

Korean Gentleman

On an eight-panel masterwork

KOREAN SCHOLARS of Korean art consider our newly acquired *Bamboo through the Four Seasons* to be the most important Korean literati screen outside of Korea,” says Robert D. Mowry delightedly. The Dworsky curator of Chinese art at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum and senior lecturer on Chinese and Korean art is thrilled with the piece himself, and with its acquisition.

A decade ago Mowry set out to assemble a collection of Korean art. “We had a running head start,” he says, “because thanks to the Grenville L. Winthrop bequest of 1943, we already had a small but magnificent group of early, gilt bronze Buddhist sculptures of world-class quality—the kinds of things that absolutely are not available today and, even if they were, would be far, far beyond Harvard’s budget.” The museum also had several fragments of Korean Buddhist sutras written in gold and/or silver ink on indigo paper. In 1991 came a gift of 150 ceramics. Mowry and his colleagues concentrated on paintings and have acquired about 60 screens, scrolls, and album leaves. Now, he judges, “Although we certainly don’t have the largest Korean collection in the West, I dare say we have the most comprehensive one.”

Bamboo through the Four Seasons is an eight-panel folding screen

Painted in ink on paper in the mid eighteenth century by Yu T k-chang. “Because Korean screens were used to divide larger rooms into smaller spaces, the number of panels varied to suit the size of the room,” says Mowry. A screen may present a single,

unified composition that spreads across all its panels, but in this instance each panel is conceived as an individual painting, two for each season. The first depicts newly sprung shoots emerging from the ground in spring. The last painting is shown here. It bears im-

pressions of two seals, in red, that read *Su-un* and *Ka-san-ung*, sobriquets of the artist.

Yu was a follower of the bamboo-painting master Yi Ch ng, who lived a century earlier, and both Yu and Yi took inspiration from earlier Chinese literati work (“literati” paintings being those done for the educated elite, as opposed to Buddhist or folk-art paintings). Their paintings depart in some respects from Chinese models, says Mowry. “Two tones of ink used to distinguish fore- and background subjects is a distinctly Korean style of bamboo painting.” The snow in this wintry scene is the untouched paper on which the painting was made.

So important was the ability to paint bamboo that in the fifteenth century it outranked landscape painting in the examinations for Korea’s royal academy. “Bamboo,” says Mowry, “was one of the so-called Four Gentlemen—along with plum blossoms, orchids, and chrysanthemums—and all four were said to embody the virtues to which Confucian scholars aspired, such as integrity, purity, and strength in the face of adversity.”

