



**Laurel Kendall, Jongsung Yang, and Yul Soo Yoon,
*God Pictures in Korean Contexts: The Ownership and Meaning
of Shaman Paintings***

Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2015. 176 pages. Hardback, \$54.00; paperback \$29.00. ISBN 97808248-47647 (hardback); 9780824847630 (paperback).

THIS DELIGHTFUL yet compact book reports a collaborative project between Laurel Kendall (a long-established and well-known observer of Korean shamanism who works as chair of anthropology, and as a curator at the American Museum of Natural History), Jongsung Yang (formerly at the Korean National Folk Museum of Korea, and now director of the Museum of Shamanism), and Yul Soo Yoon (the founder and director of the private Gahoe Museum in Seoul). With the benefit of Kendall's elegant narrative style, the three authors explore how interest in and the valuing of shaman paintings evolved as Korean urban development and modernity embedded folklore in nationalist discourse. They reject the old anthropological structural-functionalist discourse that separates magic from religion, and instead reference Europe and America's twentieth-century discovery of primitivism through the work of Picasso, and the subsequent public displays of modernist art in Europe and America alongside traditional artefacts sourced from the global south.

KENDALL first bought a painting in the 1970s during fieldwork (which led to her 1985 and 1988 monographs). Previously, as a Peace Corps volunteer, she had hung prints of shaman god paintings on the wall of her boarding house room. At that time, most Koreans felt uneasy about displaying objects once venerated as the houses of gods, and few perceived that such folkloric depictions could have artistic value. Since then interest has shifted over time, and the authors explain this by utilizing Bruno LATOUR's (1993) sense of purification through naming, and Arjun APPADURAI's (1996) discussions of the social life of objects, to theorize about how this has occurred. Citing Michael TAUSSIG (2009), they note that purification is seldom complete: objects considered primitive, in this case shaman paintings, still, as objects, retain "a frisson of magic" and traces of their past. However, unlike the distant lens through which Europeans and Americans view primitivism, Koreans have a more intimate nostalgia for a past that remains close: their recent ancestors valued shaman rituals, and regarded the very air as being populated by myriad gods. This nostalgia accords a purity lacking in modern life, an idea Kendall discussed in her account of Korean village spirit poles, *changsŭng* (KENDALL 2011). Also, sitting alongside this volume, two articles by KENDALL and YANG (2014; 2015) sketch out the "Picasso Face" and the ambiguities of materiality and religion inherent in shaman paintings.

All three authors have personal baggage to account for arising from their collecting activity. This becomes clear in the brief biographies incorporated into chapter 1. Kendall notes how the shaman she closely observed during fieldwork would refer to her grandfather and grandmother as gods residing in the images pasted to the walls of her shrine. At the time, the cheap prints that adorned the walls of their residences hardly interested Kendall. However, she goes on to explain how and why she came

to study the costumes and altar fittings in ways that readily relate to her more recent concerns for god paintings: “By following objects, I came to understand relationships ... between the client’s family, their own potent gods, the shaman, and the gods in the shaman’s own shrine” (13).

In contrast, Yang was interested in shamanism as a youth, and was apprenticed to a shaman for six years. Even though he never went through the initiation ritual that would mark his acceptance as a shaman—instead opting to travel to America for doctoral studies at Indiana University—he did have the chance to observe how the costumes, paintings, and paraphernalia of deceased shamans would be burned or buried. He began collecting these objects, thereby preventing their destruction and loss. This in turn required reassuring those concerned that he would take responsibility for the spiritual power attached to them. In so doing, he acquired the collection that is today showcased in the Museum of Shamanism. In his turn, upon graduating from university, Yoon trained with the folklorist and founder of the celebrated Emilé Museum, Cho Cha-ryong (*Zo Zayong*), learning to value the peculiar Korean identity inherent in folk paintings. He explored the relationship of shaman paintings to other folk art and, indeed, to the broader corpus of Korean art. His collection of god paintings became part of the Gahoe Museum that he curates. The two collections of Yang and Yoon provide most of the illustrations in the book.

Starting with the Picasso epiphany—the discovery of primitivism or, in Korea, the realization that folk paintings have value as art—folklorists began to collect and deal in shaman paintings. The popular discovery in 1963 of ten old paintings hidden in a cave by the Cheju island folklorist Hyŏn Yong-jun marked the starting point. He had wanted to acquire some of these paintings, but the shaman who used them to house her gods refused. After her death, he found the paintings bundled up on a ledge high in the cave. Then came the folklorist Kim T’ae-gon, currently at Kyunghee University in Seoul, who documented all things shamanic—rituals, texts, paraphernalia, and the like—and who collected paintings that became the subject of the first landmark text on the subject, published in 1989. Cho Cha-ryong had long encouraged the embrace of folk paintings, but Yoon notes in his brief biographical statement that foreigners came to appreciate shaman paintings before Koreans. Hence, we read that two paintings were displayed in a 1983 exhibition curated by a foreigner, despite protests from Korean officials (indeed, the National Museum of Korea still has no shaman paintings in its collection, and I note that the large collection owned by the British Museum in London remains hidden from public view). By the 1980s, though, the “critical scaffolding” (60) for appreciating the shaman paintings was in place, and the prices demanded for them rose. Dealers and professors “abducted” paintings, often offering half-hearted supplications to mollify concerned shamans. Collecting peaked in the 1990s, just when interest in folklore itself began to wane among Koreans, along with the demise of journals featuring it, such as *Saemi kippŭn mul* (Water from a deep spring), *Chŏnt’ong munhwa* (Traditional culture), and *Konggan/Space*, although it never embraced shaman imagery.

The authors discuss the way that shamans procure paintings, and how they hold rituals to animate them. They observe that in the past, faded, water damaged, and moth- or mouse-eaten paintings would be periodically replaced with new items purchased from the specialist shops along Seoul’s central thoroughfare, Chongno, or produced to order from specialist artists. By the 1960s, bright colors had become normal,

and prints became available. More recently, China has become the supplier of mass produced paintings, impacting the ability of local artists to compete. Barely any shops remain in Chongno, and those artists who do continue with their craft might produce a painting incorporating a vision that a commissioning shaman has of a specific god, while lesser artists might take a pre-stencilled drawing and fill it in, adjusting the details to suit a client. Two artists are interviewed, along with the proprietors of a couple of the remaining specialist shops. Still, discussion of decline is said to be “modernity talk” (96), and evaluating the veracity of what “conversation partners” detail is resisted on rather nonacademic grounds that it is “impossible to know,” or because there is “no independent confirmation.”

All three authors, ultimately, have vested interests in shaman paintings as art. But, as Walter Benjamin balances the ubiquity of mechanical reproduction against the incorporation of auras, so the book is clear and vague about the purity of the art that it seeks to champion. There is a sense here in which academic discourse refuses to be silenced by the practices of collecting. Throughout, considerable attention is given to theoretical literature, but this only increases the uncertainty, and quite deliberately so. Hence, taking from Patricia SPYER’s “deliberately oxymoronic” characterization of the “border fetish” (1998), and from other more recent literature still, the bridge between a painting animated by a god and a painting given value as an object of art is said to be unstable (67). When two paintings fell off the wall of a shrine and landed on top of each other, the interpretation given held that two gods had quarrelled. A painting is animated only when a god enters it in a ritual dedicated to this happening. If the god refuses to do so, cases are reported where the painting will be returned, as if unused, to the shop or artist from which it was bought. Again, cautionary tales are offered that tell of deaths and accidents that followed the mistreatment of a painting. Attention-seeking gods reject being housed in single paintings that depict multiple gods—paintings designed to fit the cramped conditions of urban apartments. And yet, when a shaman dies or stops giving rituals and leaves nobody to inherit a painting, the interpretation is that the god does not want to stay, and so a painting can be given to a museum. “They go completely away, they fly off. [A museum is] a place where they cannot reside,” (123) remarks one shaman, providing reassurance for Yang and Yoo’s collection activities. “Has the museum become the twenty-first-century equivalent of a mountain burial, a pure and somewhat distant place where sacred things might be interred?” (125) ask the authors. At this point, those familiar with Hollywood’s *Night at the Museum* films might want to remember that the museum featured is where Kendall works, the American Museum of Natural History, and wonder what to make of the resulting ambiguity. And the concluding paragraph to the book leaves the ambiguity hanging: a shaman gives a painting to the collectors, remarking how the god known as the General wants to go to a museum because he has work to do there. Do the gods continue with their work, in the Museum of Shamanism, in the Gahoe Museum, and in other collections of shaman paintings?

REFERENCES

APPADURAI, Arjun

1996 *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KENDALL, Laurel

- 1985 *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- 1988 *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman: Of Tales and the Telling of Tales*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- 2011 The *changsŭng* defanged: The curious recent history of a Korean cultural symbol. In *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity: Commodification, Tourism, and Performance*, ed. Laurel Kendall, 129–48. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

KENDALL, Laurel, and Jongsung YANG

- 2014 Goddess with a Picasso face: Art markets, collectors and sacred things in the circulation of Korean shaman paintings. *Journal of Material Culture* 19: 401–23.
- 2015 What is an animated image? Korean shaman paintings as objects of ambiguity. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5: 153–75.

LATOUR, Bruno

- 1993 *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

SPYER, Patricia, ed.

- 1998 *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*. New York: Routledge.

TAUSSIG, Michael

- 2009 *What Color is the Sacred?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Keith Howard

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London