

Beyond Style:

Circulation and Transformation of the 'Bird-and-Flower Painting' in East Asia

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Bird-and-flower paintings are a commonly appreciated genre in East Asian art. Originated in China, bird-and-flower paintings prevailed in East Asian countries for centuries. Because of the supernatural and auspicious quality which bird-and-flower paintings possess, they were appropriated as diplomatic gifts. The main theme of this paper is to delineate the circulation and transformation of the style and iconography of the 'bird-and-flower paintings' in East Asia by shedding light on the convention of copying masterpieces in East Asian art.

The first part described how Kano school painters combined the style of Yamato-e that typically depicts four-seasonal elements with the gilded screens. I pointed out that while they painstakingly learned Chinese techniques and styles based on the past works and prints imported from China, Kano school painters adopted the gilded screens unique to Japan, which made this genre of paintings more appropriate for official gifts for foreign countries. The second part explored how the bird-and-flower paintings originated in China were circulated and transformed in Japan and Korea, specifically focusing on the style and technique of the newly emerged concept of sketch from life. I argued that while retaining the auspicious quality of bird-and-flower paintings, the style and technique of Shen Quan (1682-1760) infused a new perspective of observing nature with sketch from life in the depiction of Japanese painting. The paintings based on the sketch from life were widely accepted by authorities such as shoguns and daimyos who were enthusiastic about acquiring comprehensive and scientific pertains to herbalism and natural history in the mid-Edo period. In this sense, it is safe to say that the bird-and-flower paintings was rejuvenated in the early eighteenth century by attaining realism of Western/Chinese techniques. Lastly, I discussed the reevaluation of Shen Quan's style in the modern era, contextualizing the iconography of the bird-and-flower paintings rendered by Japanese painters for the Choson court in the colonial era. By encompassing Korean conventional styles and motifs, the screen paintings of 'peach and crane' and 'pine trees and deer' by Japanese painters possessed both the conventional quality as the bird-and-flower paintings and were therefore fully acceptable at Korean court during the colonial era. The meticulous rendering of the paintings in the manner of Shen Quan's style would have deliberately demonstrated Japan as a prospering modern nation which represent the Eastern countries.