A dazzling exhibition of Korean art recalls a lost world of lyrical elegance

BY ANN MORRISON | PARIS

Perhaps because many of its influences came from China, Korean art rarely gets a fair share of attention in the West. Now Paris' Guimet Museum is helping right that imbalance with "The Poetry of Ink: The Literati Tradition in Korea, 1392-1910," a dazzling display of rarely seen Choson-era art from the museum's own treasures as well as private collections. As the exhibition's title suggests, the highlights are calligraphy, painting and poetry.

Since China's Song dynasty (960-1279), these interconnected arts have been considered the "three perfections," fitting pastimes for scholar-officials, or literati, who for political or personal reasons, often had little else to do. The idea of using simple calligraphic brushstrokes to create lyrical paintings (many of which featured poems along their borders) reached Korea in the early Choson period some 600 years ago. Judging by the Guimet show, which runs until June 6, the technique thrived in the Land of Morning Calm. The museum has turned its exhibition space into a haven of tranquility, with rooms of graceful scrolls and elegant screens as well as antique furniture, porcelain, and writing accessories—more than 150 works in total.

Though the pieces are delightfully Korean, the Chinese influences are strong. After all, refugees from the Middle Kingdom's dynastic wars were streaming into Korea as early as the 12th century B.C. For centuries, the Korean élite used the Chinese language, much as medieval scholars in Europe depended on Latin. And Korean artists remained true to the literati tradition—and the Confucian ideals that animated it—long after China, under Manchu rule from 1644 to 1911, had moved on.

Shared Confucian values are most obvious in the many paintings of the "four noble plants": plum blossoms, which flower before the snows melt, symbolize the hope of spring; chrysanthemums, the hardiness to survive in autumn; orchids, refinement and modesty; and bamboo, loyalty, because it bends but never breaks. This steadfastness is celebrated in an exquisite silk hanging scroll, *Bamboo Blowing in the Wind* by Yi Chong (1541-1626), a
royal prince who is considered the greatest Korean painter of bamboo. You can almost feel the breeze as the dark leaves float away from their own ethereal shadows, an effect Yi achieves by altering the proportion of water to ink on his brush. Animals and birds also make symbolically important appearances throughout the exhibition, which opens under the gaze of a lively 9th century temple carving of a tiger, the protective symbol of Korea. Cranes, which symbolize longevity, are well represented, too. In *The Moon and Two Cranes in the Middle of Bamboos*, the birds are beautifully rendered in black ink, colored pigment and gold in a hanging scroll from 1682.

The Guimet curators make the point that by blending Song and Ming styles, the Choson artists created their own pictorial vocabulary, one more personal, more poetic and closer to nature than their Chinese contemporaries'. historically, Koreans have certainly felt that their country is one of uncommon beauty—and this delight in their natural setting is evident in the exhibition's evocative landscape paintings. The Korean artists pay particular attention to the subjects in the foreground—mountains, plants, trees, rocks—leaving the background almost empty to maximize the feeling of depth and provide a sense of perspective that their Chinese counterparts often lack. The overall effect is both abstract and realistic.

With so much flora and fauna on display, the show offers relatively few pictures of people. Only one portrait is included: the stern Cho Man-young, with stringy beard and moustache, painted by Yi Han Chul in the 19th century. Still, there are some lovely renderings of the literati themselves: scholars alone in their pavilions admiring nature, or meandering through the countryside on the backs of donkeys, or on a picnic—challenging one another to produce the best picture or most expressive calligraphy. One of the most charming is Yi Song Rin's 1748 *Sage and Child Under the Moon and the Pine*. Confucian philosophy acknowledges the centrality of man, the importance of learning, the appreciation of nature and the cycle of life. All are here, as the little boy, holding his lunch box in one hand and his scroll box under his other arm, follows the aging scholar through the countryside.

Just when you might think there is not enough humanity in the exhibition, you come across a monumental, eight-panel ink-and-color screen, *Scenes of Yangban Life*. Painted in the late 18th century by one of Korea's best-loved artists, Kim Hong-do, it is a marvelous genre work complete with a fat lord being carried on a palanquin, peasants working in fields (one stout woman nonchalantly adjusting the back of her skirt), as well as gentlemen and ladies playing musical instruments, while the smokers, including a woman, stay outside the garden gate.

Of course, screens like this are associated more with Japan than China. And the Guimet show acknowledges the back-and-forth influences between peninsular Korea and island Japan, especially after the fall of China's Ming dynasty in 1644. But Japanese screens were mainly intended to remain stationary, while those in Korea were designed to be portable. As the French journalist-diplomat Georges Ducrocq wrote 100 years ago,
"When they cannot enjoy the countryside, the Koreans have their screens to provide them with the illusion of it." And though people in 21st century Paris can't go back to the kingdom of Choson, they have the Guimet exhibition to gain an enchanting sense of a country in love with its own beauty.