

Knowledge in *trompe- l'œil*

Korea
(18th-20th
century)



Guimet
Musée national des arts asiatiques

Exhibition
16 September
2026 -
4 January 2027

Visit guide

Knowledge in *trompe-l'œil*

What purpose does a bookshelf serve when there is no time to read? At a time when knowledge flows across our screens, the simple pleasure of reading can seem a luxury, and bookshelves are often admired more than they are used. Yet this dilemma is far from new. In late 18th century Korea, King Jeongjo (r. 1776-1800) faced the same predicament. Burdened by the affairs of state, he turned to the power of images, commissioning a monumental *trompe-l'œil* screen depicting the royal library so that he might remain close to his books.

This remarkable image emerged from a broader history of cultural exchange. The art of *trompe-l'œil* relied on the principles of perspective, a European technique that had reached the Chinese court before being introduced to Korea through the diplomatic missions regularly dispatched to Beijing.

Initially centred on the depiction of books, these painted screens gradually evolved into richer compositions combining scholarly objects with rare and curious artefacts. This gave rise to the artistic tradition of *chaekgeori* (literally “books and things”) while painted representations of bookshelves, most often mounted as folding screens, also became increasingly popular. Much like Western paintings of cabinets of curiosities, they furnished interiors ranging from the royal palace to the homes of the urban elite.

Both works of art and architectural partitions, these screens invite the eye into another world: a cabinet of desires. Far beyond Korea, they prompt us to reflect on our own relationship with accumulated knowledge, the place of books, and the objects with which we surround ourselves.

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Staging knowledge

In 15th century Korea, social advancement depended on success in the national civil service examinations (*gwageo*), the most prestigious of which were based on the study of the Confucian classics. Modelled on the Chinese imperial examination system, these highly competitive tests determined access to official positions. From the 17th century onwards, however, circumstances began to change. Successive wars against Japan and the Manchus, economic crises and the growing number of candidates made entry into government service increasingly difficult. Although the examinations remained central to society, they no longer guaranteed status or prestige. Knowledge increasingly flourished beyond the institutions of the state, circulating through private academies (*seoweon*), within families and among communities of scholars. From the late 18th century onwards, painted bookshelves became a feature of domestic interiors, fostering intellectual reflection alongside the practices of reading and writing.

Staging the scholar and the ideal official

In 18th century Korea, learning shaped the life of the scholar. He surrounded himself with objects associated with study, creating an environment conducive to reflection: brushes, inkstones, musical instruments, strategy games and editions of the Confucian classics. Yet traditional Korean houses contained nothing comparable to the monumental bookshelves found in China

or, further west, in France, Italy and Germany. Books and other precious objects were kept in chests, arranged on furniture or, occasionally, displayed on a few shelves. Knowledge was not proclaimed through abundance but expressed through order — an ordered interior reflecting a disciplined mind and an aspiration to virtue.

King Jeongjo's *trompe-l'œil* library

Traditionally, the Korean monarch sat before an *ilwolobongdo* screen depicting the sun, the moon and five mountain peaks, an image symbolising both the order of the universe and royal authority. In 1791, King Jeongjo (r. 1776-1800) introduced a striking innovation. In the audience hall of Changdeok Palace, he replaced this emblematic screen with a painted representation of the royal library, proclaiming that knowledge was the true foundation of power. Through the Gyujeonggak, the royal library he established, Jeongjo actively promoted the production of these paintings. Images of compartmentalised bookshelves (*chaekgado*) became a standard subject in official examinations for court painters (*nokchwijae*). Their compositions were carefully regulated, with ostentatious luxury giving way to the central presence of books.

Between China and the Jesuits: tracing the origins of *chaekgeori*

Far from the familiar image of the "Hermit Kingdom", Joseon Korea was fully engaged in the cultural exchanges of East Asia. During the 18th century, diplomatic missions to Beijing, capital of the Qing Empire, played a vital role in the circulation of objects, ideas and knowledge. Korean envoys encountered the emperor's *duobaoge* ("cabinets of a hundred treasures"), while also discovering Western learning introduced by Jesuit missionaries, members of a Catholic religious order, established at the Qing court since the early 17th century. Books, engravings and world maps offered new ways of understanding space. Optical instruments such as telescopes

encouraged closer observation of the natural world, while churches adorned with *trompe-l'œil* decoration left a lasting impression on visitors. These encounters transformed artistic practice. Korean painters adopted new approaches to perspective, chiaroscuro and illusionistic painting, giving rise to *chaekgeori* at the meeting point of Chinese traditions and Jesuit innovations.

Korean embassies to Beijing

Although Joseon Korea is often described as a vassal of Qing China (1644–1911), it in fact occupied a distinctive position within the tributary system, skilfully using it to preserve its political autonomy. Embassies travelled regularly to Beijing to present tribute, receive the imperial calendar and participate in dynastic ceremonies. Each mission numbered several hundred people, including senior officials, interpreters, scientists, scholars and artists. During the 18th century, these delegations enjoyed considerable freedom to explore the Chinese capital, then one of the principal meeting places between Asia and Europe. On their return, they submitted detailed reports to the royal court, helping to disseminate what became known as *Seohak*, or "Western Learning". King Jeongjo himself took a keen interest in European engravings and scientific knowledge.

Perspective and *trompe-l'œil*: a Western visual language in Korean art

Jesuit missionaries arriving from Rome introduced the techniques of perspective and *trompe-l'œil* to Beijing. In 16th- and 17th-century Europe, such illusionistic images were more than decorative devices: they were intended to instruct, inspire and strengthen religious devotion. Andrea Pozzo's celebrated decoration for the Church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome became one of the defining examples of the genre. Pozzo's treatise on perspective was later translated and adapted in China by Nian Xiyao, drawing in part on the expertise of Giuseppe Castiglione, the Jesuit painter at the court of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–1795). Korean envoys encountered these spectacular visual effects in Beijing's churches. Back in Korea, however, perspective was never adopted wholesale. Instead, it was reinterpreted in *chaekgeori*, drawing the viewer's gaze towards books, objects and the world of knowledge.

Chaekgeori: a cabinet of desires

Chaekgeori is more than the depiction of an ideal bookshelf; it also presents a collection assembled for contemplation. Unlike its physical counterparts—Chinese "cabinets of a thousand treasures", designed as displays of wealth, or Western cabinets of curiosities—these paintings transform the bookshelf into an imagined yet carefully ordered space. The pleasure of collecting becomes an illusion in itself, shaping the choice and arrangement of every motif to create a distinctive visual language. Within the domestic interior, the objects depicted are no longer simply those one owns, but those one longs to possess. Books, porcelain, bronzes and exotic artefacts thus find their way into every home. Found both in the capital and across the provinces, these images accompanied the rise of new social elites and the emergence of a consumer culture, particularly during the relatively peaceful 18th century, which was conducive to trade through contact with markets, especially in China.

The desire for ancient objects

At court and among scholars alike, ancient objects embodied an ideal of moral and intellectual refinement. Chinese archaic bronzes, associated with antiquity and the age of Confucius, were especially prized. Although they circulated from China to Korea, they remained rare, costly and accessible only to a privileged few. Knowledge of these objects also spread through widely circulated catalogues of bronze rubbings (*kaogutu*). Drawing on these sources, Korean artists reinvented their forms in paint. On folding screens, these motifs acquired a new significance: no longer simply scholarly references, they became visible expressions of intellectual aspiration.

The desire for precious objects

With the establishment of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), white porcelain came to embody both a moral and an aesthetic ideal. Its soft, understated whiteness expressed values of restraint and virtue rather than luxury or display. In contrast, the brightly enamelled porcelains produced in China under the Ming and Qing

dynasties were created for the imperial court before being traded widely across the world. Commerce with Qing China (1644–1911) brought these wares to Korea, though they remained rare. Their presence belonged as much to the realm of imagination as to everyday life. Integrated into *chaekgeori* compositions, *famille rose*, *famille verte* wares, yellow, crackled ceramics and blue-and-white porcelain introduced vivid colour and contrast into otherwise restrained interiors.

New desires

From the 18th century onwards, painters recorded changing patterns of consumption in Korea. As contacts with the wider world intensified, new objects entered local collections. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, spectacles, clocks, pocket watches and fashionable accessories began to appear in *chaekgeori* compositions. These folding screens reflected not only the objects that circulated, but those that people aspired to own. *Chaekgeori* became a true barometer of taste, revealing broader social and cultural change. In many ways, it anticipated the modern shop window, where objects derive meaning not simply from their function but from what they signify. These images ultimately invite us to reflect on the consumption of knowledge itself—and on the distinction between possessing knowledge and truly understanding it.

When knowledge is nothing but illusion

Once the book becomes an object, it is no longer simply a vessel of knowledge: it becomes a sign. In Europe, vanitas paintings, such as those by Sébastien Stoskopff, pair books with candles and precious objects to evoke both the fragility of knowledge and the passing of time. In Korea, the same idea finds a different expression. Books are fragmented, multiplied and dispersed across the painted surface. They are no longer merely read but displayed, their accumulation creating not only the image of knowledge but also the desire to possess it. Yet the works gathered here remind us that

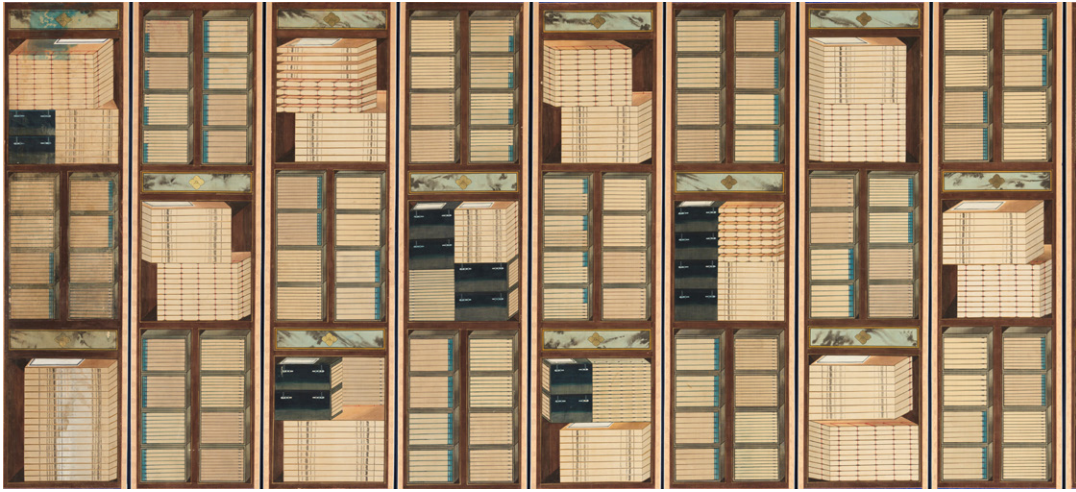
knowledge remained a living practice. They reveal what people were reading in Korea during the 18th and 19th centuries. Displayed beneath this rotunda with caryatids, in dialogue with the Guimet's historic library on the floor below, these books also echo the collection assembled by the museum's founder. Across Eurasia, they reveal a shared intellectual world, where science, religion, history and literature transcend geographical boundaries.

A bookshelf deconstructed

From the late 18th century onwards, artists working outside the royal court gradually broke away from courtly models, developing a freer visual language. Books became decorative motifs, perspective fractured, and carefully orchestrated disorder replaced rigid symmetry. Animals associated with longevity often entered the compositions, while Confucian moral values remained ever present. As a prosperous middle class (*jungin*) emerged, *chaekgeori* spread well beyond scholarly circles. Produced outside the palace, these works came to be known as "popular paintings" (*sokhwa*). Their motifs were endlessly repeated and disseminated across the country by itinerant painters, while smaller formats made them accessible to more modest homes.

Dreams of ink and shadow: optical illusions

The exhibition concludes with works in which illusion itself takes centre stage. Books vanish, shelves dissolve and fantastical settings erase every familiar point of reference. The bookshelves give way to an ambiguous space poised between dream and the loss of visual certainties. Long regarded simply as folk painting (*minhwa*), these compositions display remarkable formal freedom: objects shift in scale, float weightlessly and continually recombine in a world where visual logic no longer applies. Their affinity with Surrealism is striking. Here, the library becomes a landscape of the mind, where knowledge is transformed into dream and objects into metaphor.



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1. Folding screen representing a bookcase (*chaekgado*)
Korea, 19th-20th century, Joseon period (1392-1910), ten-panel folding screen, colour and ink on silk, Seoul, National Palace Museum of Korea, 6501

© National Palace Museum of Korea

2. Kim Hong-do, known as Danwon (1745-1814 ?) A Gentleman Chanting Poetry
Korea, end of the 18th century, Joseon period (1392-1910), colour and ink on silk, Seoul, private collection

© Leeum Museum of Art



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3. Chaekkeori:
Boyi and Shuqi,
Korea, 18th-19th century,
Joseon period (1392-
1910), folding screen
element, colour on paper,
Paris, musée Guimet,
donation by Lee Ufan,
2001, LUF 26

© Musée Guimet, Paris,
Dist. GrandPalaisRmn /
Thierry Ollivier

**4. Vase decorated with
knotted fabric**
China, Qianlong reign
(1736-1795), Qing dynasty
(1644-1911), porcelain
decorated with *famille*
rose enamels, Paris,
musée Guimet, donation
by Ernest Grandidier,
1894, G 4877

© GrandPalaisRmn
(Musée Guimet, Paris) /
Thierry Ollivier

**5. Folding screen
representing a
bookcase (chaekgado)**
Korea, 19th century,
Joseon period (1392-
1910), ten-panel folding
screen, colour and ink
on silk, Seoul, National
Museum of Korea,
bequest by Lee Hong-kun,
1981, Dongwon 3322

© National Museum of Korea

Exhibition

**Knowledge in *trompe-l'œil*
Korea (18th – 20th century)**

16 September 2026 – 4 January 2027

Curator

Arnaud Bertrand, Musée Guimet

Exhibition catalogue

Le savoir en trompe l'œil

Corée, 18^e – 20^e siècle

*A co-publication by Musée Guimet /
Beaux-Arts Éditions*

160 pages, €35 (in French)

Around the exhibition

Full programme available at guimet.fr

EVENT

Chuseok Weekend

Saturday 26 and Sunday 27 September

PERFORMANCES AND CONCERTS

Wind Alone, Sand Alone, Make No Sound

Thursday 1st October | 8pm |

Chudahye Chagis

Thursday 15 October | 8pm |

Dal:um + Dasom Baek

Friday 6 November | 8pm |

*Sammaekyung – Enfin, je crois avoir vécu,
by the National Theatre Company of Korea*
Friday 13 November | 8pm | and Saturday
14 November | 2:30pm |

Park Jiha

Thursday 14 November | 8pm |

LECTURES AND CONFERENCES (IN FRENCH)

Conference: Staging knowledge in Korean art, books and chosen objects

Saturday 10 October | 2:30pm – 5pm |

Literary discussions: World library and illusion of knowledge

Saturday 7 November | 3pm |

Conference with the exhibition curator

Sunday 8 November | 3:30pm |

Literary discussions: Presentation of the historical and cultural dictionary of Korea(s)

Saturday 14 November | 3:30pm |

Conference: Two printing treasures presented as world treasures

Saturday 21 November | 3pm – 5pm |

Literary discussions: Confucianism in Korea: understanding the scholar

Saturday 5 December | 3:30pm |

Literary discussions: Diplomacy and litera- ture: when Korea opened itself to the world

Saturday 12 December | 3pm |

GUIDED TOURS (IN FRENCH)

Adult discovery tour

Starting 26 September, every Saturday | 2pm |

Descriptive tour

Friday 9 October | 2pm |

Tour in French Sign Language

Saturday 17 October | 11am |

WORKSHOP

Korean calligraphy

Saturday 14 November | 2:30pm |

**And also, cinema with the Busan Internatio-
nal Short Film Festival and the Korean Film
Festival in Paris, as well as screenings
for young audiences**

Practical information

Open every day except Tuesday | 10am – 6pm |

Closed on January 1st, May 1st and
December 25

The Guimet – National Museum of Asian Arts, France

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guimet.fr



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