

## Color research of Korean traditional painting: Starting with ChoSun Folk painting

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### ABSTRACT

A color in painting itself has value of existence beyond its role as a material, and it has linguistic properties that express human emotions and concepts, as the color sentiment that carries a symbolic meaning tied into a certain color can be a unique element that represents an aesthetic sense of a certain group of people. If we as Koreans were to express our own color and color sentiment, a concept of a “white-clad race” or an ink painting first comes into our minds. This is because throughout Korean art history color paintings have been shunned by ink paintings that used to be the neo-Confucian elites’ taste in the Joseon Dynasty. However, as seen in Goguryeo mural paintings or Goryeo Buddhist paintings, there was a great use of colors in traditional Korean fine arts. The tradition of color uses was passed down to the late Joseon Dynasty on which literary paintings centered, as shown in folk paintings, dancheong, and so forth. Traditional Korean folk paintings are full of imagination with humor and show a great freedom of structuring frames. Their planarity, simplicity, and decorative features in particular are main structural characteristics of folk paintings, presenting practical but symbolic meanings and Korean beauty of colors through a shamanistic concept added by a decorative function in daily life. Despite constraints in color uses in the Confusion Joseon Dynasty, suppressed color consciousness became expressive in folk paintings that are practical, decorative paintings due to societal changes, such as social unrest of the stratified social system in the late Joseon Dynasty. For example, a traditional Korean view of colors influenced by shamanism and the theory of yin and yang and the Five Modes of Action was expressed in forms of intense colors and pure sentiments that met the needs of the public in the late Joseon period, reflecting the spirit of the times and radical social changes. Likewise, the Joseon folk paintings are approachable with ease and closely interconnected to our lives; this is why we pay attention to them. There has been an increased use of colors and a mounting interest in color paintings in modern society, which has in turn led to a growing population engaged in color paintings. In this context, what is noteworthy is the work of reinterpretations and modernizations of colors in traditional color paintings. In color paintings, the reinterpretations of traditions are equivalent to the establishment of Korean coloring styles; we need to pass down and develop traditional concepts of paintings and color consciousness apparent in ancient shamanistic beliefs, Goguryeo mural paintings, and Joseon folk paintings. To do this, there is a need to seek modern paintings through techniques and perspectives that are in tune with the national sentiments of Korea and the times based on a proper understanding of traditions, rather than blindly adhering to the tradition of five colors: red, blue, yellow, white, and black.

**KEYWORDS:** Traditional Color of Korea, Folk painting, Korean traditional painting

### INTRODUCTION

A color plays a role as a human lingua franca delivered through a sense of vision, and exists as a subject element in formative arts, which transmit human feelings and thoughts to others in a form of visual language. As each people has their own cultures, traditional culture regarding colors also reflects natural environments and ideas and traits of its own people, evolving through complicated, subtle relationships with them. The Western color culture has a different foundation from that of the Eastern. Based on optics, research in the Western chromatics is rooted in the seven colors of the rainbow prism. In contrast, in the East, five colors (i.e. red, blue, yellow, white, and black) have been considered rainbow colors. In other words, the five colors of

the rainbow do not literally refer to a mere five colors but to “all colors that can exist in the universe”. In addition, depending on relationships between the five modes of action, it was believed that neutral colors could be created, and an infinite hue could be generated through those neutral colors. In Korea, the five colors were called “O-bangsaek” according to the theory of yin and yang and the five modes of action, symbolizing colors of the cardinal points, and were expressed with symbolic meanings they entailed, rather than their beauty itself. This tendency appeared not only in art but also across the daily life matters of food, clothing, and shelter. This study seeks to explore the impact of the five colors on Korean art through analyzing the colors in the Joseon folk paintings that the best demonstrate the beauty of color combinations in order to examine a system and a color sentiment in traditional Korean paintings.

Firstly, to establish proper color recognition on traditional paintings, we explored the social characteristics of the late Joseon Dynasty and colors based on religions and ideas, and analyzed colors in folk paintings that quickly spread at the time. For the color analysis of folk paintings, we mainly adopted a naked eye-analysis method of art pieces, and used digital images or collection catalogs that museums provided when there was a limitation on checking art pieces (e.g., overseas collections).

## THEORY

### Features and Definitions of the Korean Folk Paintings

The Korean folk paintings have been recognized for their unique beauty and art-historical, aesthetical features all over the world. This worldwide recognition stems from firstly, unique characteristics and imaginations of our own culture, and secondly, from the efforts of researchers, collectors, and enthusiasts who have found, introduced, and explored them. However, in spite of these efforts, there has been a lack of awareness about traditional paintings and color views of Korea. This is because they have been shunned by ink paintings of the Joseon neo-Confucian, which is placed at the center of Korean art history. In addition, there is another problem with defining the folk paintings that have not been addressed yet, as they include two conflicting traditions: splendid, decorative color paintings with high-quality techniques of the royal palace and simple, folksy paintings of ordinary people. Therefore, due to the impression of “folk painting” contradicting that of the royal families or ruling classes, the term “decorative painting” has been alternatively used; yet it does not include comprehensive details of the highs and lows (祈福), auspicious signs (吉祥), evil spirits (辟邪), religions, and so forth. Thus, it is desirable to expand the definition of folk paintings to a concept that include folk paintings of both the royal palace and ordinary people. In a broader term, folk paintings can refer to “anonymous paintings painted or appreciated by all people including the royal families or neo-Confusion elites for the purpose of practical use, not of pure appreciation.

### Traditional Korean Views on Colors and Colors in Folk Paintings

Colors in Korea were intertwined with shamanistic beliefs since the era of the Dangun mythology and maintained themselves independently of China. As the theory of the Five Modes of Action was introduced from China, beliefs in the colors transformed into a mixture of shamanistic views on colors and the five-color-perspective (五彩). In other words, the theory of yin and yang and the five modes of action, a pivotal philosophy of the Eastern culture, were added to shamanism that had existed since ancient times, and then Confucianism and Buddhism were combined with them, which in turn formed the shamanistic, symbolic views on colors. In the Joseon Dynasty, especially, colors in folk paintings have both a notional, ritual aspect and a practical aspect of food, clothing, and shelter in daily life. This is because of a great influence of social background of the Joseon period on the traditional views on colors. As the system of neo-Confusion philosophy and social structure began to change since the late Joseon Dynasty (18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), a foundation for color development (e.g., an increased demand for paintings, realistic views on paintings, diversified coloring materials, etc.) was prepared, which made ways of expressing colors to be more varied. Beyond the roles of colors as decorations for the royal palace or seasonal customs, colors became a decorative use in the daily lives of ordinary people in the late Joseon period and influenced the popularization of an awareness of chromatic colors.

Colors have a basic purpose of richly decorating paintings. To maximize the splendor, color band decorations are used sometimes. <Jejado 梯字圖> (Fig. 1. Owned by the National Folk Museum of Korea), a character painting consisting of black strokes, is an example of a use of the color band decoration. This

painting stemmed from an unconventional idea; Jeja is placed in the sky above a low hill, and orange lines on a blue background have an intense decorative effect. This color combination and alignment method is rooted in our old traditions. In terms of O-bangsaek (i.e., five colors), it is generally not mixed with other colors to maximize the shamanistic effects. The problem is how to create diverse ornament effects with the limited five colors. Color bands can be a solution to the problem. When O-bangsaek is expressed evenly spread out, it has much stronger splendid, decorative effects than that expressed split here and there. Using color bands is the best way to express a maximized diversity, while adhering to the principles of O-bangsaek. Of course, we can make as many colors as we want by mixing colors; however, O-bangsaek itself can illustrate the ultimate diversity with a limited number of primary colors when it is arranged as color bands. This presentation of O-bangsaek as color bands can be traced back to the Goguryeo mural paintings. <Ohoebun Tomb No.5> (Fig. 2. Retrieved from the Goguryeo mural paintings), located in the second capital of Goguryeo Jiban, an arched-structure decorating wall-surface and a figure of dragons consisting of color bands. Lines on the structure are in three colors of black, yellow, and red, not in solid colors. In addition, the bodies of dragons are divided into seven color layers: black, yellow, blue, red, blue, red, and black in that order. In this case, it is seen that O-bangsaek was applied as basic colors, and still the liveliness of primary colors and an ornament effect could be maximized through aligned color bands, not mixed. Likewise, colors in folk paintings pursue bridge, transparent colors, and its rainbow-like structure with evenly aligned primary color bands provide dreams and fantasies beyond its role as a decoration.



Fig. 1: *Jejado* (梯字圖).



Fig. 2: *Ohoebun Tomb No.5*.

## CONCLUSION

In Korean colors, “O-bang-jeong-saek” and “O-bang-gan-saek” are widely known for standards of traditional colors. ‘O-bang-jeong-saek’, centering on yellow (meaning ‘sand’) in accordance with the theory of yin and yang and the five modes of action, has blue, white, red, and black at the east (“tree”), west (“iron”), south (“fire”), and north (“water”), respectively. An “incompatible” relationship between these produces O-bang-gan-saek. A recent claim that our ancestors created colors also from a “compatible” relationship has

been made in the Bingheogak Lee's <Gyuhapchongseo>. There were strict rules on colors from wedding presents in the Joseon Dynasty to banquet food for parents-in-law. Likewise, we do have cultural heritages reflecting our own traditions and unique color consciousness; yet currently many of us have a misunderstanding of the traditional views on colors or color consciousness of Korea based on a groundless claim that our ethnic color is white. Furthermore, there is a lack of an awareness of Korean color paintings.

This paper focuses on colors in folk paintings out of traditional Korean paintings, which contain dynamic social changes in the late Joseon Dynasty. We hope that this study contributes to shed light on the color culture in traditional Korean paintings.

Our folk paintings are artistic pieces for practical use that correspond to our lives. Their authors were devoted to meeting social demands, rather than focusing on themselves, which led to honest, genuine beauty expressed in them. The reason why folk paintings could have a great artistic value despite an inferior quality of techniques and a lack of advanced knowledge is that they carry genuineness in expression. There is an urgent need for modernization work reflecting the lives of contemporary people and a raised awareness of color sentiment, while continuing to value the spirit of folk paintings and traditional views on colors. As folk paintings were in the past, we have a hope that "anonymous arts for life and society of all citizens" come true today.

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