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Three Collectors of Minhwa and the 'Modern Gaze'

Abstract

Although Korean *Minhwa* ('folk painting') is now a well-recognized genre of Korean art, academic research only became aware of its importance at the end of the twentieth century. Such neglect stems from the idea that the anonymous, brightly coloured and often somewhat clumsily executed works could not compete with 'literati style' ink paintings by well-known historical individuals. Yanagi Muneyoshi started to collect Korean folk paintings in the 1910s as part of his folk art (Jp. Mingei) movement. During the 1960s and 1970s, Zo Za-yong and Lee Ufan were attracted by Minhwa, due to the paintings' symbolism and reflections of peoples' rituals and aspirations. Their collections include both works done by itinerant 'folk' painters and sophisticated court productions. This paper will explore the definitions of Minhwa of the three collectors and their motivations to collect it. Although they played different roles in modern and contemporary Korean and Japanese art scenes, their exposure to Euro-American modern art, their 'modern gaze,' gave them the ability to discover an important genre of East Asian painting.

Keywords: Minhwa; Korean folk painting; Zo Za-yong; Yanagi Muneyoshi; Lee Ufan.