The exhibition The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens explores the genre of Korean still-life painting known as chaekgeori (loosely translated as ‘books and things’). Chaekgeori (Check-oh-ree, 책거리) was one of the most prolific art forms of Korea’s Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), and it continues to be used today. It often depicts books and other material commodities as symbolic embodiments of knowledge, power, and social reform.

For the first time in the United States, more than twenty screen paintings dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the Joseon dynasty are on view at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University in New York. The flexible yet timeless themes chaekgeori emphasizes and the numerous possibilities and techniques it can utilize have ensured the genre’s ongoing popularity, now stretching for more than two centuries. No other genre or medium in Korean art, in both literati and folk painting, has so engaged and documented the image of books and collectable commodities, and the changes in how we view and value them over time.

And when the genre transitioned into folk style painting, new and unexpected visual elements emerged. Folk-style chaekgeori expanded the range of subjects beyond books to express surrealistic dreams and more. For example, an unusual feature of this particular late nineteenth-century screen painting (fig. 2) is its depiction of clouds and a dragon. The dragon symbolizes the desire for many sons, the wish to educate them, and the hope to have them improve their social status through education. Sometimes, books were symbols of identity, the viewer’s eye, yet they simultaneously invited and forbade access to the incredible imagination inherent in folk-style chaekgeori. The exhibition also showcases how this artistic genre has been utilized by today’s artists. For example, in Aran Kang’s Digital Book Project installation, books glow, catching the viewer’s eye, yet they simultaneously invite and forbid access as embodiments of ideas (fig. 3). This aspect of her work can be directly compared to the representation of books in chaekgeori paintings, where books are symbols of ideas, inaccessible objects that ultimately surpass their original, physical meaning and being. In our increasingly paperless and digitized society, much like in Hong’s painting, serving as props for the imagination to carry and communicate embodied meaning.

The power of books serves as space defining objects, backgrounds, and pedestals for hundreds of mass-produced toys. These toys, due to their sheer quantity and our preconceived notion of their value, are ultimately of little importance. On the left side of the painting, three skulls enter the pictorial space. Symbolizing death, they are a stark contrast to the durable plasticity of the toys, as if to forecast an impending doomsday. On the right side, the Virgin Mary acts as a quintessential (yet also ironic) representation of Western religion, ethics, and humanity. Through these juxtapositions, Hong reminds his viewers that there is more to life than the ownership of uncountable objects, especially when said objects are so empty of any transcendental value or meaning. Books are in the background of our lives, much like in Hong’s painting, serving as props for materialism. Using chaekgeori, Hong is able to astutely critique this state of affairs. The other modern artists featured in the exhibition make similar (yet also differing) commentaries on these themes, using a genre created and promoted expressly to combat against materialism.

The significance of any work of art consists largely in the work’s ability to carry and communicate embodied meaning. And when it comes to documenting, engaging, and commenting on the culture of consumption, no other genre or medium in Korean art can compare to chaekgeori. By drawing on a long artistic lineage and making comparisons to the traditional form and objectives of chaekgeori with contemporary examples, The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens facilitates a better understanding of the intellectual curiosity and the desire to own commodities that animated Korean society then and that continue to animate us now—and how these powerful urges continue to be portrayed in art.

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