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France meets Korea - Works on Paper

The history of paper

Working on paper has great traditions around the world, which differ in terms of their form and intensity, but testify to a long-lasting fascination with the medium itself. Although working on paper was initially subordinate to painting in the hierarchy of art media in European art history for a long time, the medium of paper in particular was intended to provide a new approach to art. From the early Middle Ages onwards, the burgeoning importance of paper can be observed particularly in the liturgical context of codices. The use of paper in the Renaissance and Baroque periods shows drawing as a means of preliminary studies for oil paintings and today, as an integral part of reception, enables a better understanding of the artist and the work.

In the 19th century, French impressionists such as Edgar Degas and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec were to discover the possibilities of pastel on paper to capture fleeting moments and the dynamic colors of modern life. Artists such as Paul Cézanne and Eugène Delacroix to realize their color studies and landscape depictions frequently used watercolors. In the following century, artists such as Henri Matisse perfected the technique of "papier collé" (collage). His famous "Gouaches découpées" (cut-out gouaches) transformed bold colors and organic shapes into new, innovative compositions. The work on paper was given an independence that had not been taken for granted until then and the depiction of colors and light in particular could be experienced in a new way through these techniques.

Throughout the centuries, works on paper remained a flexible and accessible medium that offered artists a wide range of possibilities for artistic expression. They reflect the development of art and show the innovative power and creativity of artists in their exploration of material and technique. The artistic handling of paper as a material itself requires a high degree of sensitivity - working on paper is characterized by the need for immediate perfection. Every stroke must be right, every application of color perfect.

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Despite their stronger presence, working with canvas offers a certain amount of room for correction. The aura of works on paper is therefore much more delicate, but as a viewer, you are almost directly confronted with the artistic genius and the creative process of a work.

Although the art history of Europe neglected paper for a long time, the tradition and appreciation of this medium is more deeply rooted in Asia. Ink drawing, which spread widely across the Asian continent from the 6th century onwards, originated primarily from Chinese calligraphy and the media used were either ink or soot on handmade paper. From the very beginning, the East Asian art of drawing has had a strong connection with Buddhism and Confucianism and was understood early on as an exercise in meditation. The proximity to nature, both spiritually and in terms of representation, is an important component. In Buddhist belief, the landscape embodies the "universal soul" of the world. This connection between Zen and the creative process was not lost over the centuries, even when the style of drawing increasingly developed into figuration from the 15th century onwards.

The history of papermaking in Asia is rich and varied, and South Korea occupies a special place in it. Paper art in Korea is closely linked to the production and use of hanji, the traditional Korean paper. Hanji is made from the bark of the mulberry tree and is characterized by its exceptional durability and versatility. The history of hanji dates back to the 4th century AD, when papermaking techniques were brought to Korea from China and further developed. Hanji was not only used for everyday purposes, but also for creating Buddhist scripts, artistic folding work and as a ground for paintings and calligraphy.

In modern times, hanji is experiencing a new heyday, both in its traditional form and in contemporary artworks. Korean artists use hanji to reflect both cultural heritage and modern aesthetic demands. To this day, the artistic tradition of hanji making is being preserved and at the same time new creative paths are being explored, making paperwork a lively and significant part of Korean culture and the art scene.

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Woo Jong Taek - The Painting of Zen

The South Korean artist Woo Jong Taek creates his works in the traditional sense and yet they have a modern component. In keeping with his historical heritage, the focus is on his connection to nature and his own spirituality. Meditation and the resulting moment of Zen play a decisive role in Taek's creative process. In that very moment of contemplation, it bursts out of the artist as if in an eruption - with his tools, a calligraphy brush and the color he mixes himself from soot or clay, he creates painterly structures that completely elude the categories of drawing and painting. Some of the ink sinks into the handmade Hanji, while the more firmly mixed part of the color remains impasto when applied. The artist oscillates between the worlds of drawing and painting - like his spiritual teachers of East Asian ink drawing.

However, the subjects in Woo's works cannot be categorized in this tradition. Some of the forms are reminiscent of calligraphy, although these cannot be precisely defined. "Memory of Origin" is the name given to all of the artist's works and initially only reveals their actual motifs to the viewer to a limited extent. In search of an explanation, one must return to the act of meditation. Through meditation, the artist attempts to approach humanity's most fundamental question about the origin of all existence and to capture this on the painting surface. The resulting forms are completely abstract and yet the spiritual-human component of the search seems visible: in the depths of the color, we unintentionally recognize familiar things, little anecdotes from our world that we know.

Hoon Kwak - The connection between West and East

As a founding member of the Korean Avant-Garde Association, Hoon Kwak was influential in the development of contemporary art in the country. The AG group was a post-war collective of various artists and critics in South Korea who were committed to the artistic development and reorientation of the country in the 1960s and 1970s. The group organized three major group exhibitions and the

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Seoul Biennale in 1975, and was able to establish an internationally oriented platform for the first time, in particular through its rich variety of media and the magazine it published. Hoon Kwak's oeuvre is characterized by the way, in which we as humans relate to nature through physical and spiritual means. To express this visually, he transcends cultural boundaries by emphasizing the universal values that illuminate the purely human quality. Kwak incorporates various symbols of the past into his works to transcend notions of temporality and depict the persistence of the primal instinct of survival in an increasingly fragmented world.

In his work series "Halaayt", the artist uses the open term of the First Nations on the west coast of Canada, which describes the totality of the spiritual and thus consciously combines South Korean-influenced painting techniques with content from the western world. The works show dynamic scenes of traditional whale hunting, in which man seems to be exposed to his primal instinct of survival in and with nature. "Halaayt" shows the inevitable collision of man and nature, of civilization and wildness, and thus visualizes the focus of Kwak's artistic practice: an attitude of wholeness and the inevitable interconnectedness of the world.

Alain Clément - Shapes and colors of the southern French light

The works of French artist Alain Clément seem to defy the specific standards of works on paper and painting. The beginnings of classical modernism in the western world mark the breaking up of old conventions, as well as the strict theoretical, art-historical separation of painting and works on paper. The Fauvists in particular, who proclaimed color to be the most important creative medium and thus assigned the (color) surface a decisive role in pictorial composition, were to set the course for a European upswing in the values of work on paper.

Alain Clément's works show free surfaces, bright colors and rhythmic lines and bands. The first impression of formalism seems to give way to the recognition of organic, recurring forms.

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Despite the actual abstraction, the artist's subjects seem to linger in reality, as if the forms had sprung from nature. On observation, human-sensual or floral quotations from our world appear. Clément's search for a formalist pictorial language is not associated with a break with past painting - it is precisely this artistic heritage that is central to his work. Although this initially places the focus on form, the actual pictorial representation is still intrinsic to the painting.

The theoretical question of flatness and spatial perspective plays a major role in Clément's oeuvre. The artist applies the paint in a completely two-dimensional manner and thus eludes the classical perspective approach of painting. Despite a flat application of color and without obvious techniques of plasticity, he creates depth and space. The superimposition of seemingly two-dimensional surfaces creates a pictorial space to be filled. The artist's gouaches are particularly captivating due to their glazed application of color, which reveals the subtle composition of the picture. The translucent quality of the paper and the artist's glazed application of paint allow the light itself to become an actor - depending on the incidence and intensity of the light, the colors appear changeable and, despite the flatness of the underlying material, display an enormous variety of dimensions.

Anna Bode