

Yu. I. Gutareva

ORCID: 0000-0002-0210-6541

✉ gutayule@gmail.com

Филиал Российской академии художеств в г. Красноярске
«Региональное отделение Урала, Сибири и Дальнего Востока
Российской академии художеств в г. Красноярске»
(Россия, Красноярск)

SEOLSONGDO (설송도) BY YI INSANG (이인상, 1710–1760) AS AN EMBODIMENT OF THE SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF THE PINE TREE IMAGE IN KOREAN FINE ART

Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу свитка «Сольсондо» (설송도) выдающегося корейского художника позднего периода эпохи Чосон Ли Инсана (이인상, 1710–1760), изображающего заснеженные сосны, в образе которых автору удалось наиболее ярко воплотить сложный синкретический комплекс идей, присущих корейской культуре, и отобразить внутреннее духовное состояние. Автор предпринимает попытку на примере произведения Ли Инсана раскрыть особенности художественного образа сосны, выявить символический смысл, объяснить идейную составляющую образа, определив его место и значимость в корейском изобразительном искусстве как важного элемента в визуальной системе, необходимого для сохранения культурной традиции и национального характера. Главный вывод статьи заключается в том, что образ сосны, являясь одним из ключевых в корейском изобразительном искусстве, характеризуясь духовной содержательностью и глубиной философско-эстетических идей эпохи Чосон, обладает жизнестойкостью. Он не теряет актуальности в творчестве корейских художников нашего времени, воплощающих элементы нового концептуального восприятия национального культурного кода, интегрируя и обогащая его новыми формами с использованием современных технологий и различных материалов.

Ключевые слова: Ли Инсан, Сольсондо, образ сосны, символическая интерпретация, символизация сосны, корейское изобразительное искусство, корейская живопись

Для цитирования: Gutareva Yu. I. *Seolsongdo* (설송도) by Yi Insang (이인상, 1710–1760) as an embodiment of the symbolic interpretation of the pine tree image in Korean fine art // Шаги/Steps. Т. 8. № 4. 2022. С. 152–169. <https://doi.org/10.22394/2412-9410-2022-8-4-152-169>.

Статья поступила в редакцию 3 марта 2022 г.
Принято к печати 27 мая 2022 г.

Yu. I. Gutareva

ORCID: 0000-0002-0210-6541

✉ gutayule@gmail.com

*Branch of the Russian Academy of Arts in Krasnoyarsk
“Regional Department of the Urals, Siberia
and the Far East of the Russian Academy of Arts in Krasnoyarsk”
(Russia, Krasnoyarsk)*

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Abstract. The article analyses the scroll *Seolsongdo* (설송도) of Yi Insang (이인상), an outstanding Korean painter of the late Joseon era. The scroll depicts snow-covered pines, an image through which the artist managed to most clearly embody the complex syncretic set of ideas inherent in Korean culture, and to display the inner spiritual state. The author makes an attempt to use the example of Yi Insang's work to reveal the peculiarities of the artistic image of the pine tree, to identify the symbolic meaning and explain the ideological component of the image, defining its place and significance in Korean fine art as an important element of the visual system, necessary for the preservation of the cultural tradition and national character. The main conclusion of the article is that the image of the pine tree, being one of the key images in Korean fine art, characterized by spiritual content and depth of philosophical and aesthetic ideas of the Joseon era, has vitality and does not lose relevance in the works of Korean artists of today, embodying elements of a new conceptual perception of the national cultural code, integrating and enriching it with new forms, modern technology and various materials.

Keywords: Yi Insang, *Seolsongdo*, pine tree image, symbolic interpretation, pine tree symbolization, Korean fine art, Korean painting

To cite this article: Gutareva, Yu. I. (2022). *Seolsongdo* (설송도) by Yi Insang (이인상, 1710–1760) as an embodiment of the symbolic interpretation of the pine tree image in Korean fine art. *Shagi / Steps*, 8(4), 152–169. <https://doi.org/10.22394/2412-9410-2022-8-4-152-169>.

Received March 3, 2022

Accepted May 27, 2022

One of the most famous works of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897) depicting pine trees is the *Seolsongdo* (설송도, 18th century) (Fig. 1) scroll by Yi Insang (이인상, 1710–1760). His snow-covered pines present complex syncretic ideas and a spiritual state deeply inherent in the national culture. Having understood the power of symbolism the artist used it effectively with superb artistic skill, conveying thoughts through the imagery of the picture.



Fig. 1. Yi Insang (이인상). *Seolsongdo* (설송도). 18th century
Paper, ink. 117.4 × 52.7 cm. National Museum of Korea, Seoul

In Korean culture, as in other countries of the Far East, there is a universal system of symbols where the symbolism of individual representatives of the plant world hides information about the moral criteria and aesthetic values accepted in a given society. One such deeply significant symbol is the coniferous tree, primarily a pine tree, which contains a compound syncretic complex of ideas that has given it a special place in the national symbolism and art of Korea.

If we look for the deeper roots of such veneration and sacralization of the pine, we must turn to the archaic rituals associated with the World Tree [Toporov 1987: 398–406], the image of which in Korean shamanism carried early cosmogonic ideas. The trees are the abode of spirits that help Koreans cure diseases and bring happiness [Kontsevich 2001: 39]. As for the pine tree, it has become a special sacred plant: it, like the cypress, was connected to representations of royal ancestors

whose lineage went directly back to this coniferous tree. Tales and myths of ancient Korea include references to the pine tree, in which it is considered part of the ritual [Nikitina 2001: 91–93]. Acting as guardians of ancient traditions, conifers have influenced the establishment of a certain system of symbols and standards that play an important role in the worldview of Koreans, wherein the pine, the main evergreen tree that is grown almost over the entire mountainous Korean peninsula, occupies a special place.

Rooted on hard rocks and remaining green even in snowstorms, the pine tree symbolizes not only the natural landscape of Korea but also the resilient spirit and character of the people who have maintained their national identity despite many foreign invasions and hardships [Suh 2017: 60]. Growing under extreme conditions on steep mountains devoid of soil where its roots dissolve the rock and extract nutrients literally from the rock, the mountain pine has influenced the establishment of a certain system of symbols and benchmarks that play an important role in the worldview of Koreans. This evergreen tree is perceived as an image and a symbol firmly fixed in the national consciousness. Inspired by the majestic appearance of the pine tree, Koreans have since ancient times praised its qualities such as resilience, permanence, beauty, strength, and power. In both South Korea and North Korea, it is believed that the characteristic features of the tree coincide with the national character. And that is why it is the pine tree that grows in harsh natural conditions that becomes a symbol of the indomitable will and courageous spirit of the Korean nation [Kim 2018: 4].

Thanks to its symbolic and aesthetic value, the pine tree has become a motif for many works of literature. The image of the pine tree is inextricably linked to the history of the formation of Korean art, the surviving ancient monuments of which bear witness to this [Gutareva 2021: 206]. According to Korean historical records, the high level of pictorial skill in depicting a pine tree was reached during the period of the United Silla state (VII–XV centuries) in the works of the artist Solgeo (솔거). The artist painted the walls of Hwangnyongsa Temple, and the old pine tree he depicted on the wall was so realistic that, according to legend, birds that had gathered to land on its branch crashed against the wall. “There were scales and cracks on the trunk, and branches with needles, curved like a bowl” [Nikitina, Trotsevich 1969: 222].

Over time the art of depicting pine trees becomes deeper and sublime, containing the spirit of the current era and the philosophy of the past, but why has the pine tree always remained one of the central images in Korean fine art?

If we turn to the origins of pine sacralization, it should be noted that, as a result of the influence of natural philosophy on the figurative system of Korean art, a dual view was formed, conveying the softness and fluidity of the cosmic beginning *yin* (*yim*) and hardness *yang*, which found expression in the representation of water space and mountains and trees. These major natural realities, understood by Koreans in ancient beliefs and mythologies and enriched by a host of characters associated with the idea of immortality, gave rise to fundamental symbols and artistic imagery in Korean art, with the pine tree being one of the most important. It was believed that the pine, being a “symbol of eternity” as an evergreen tree, stored many life-giving elements of *yang*, which ensured the preservation of life. Associated with it is a set of ideas about the eternal, the unchanging, as a property of the

world and man [Kravtsova 2004: 339]. Trees, mostly conifers, are one of the main elements of the landscape, along with the moon, water, mountain. Rethinking of personality in tree images reveals the problem of moral value as a problem of overcoming human mortality, expressed in the immortal essence of the evergreen tree, with which the morally impeccable person is correlated, which is clearly formulated in Korean culture.

It is important to emphasize that the symbolism of the pine tree image is extremely multifaceted. Thus, on the image of coniferous tree is superimposed the Confucian tradition, in which since the times of Confucius the pine tree was associated with loyal subjects [Kontsevich 2012: 17]. But, while embodying Confucian restraint and resilience, the mountain pine also expresses the Taoist ideal of the “usefulness of useless”, that is of the bent tree, unfit for further use.

As an ambiguous image, a pine tree could correlate both with a socially active person and with an “asocial” one, imbued with a hermit’s worldview. The first type was associated with tall, straight pines, going to the “beams”, i. e., designed to support the state, while according to *Junzi* [Zhdanova 1986: 173] low, useless trees belonged to the second type. Not realized in pure form in any of the variants, the pine could accommodate their complex syncretic interrelation. In the Korean soul of that time, the two attitudes toward the world coexisted freely: “the Korean was a Confucian in public service, and when alone with himself and nature, he turned to Taoism or Buddhism” [Trotsevich 1990: 15].

The scroll *Seolsongdo* presents an outstanding example of the personification of the image of a pine tree as a truly noble person in both Confucian and Taoist understanding of it: a man who has inner fortitude, not subject to external hardships and detached from the “vanity crowd” [Park 2004: 234]. The work tells of the fearless spirit of a scholar whose depth of spirit can only be measured by the inner gaze of the mind, using to the full extent the symbolism of the images of pines he created, and not considering mere mastery of the brush. The scroll depicts a pair of pine trees rising from a cleft in the barren rock. The artist brings the upright tree to the foreground, displacing the leaning trunk of the other to the back, thereby emphasizing the majesty, power and strength of the former. Its crown, invisible beyond the top edge of the painting, must withstand the enormous load of snow at this time of year, but the tree stands upright and bravely resists the snow assault. This was the character of Yi Insang himself. His pseudonym Neunghogwan (능호관) literally sounds like “the home of a man with a mind as pure as ice.” The author’s personal biography is reflected in the profound symbolism contained in the images of these pine trees, which “reflect the artist himself, who stood between his social status in reality and his scholarly and artistic ideal” [Paintings 2010].

From an early age, Yi Insang loved to study the classics and displayed a particular talent for painting and calligraphy. Although he belonged to a prominent family, he was a descendant of the outstanding Korean scholar Baekgang Yi Gyeongyeo (1585–1657), but was constrained by the circumstances of his background: his great-grandfather was a *seoeol* (son of a concubine), which defined his social status also as a *seoeol* and imposed several restrictions on his career in government service [Paintings 2010]. When Yi Insang was only nine years old, his father passed away, leaving the family in poverty. He had to work as a low-ranking official, but even in service he never compromised his sense of justice or followed public tendencies,

always relying solely on his own perception of what was morally right. Throughout his life, Yi Insang studied the Confucian classics and made great efforts to follow the principles of Confucianism. Yi Insang was widely revered by his contemporaries not only for his scholarly depth but also for his uncompromising spirit.

The unyielding pine tree on the canvas is a symbol of the unwavering character of a scholarly individual, inherent in Yi Insang himself, who by artistic means brilliantly exalted the power of symbolism in this work. As researchers note, when looking at that proud pine one feels the special aura of the tree trembling from the gusts of the piercing wind but which only seems to strengthen it. Due to the barren soil on which the tree stands, it must have particularly strong and deep roots in order to survive. Such a scroll, marked by a deeply symbolic image of a pine tree, can be regarded as a spiritual self-portrait of the artist [Chang 2020: 303–304].

Having clashed with his superiors, at the age of forty-three Yi Insang left public office for good. He was so poor that he had to live in a small house on the side of a mountain, where the wind kept blowing through the ramshackle thatched hut. Yi Insang, thin and tall, had to bend every time he crossed its threshold. But he did not break down and lived an extraordinary life until his death — observing the world around him from his voluntary seclusion, he devoted every free minute to reading, poetry, calligraphy and painting and left many outstanding works of art. Painted in black ink alone, his works display his profound understanding of calligraphy, his talent as a thinker and his poetic aspirations, and, according to researcher Park Heebyeong, should always be viewed as one and the same in this manner [Park 2018: 7].

It should be noted that sentiments of “withdrawal”, “solitude”, have always been present in Korean culture. They come from the depths of tradition, when the intellectual had to (at least temporarily) sever social ties and remain alone with nature, to merge with it as one of its natural particles in order to influence the world with the power of words or brushwork — to preserve or restore harmony. This ancient idea was further transformed into an “intellectual movement” of those who disagreed with a policy of the authorities or were oppressed by the royal court, who refused to serve and in protest sought solitude in the bosom of nature [Trotsevich 2011: 6].

In Taoist imagery the pine serves as a metaphor of the hermit’s solitude. Thus, the pine tree sets an example for all monks, hermits, deprived of all the benefits of life, but filled with inner harmony. In painting, the pine, acting as a plant of immortality — a symbol of and wish for longevity — complemented and enriched the image of hermits. This is fully reflected in another work by Yi Insang, *Geomseondo* (검선도, Immortal with a Sword) (Fig. 2), where the hermit is depicted in the foreground and in the background is a pair of pine trunks with obvious similarity to the picture of pine trees in *Seolsongdo* scroll. The main character, the Taoist hermit (Korean 신선, *Sin Seon*), who has supernatural powers, is traditionally depicted with a sword, a symbol of truth with which to distinguish truth from lies and defend justice. In this work, the blade is stuck in a bent tree, and only the stalk of the sword is visible on the canvas. Strength is seen not in the sword, but in the taming of one’s own desires, and in quieting one’s mind in voluntary hermitage.

The image of the hermit is complemented and intertwined with the symbolic image of the pine tree in the *Songhadokchwado* (송하독좌도) (Fig. 3), representing the high-spirited individual to whose ideal the artist aspired.



Fig. 2. Yi Insang (이인상). Immortal with a Sword (검선도, Geomseondo) 18th century. Paper; ink, mineral-based paint 96,7 × 61,8 cm. National Museum of Korea

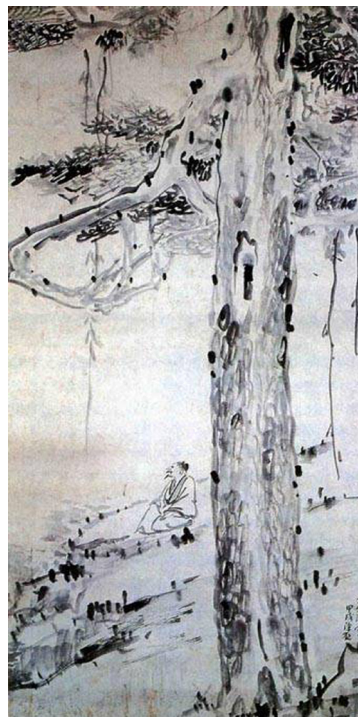


Fig. 3. Yi Insang (이인상). Songhadokchwado (송하독좌도) 18th century. Paper; ink. 80 × 40 cm Joseon Art Museum in Pyongyang

On the scroll, Yi Insang depicts a sage sitting under a large pine tree and looking straight ahead. This main character also appears as an elderly man who is free from the turbulent world and dissolved in nature. According to researcher Hwang Jeongsu, Yi Insang became the creator of his own artistic handwriting, reflecting his clear mind and the properties of his straightforward character, and manifested in the economy of ink and the conciseness of its use. He didn't make unnecessary strokes and didn't allow abundance of ink stains on the page. Many of his contemporaries admired his manner of writing. Among them, the most impressive is the late Joseon writer Kim Jaero (김재로) who said, "The secret of Yi Insang is not brilliance but gentleness. Not in rich flavor, but in subtlety. Only those who feel will know it" [Hwang 2020].

The artist's dream of surpassing the everyday reality of the world and retreating into nature was realized in his last years and is reflected in his scrolls devoted to images of hermits sitting alone by the water under a pine tree (another favorite subject of the artist) and embodying his personal life experience — *Songhagwanphogdo* (송하관폭도) (Fig. 4). The water in the waterfall represents the clarification of the mind, while the pine tree, as the researcher M. I. Nikitina notes, plays an extremely important role in "modeling space" [Nikitina 1994: 129] to create a sublime-spiritu-

al environment, both in poetry and in painting. A pine often acts as a central or one of the main elements of the landscape — “a picture of the ideal world of nature” — opposed to the world of vanity [Filimonova 2003: 28].

Only a few friends are always with me:
Bamboo, Pine, Water, Cliff.
And when the moon rises over the eastern mountain
The moon rises, I meet it!
And apart from these five friends,
There's no one in the world I want!
Yoon Sondo (Kosan “Lonely Mountain”)
(trans. from Korean into Russian by A. L. Zhovtis, trans. into
English by Elena Flower) [Kontsevich 2012: 146].

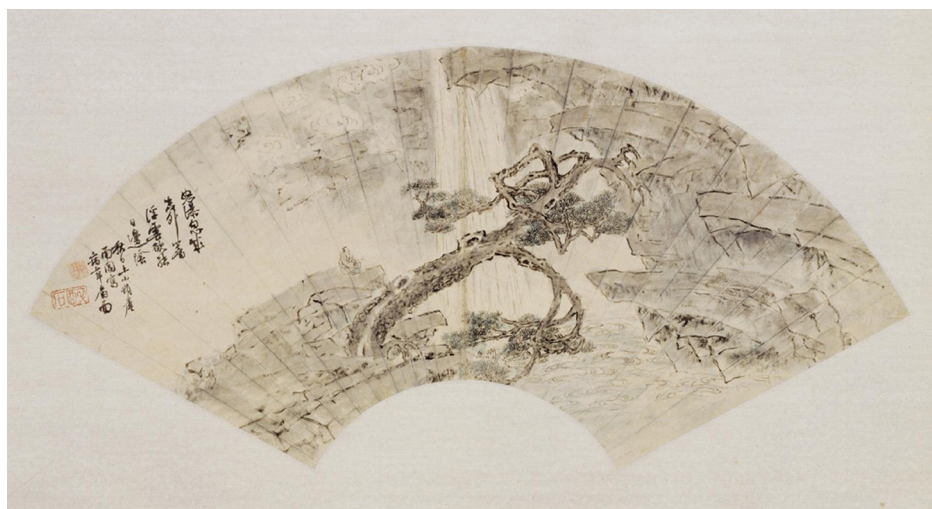


Fig. 4. Yi Insang (이인상). *Songhagwanphogdo* (송하관폭도)
18th century. Paper; ink, Mineral-based paint. 23.8 × 63.2 cm
National Museum of Korea

At first glance, Yi Insang's painting and his manner of writing may seem too simple, and bewildering in that his *Seolsongdo* scroll becomes an artistic ideal for both the Joseon era and for contemporary artists. However, its essence can be summed up in the commentary of one of the most influential figures of the 19th century Korean scholarly and artistic world, Kim Jeonghui (Chusa, 1786–1856): “If you can appreciate Yi Insang's works, you will be able to understand what it is to have literati spirit in practicing calligraphy and painting” [Paintings 2010].

Such works, characterized by a deep emotionality and the conveyance of an inner state rather than merely depicting the external details of the landscape, are characteristic of the work of intellectual artists (문인화가, *muninhwaga*). *Korean Scholarly Painting* (Korean 문인화, *muninhwa*) represented painting for the free expression of the soul and was initially positioned as the opposite of the creative

method of professional artists, for whom painting was a craft. The main theme that acts as a pivotal line in the “painting of the intellectuals” is that of the *Four Gentlemen* or *Four Noble Ones* (사군자, *sagunja*): the plum blossom, the orchid, the bamboo and the chrysanthemum. Each of these plants is a classic embodiment in painting of the Confucian ideal of *junzi* which appears in this theme in its main qualities — hardness and at the same time softness, harmonious combination of culture-confinement and simplicity-naturalness, and sensitivity [Sokolov-Remizov 2004: 98].

The pine closely echoes the *Four Gentlemen*, displaying the symbolism of a truly noble individual, capable of overcoming any problems and hardships of life (Fig. 5). The pine, like the bamboo and the plum tree, manages not to break under the weight of the snowfall, to withstand even the most severe tests of frost, preserving its original straightness and inner fullness. These plants constitute the concept *Three friends of winter* (송죽매, *songjungmae*), which includes not only the practical side of frost-resistance, but also its “interpretation in the ethical plane — firmness of character, elevated aspirations and purity, which found a brilliant reflection in poetic and pictorial art of the Far East” [Du 2013: 51].



Fig. 5. Kim Gyujin (김규진). Plum, Orchid, Bamboo, Pine (매화, 난초, 대나무, 소나무). Early 20th century
Silk, ink. 388 × 1416 cm. Private collection

In the work the sense of simplicity was achieved by a conscious effort of the artist, where he avoided details in the depiction of symbolic plants, presented a simple composition, thus concentrating the inner essence of the idea, which was basic in the painting of “literary artists”. The high talent of the artist in creating a capacious symbolic image of pine trees, reflecting his life path and his inner values, allowed him to create this masterpiece of painting, expressing a deep spiritual idea by the simplicity of pictorial means.



Fig. 6. Jeon Yeong (전영). *Snow Covered Pine in Early Spring*
(이른봄의 설송). 2007. Paper, ink, water-based paint
178 × 96 cm

The amazing vitality of this image as a stable form of expression of artistic ideas demonstrates the particular strength of the tradition that sustains it, and is of particular interest in the conditions of modernity, when significant images are often lost and new ones appear. Having survived the powerful influence of foreign culture and art in the 20th century and the tragedy of Korea's division into two states, the image of the pine tree in Korean art has not lost its relevance, but, on the contrary, acts as a guardian of cultural traditions and is regarded as an appeal to national origins. It is organically refracted in the works of contemporary artists of the Republic of Korea and North Korea, enriching it with facets of new understanding, consonant with the personal ideas of the authors of artistic works, as well as the social problems of modern times, inherent in each state. In the art of the DPRK, where painting is supposed to fulfill one of the important tasks of state policy, following *Juche* (Korean 주체) (i. e., the idea of independent and autonomous development), the use of the image of an evergreen tree for the expression of patriotic content is still relevant. Korean medieval art often used the image of a pine tree as a symbol of longevity, but now artists associate it with the fortress and indomitable spirit of the state and people. In the portrayal of the pine tree, the artists put a clear symbolic and sometimes political connotation. Heroizing the natural beauty and glorifying its relentless vitality, North Korean artists strive to monumentalize the image. For example,

this was true of the scrolls by Jeon Yeong (전영), an honored and popular artist of North Korea who not unreasonably earned the creative name of “Heavenly Pine” (천상의 소나무) among art connoisseurs. In his scroll we also see two pine trees as in Yi Insang’s *Seolsongdo*, but the upward aspiring pines are not only monumentally lofty but also exaggeratedly hyperbolized. Here we see the artist’s attempts to combine the national tradition of Korean traditional painting with hyperrealism in the representation of the pine tree as a tree of superpower and super beauty in his symbolic interpretation of the display of power and prosperity of the superpower of North Korea. Even the snow-covered pine trees on his scrolls (Fig. 6) demonstrate a major mood, communicating an elevated mood to the viewer. It is fair to say to art connoisseurs and viewers that “in Jeon Yeong’s works the pine trees are more beautiful than in the real world” [Yoo 2007].



Fig. 7. Lee Changjo (이창조). *Pine Tree (소나무)* 2013. Canvas, oil. 53 × 45.5 cm

In the art of the Republic of Korea, the image of the pine has been integrated and enriched with new forms. Today, South Korean artists turn to it using modern technologies and various materials. It is important to note that against the background of the loss of traditional values in society under the influence of the powerful modernization processes in the Republic of Korea, the canonical image of the

pine tree has acquired a new meaning as an important element in the visual system, necessary to maintain the cultural tradition and national character. As South Korean art successfully integrated into the global world by the end of the twentieth century, there was an urgent need to “express in contemporary art the national, which has a connection to the traditional aesthetic and worldview of Koreans” [Khokhlova 2018: 314], to protect it from being dissolved into the larger context. One such image is the pine tree immortalized by Yi Insang, which can be found in various types of art of the Republic of Korea: for example, Lee Sujin’s (이수진) installations, Lee Gil Rae’s (이길래) new-tech sculptures, or the work of Bae Bien-u (배병우), one of the most famous photographers of Korea, who has received worldwide fame and recognition in the global art market for his black-and-white photos of pine trees that “express the beauty, spirit and energy of Korean nature” [Park 2014: 118].

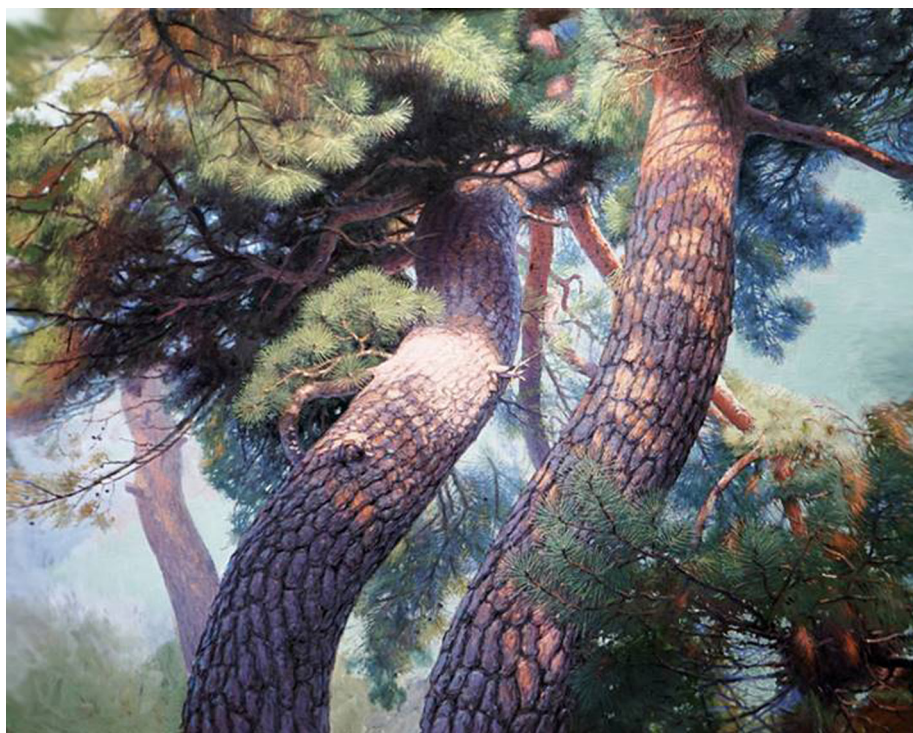


Fig. 8. *Yoon Eusoo (윤유수) Pine. (소나무) 2021. Canvas, oil. 150 × 130 cm*

Recently, South Korean painters’ interest in their own roots and national traditions has become increasingly evident, even as they work in Western European techniques, using canvas and oil. In many of the oil on canvas paintings of the present day one can see references to the composition of Yi Insang’s famous scroll. This is revealed by pine trees created with generalized forms, localized spots of color as in the works of Lee Changjo (이창조) (Fig. 7) and, marked by contrasting colors, in the paintings of Kim Sunyoung (김순영), or the more tonally refined and detailed pines in the paintings of Ryu Myeongryeol (류명렬) or Yoon Eusoo (윤유수) (Fig. 8)

and many other South Korean artists. According to the latter, “The pine is a special tree, not only the main symbol of our people, but also an inexhaustible source of inspiration since ancient times. It cannot be compared with other trees, because it provides inexhaustible material for learning the inner world through the observation of the outer: which can be found in the study of the complex texture of the pine bark, fascination with the dynamic effects in its crown, its special charm...”¹



Fig. 9. Park Jeongyeon (박정연). *Golden Pine-Life* (황금 소나무 삶) 2020. Ink, coloring, paraffin, gold powder on cotton wool. 84 × 119 cm

Interest in the image of the pine tree is undoubtedly leading in the works of artists of the Republic of Korea's traditional direction, it is confirmed by the art projects united by one theme — the appeal to the image of a pine tree. But, as rightly pointed out in the catalog of the recent exhibition of *A Moonlit Night Walk Under a Pine* (송하보월, *Songhabowol*) (Exhibition at the Icheon Woljeon Municipal Art Museum. November 26, 2020 to January 31, 2021), “Today there are quite a few artists who are constantly reinterpreting pine trees in new ways. However, there are not many artists who move forward with the pine without losing their individuality” [Songhabowol 2021]. The exhibition brought together nine famous South Korean artists and presents images with views of pine trees, but each artist individualizes his/her work and endows it with individual meaning. Some masters choose a bright colorful scale and simplified forms — Park Jeongyeon (박정연) (Fig. 9), Im Musang (임무상), others converge with the great intellectual artists and work only

¹ Quote from personal correspondence with Yoon Eusoo (2021, October 20).

with black ink (or ink with delicately subcolored water-based paints) to enhance the visual expression of the deep spiritual essence contained in the image of the pine — Yang Jeongmu (양정무), Kwon Soyeong (권소영). In the masters' paintings, the pine tree is incorporated into the landscape of wild majestic nature (Yoo Yejin, 유예진) (Fig.10)), paintings of medieval life in Korea (Lee Dongwon, 이동원) and the modern urban landscape (Song Seungho, 송승호) (Fig. 11). However, more than any other master who has come close to making sense of the Yi Insang scroll is the artist Yoo Younbin (유윤빈), as evidenced not only by her *Seolsong* scroll (Fig. 12), which has direct parallels with Yi Insang's *Seolsongdo* scroll, but also her work where she places a portrait of the great Korean master himself on the background of these snow-covered pine trees (Fig. 13). Yi Insang looks directly at the viewer, his gaze piercing and penetrating right into the heart of the beholder. The strength of his talent and the greatness of his spirit become a reference point for contemporary artists, his artistic legacy through the centuries has not lost its significance, and his image reappears in the works of Korean artists of today.



Fig. 10. Yoo Yejin (유예진). *All-encompassing desire* (부유한 욕망) 2016. Paper, ink. 100 × 100 cm



Fig. 11. Song Seungho (송승호). Arno River (아르노 강변)
2020. Paper, ink, water-based paint. 45 × 65 cm



Fig. 12. Yoo Younbin (유윤빈).
Seolsong (설송)
2014. Paper, ink. 213 × 145 cm



Fig. 13. Yoo Younbin (유윤빈). Yi Insang
Neunghogwan
(능호관 이인상). 2014
Paper, ink. 45.0 × 30.0 cm

According to Yoo Younbin, she has always been attracted to the traditional technique of Korean painting, which expresses what is hidden from sight, leaving a blank space on paper. And snowy landscapes with pine trees are the best way to do this, expressing the beauty of black ink and white space in the most effective way. To further emphasize the whiteness of the snow, which helps better convey the essential characteristics of the pine — retaining its freshness and greenness even in the cold winter, she uses the ancient *Punjibob* (분지법) method, a special traditional technique to achieve a dazzling whiteness by applying a solution of rice flour as a background pigment. Above all, however, the artist has tried to follow the harmony contained in the nature around us and stay in balance with the inner aspirations of the soul, the principles that Yi Insang adhered to in his art [Yoo 2014].

As Younbin herself says: “The pine trees in my paintings are not a tribute to romantic antiquity, they sing and carry the healing spiritual healing that our society needs so much today” [Yoo 2015].

Thus, looking at Yi Insang’s *Seolsongdo*, in which the pine tree image helped the artist to most fully express his personal aspirations, deeply interwoven with the philosophical and aesthetic values inherent in the Korean culture of the Joseon era, we can argue that the artistic image of the pine tree in Korean art is a complicated and multi-layered phenomenon that plays an important role in revealing the underlying nature of works.

In the modern world, the pine tree successfully acts as a certain figurative symbol in the context of Korean culture, projecting the personality of the creator and his dominant states of mind. The image of this coniferous tree represents one of the cultural codes of national identity, which preserves the artistic and aesthetic traditions of the past, immortalized in the scroll of Yi Insang, but also embodies elements of the new conceptual perception, which are refracted in the works of modernity with surprising facets. The features of this image reflect not only a commitment to antiquity — at the same time they demonstrate the ability to be resilient in the conditions of modernity, aimed at a harmonious combination of conservative traditions and innovation.

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* * *

Информация об авторе

Юлия Ивановна Гутарёва

кандидат искусствоведения
главный специалист (искусствовед),
Филиал Российской академии художеств
в г. Красноярске «Региональное отделение
Урала, Сибири и Дальнего Востока
Российской академии художеств в
г. Красноярске»
Россия, 660093, Красноярск, пр-т имени
газеты «Красноярский рабочий», д. 197
Тел.: +7 (391) 236-34-23
✉ gutayule@gmail.com

Information about the author

Yuliia I. Gutareva

Cand. Sci. (Art History)
Chief Specialist (Art Critic), Branch
of the Russian Academy of Arts
in Krasnoyarsk "Regional Department
of the Urals, Siberia and the Far
East of the Russian Academy of Arts
in Krasnoyarsk"
Russia, 660093, Krasnoyarsk, Avenue named
after the Newspaper Krasnoyarsky Rabochy,
197
Tel.: +7 (391) 236-34-23
✉ gutayule@gmail.com