieved a social significance as a status marker of the literati. The interplay between style and social status encouraged the development

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4 Yi, 19.  
6 Yi Song-mi, *Korean Landscape Painting: Continuity and Innovation Through the Ages*, 85-86.
of an aesthetic with a different pedigree; Jeong Seon’s (1676-1759) *Landscape with Shelter* is a good example of the upper class painting idiom of this period (Fig. 3). Formally, this painting strives toward a compositional unity that is in direct contrast to An Gyeon’s *Dream Journey*: the image presents a single, comprehensive moment in time and space. Stylistically, the development of the landscape elements, particularly the mountains, is indebted to Chinese visual cues differing sharply from those of An’s models. Specifically, the adoption of hemp-fiber texture strokes and moss dots softens the lines of the painting and typifies seventeenth-century Korean painting’s interest in Chinese Southern School literati conventions.⁷

A comparison of these images to the *Five Peaks Screen* is instructive. The heavy lines, insistent verticality, and fascination with harsh textures evident in the *Five Peaks Screen* is much closer in style to An Gyeon’s painting; tentatively, this affinity suggests that the earlier date for the screen is more appropriate than the later one. The choice of subject also reveals a deep affinity between these paintings: they render imagined landscapes that cannot exist except as a conceptual ideal. An’s subject, the dream of a royal prince, is a timeless utopian space protected by mountains and streams; the *Five Peaks Screen* renders miraculous cosmic events beside an impossibly harmonious mountain range. When considering literati painting traditions as a reference point for the *Five Peaks Screen*, the most relevant style is that developed in the early Joseon.

Nevertheless, scholarly paintings such as *Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land* and *Landscape with Shelter* only approximate the striking visual elements of the *Five Peaks Screen*. The screen differs from the literati genre in several key points: its composition is contained

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⁷ Should there be a question: Early Joseon is An Gyeon and Zhe Schools. Middle Joseon distinguishes amateur and professional painting. While prof. painting carries/synthesizes the earlier popular styles, amateur painting (more prestigious) relies on the Southern School. Scholars seeing the *Five Peaks Screen* would have valued amateur, and therefore Southern School, visuality above An Gyeon idiom.
within the bounds of its canvas, its colors are bright and emotive, and its form is ordered and regular rather than spontaneous and reflective. If the literati landscape genre does not fit the *Five Peaks Screen*, the screen does conform to the visual conventions of Korea’s rich tradition of active landscapes. By the term active landscape, I understand an image that is meant to influence reality and that incorporates or relies on a landscape arrangement of its often iconic elements. Of the rich variety of such images in Korea, this paper will highlight the *Five Peaks Screen’s* relationship to one particularly important visual tradition.

The formal relationship between the landscapes of the *Five Peaks Screen* and icons of the mountain god Sansin (Fig. 4) is striking and coordinates a purposeful relationship between the images and their ritual use. In both images, the mountain landscape is constructed with heavy lines and fields of color. Texture is developed with lines across the face of the peaks, and there is a persistent sense of formal continuity from one end of the composition to the other. The elements of the landscape are even similar: both screen and icon choose a waterfall, mountain, and pine tree as key elements of their landscape composition. Although the prominent placement of the figural element in the Sansin icon seems to disrupt its formal affinity with the *Five Peaks Screen*, the inclusion of the mountain god is actually a key similarity between the images. While Sansin occupies the middle foreground of the portrait, when the *Five Peaks Screen* was installed in its ritual context, the king or his portrait would have completed the landscape composition. In sum, both the icon and the screen combine figural and landscape elements in order to construct a similar landscape that was meant to participate actively in a ritual context. This formal relationship is such that the icon and its associated imagery stand out as clear reference points for the composition of the *Five Peaks Screen*. 
Because the Sansin portrait and the *Five Peaks Screen* are active, ritualized landscapes, this strong formal relationship has a variety of implications for the understanding of the ritual role of the monarch in the Joseon dynasty. Compositionally, affinities between the screen and the icons suggest that the monarch is to be understood as the mountain god himself. The most obvious tie between the two is the syncretic character of the artworks: both use the person or portrait of the figural subject to complete the composition as a necessary part of the landscape. Just as Sansin occupies the center of his landscape, the person of the monarch fills in the calm, forested mountain scene of the *Five Peaks Screen*.

Another concrete formal tie between Sansin and the king is the inclusion of water in the *Five Peaks Screen*. In many images of Sansin, water figures as a prominent formal element that James Huntley Grayson suggests represents the lake at Mount Paektu, the site of Sansin’s birth. The waters of the royal screen therefore form a distinct tie to the conceptual underpinning of this element of the Sansin portrait, functioning as a representation, when accompanied by the iconic five mountain peaks, of Mount Paektu. Specific formal qualities of the Sansin images’ landscape, such as the mineral blue-green technique, also parallel the coloring and composition of the *Five Peaks Screen*. The iconography and landscape genre of the *Five Peaks Screen* therefore serve to formally and conceptually tie Sansin to the monarch.

The positioning of the monarch as Sansin emphasizes the dynasty’s legitimacy and its virtuous performance of Korean traditions. These traditions are clearly articulated by shamanism, which existed before the adoption of Buddhism in the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE-668 CE) and, during that time, formed the official government religious philosophy. It was used to support the legitimacy of the king as a spiritual, as well as a secular, leader. As Grayson

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explains, the prominence of the king was supported by a belief in a supreme creator deity who was related to the royal family.\textsuperscript{9} This same deity, who was consistently associated with kingship in Korean folk tradition even after the adoption of Buddhism, was eventually conceptualized as the folk god Sansin.\textsuperscript{10}

The association that the \textit{Five Peaks Screen} makes between the monarch and Sansin serves as a conceptual tie to the first kings of the Korean people, who reigned before sustained contact was established with China. The reference to the Mountain God therefore acts to inform the viewer of the monarch’s legitimate ownership of Korean history and culture. Moreover, it communicates the ruler’s virtue, insofar as it reminds the viewer that, when ruling, the king is in the process of commemorating his ancestors and performing traditions that purportedly hearken back to the founding of the Korean people.

The key element of the relationship between the \textit{Five Peaks Screen} and icons of Sansin is their shared landscape quality. Insofar as this formal relationship allows the royal screen to construct the legitimacy and virtue of the monarch, it is clear that, of all possible artistic genres, the \textit{Five Peaks Screen} was understood in its original context to be a landscape. Nevertheless, the framers of the composition were characteristically selective in their appropriation of landscape elements: ultimately, the screen draws heavily on styles developed from iconic, rather than expressionistic, landscape traditions. As the local expression of a general idiom for the way in which artistry interacts with ritual culture in the Joseon dynasty, the \textit{Five Peaks Screen}’s conscious rejection of literati painting aesthetics is an affirmation of tradition. Given the Confucian ideology of the court, the reason for this evaluation of tradition over expressionistic aesthetic qualities becomes clear. Therefore, by moving beyond the traditional method of

\textsuperscript{9} James Huntley Grayson, \textit{Korea: A Religious History}, 25.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 23.
viewing *Five Peaks Screen*, we are able to access important information about the values of the Joseon dynasty and the way in which art was used to reinforce reality, even if it did represent an imaginary place.

![Five Peaks Screen](image)

**Figure 1**

*Five Peaks Screen*. Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). Eight-panel screen, ink and color on paper. 162.6 x 337.3 cm. Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art.

![An Gyeon, Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land](image)

**Figure 2**

An Gyeon, *Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land*, 1447. Joseon dynasty. Handscroll, ink and light color on silk. 38.6 x 106.2 cm. Tenri Central Library of Tenri University, Nara.
Figure 3
Figure 4

*Mountain God*,