Research Directions and Results

Research on monk artisans and Buddhist art of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) made great strides between the publication of *Korean Buddhist Paintings* (40 volumes) (1996–2007) and the publication of the *Report of Korean Buddhist Heritage* (2002–2014). During this period, almost all relevant Buddhist sculptures, paintings, and ritual implements in the possession of temples across Korea were surveyed. Moreover, with the additional publication of related documentary materials such as the *balwon-mun* (發願文, votive texts), the records of completion of statues (造 成記, K. joseonggi), and the records of paintings (畫記, K. hwagi), active research was also conducted on the works of monk artisans and their activities. Notably, the study of votive texts secretly enshrined deep inside the statues led to much progress in research on Buddhist sculptures based on individual monk artisans.

The special exhibition *Monk Artisans of the Joseon Dynasty: Buddhist Sculptures and Paintings*, held at the National Museum of Korea (December 7, 2001 – March 6, 2002), was planned based on research results accumulated since the beginning of the 2000s. A symposium on the most important monk artisans who produced sculptures and paintings was held on December 18, 2021. On the occasion, the need to introduce these research outcomes to the international audience was discussed, and hence this edition of the *Journal of Korean Art & Archaeology* features the special topic of monk artisans of the Joseon Dynasty.

Basis for Research on Buddhist Art during the Late Joseon Dynasty: Documentary Materials

A wealth of documentary materials exists on the circumstances regarding the production of Buddhist art during the late Joseon Dynasty. They give researchers detailed information on the artworks, including not only the date of production and place of enshrinement, but also the names of the painters and sculptors, the patrons, and all the other people involved in their creation, as well as knowledge on the division of roles among artisans. These records have enabled researchers to gain an understanding of the changes in the works of the artisans concerned and the schools (流派, K. yupa) of Buddhist art. Additionally, the lists of donors (施主者, K. sijuja) have yielded diverse information on the patrons’ social position and region of origin, as well as on donations by family groups. In other words, with so many documentary materials for reference, it is now possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of all the artistic and religious activities regarding the creation, enshrinement, and worship of...
Buddhist works of art, including the people who donated for them or commissioned them, the painters and sculptors, and the original settings of paintings and sculptures.

Basis for Research on Joseon Buddhist Art: Maintaining Religious Context among Artworks

Research on the Buddhist art of the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392) and earlier periods involved applying various methods, including those focused on the viewpoint of art history looking at the history of style and iconography, as well as the political and economic history perspective, the social history perspective, and the perspective of ideological history. However, because most Buddhist artworks have been found removed from their original place of enshrinement, it has been difficult to even think of studying them in the context of their connection to works inside a temple hall. In the case of Buddhist artworks dating to the late Joseon period, however, many of them remain in their original settings, making it possible to grasp the relationship between works inside the same space.

Owing to the documentary materials available, we can study the rituals conducted inside the temple hall, and the way the works used in the rituals relate to each other using much more diverse approaches than those used for Buddhist art of the Goryeo Dynasty and earlier periods.

Research on the Schools of Monk Artisans

Due to a great increase in temple construction during the seventeenth century, different schools of monk painters and monk sculptors in charge of producing Buddhist art began to emerge. Typically, a number of monk artisans worked together to create a single painting or sculpture, and each monk in the group performed a different task under a division-of-labor system. Monk sculptors in charge of producing Buddhist art began to emerge. Typically, a number of monk artisans worked together to create a single painting or sculpture, and each monk in the group performed a different task under a division-of-labor system. The apprenticeship system, r. 1776–1800). These schools produced artists such as Byeogam Gakseong, which constituted their human network, and also looks at the organization of groups of artisans, their work system, pay, and other aspects.

During the Joseon Dynasty, Buddhist painting was perceived as a field reserved for monks only, and schools of monk painters with their own distinctive styles were active in different parts of the country. The author emphasizes that every part of the creation process—from planning and production to enshrinement of the painting—was recognized as an area that could not be handled by ordinary artisans. Some temples became famous for training apprentices, passing on techniques, and, subsequently, cultivating new artists. The apprenticeship system (徒系統, K. dojok), enabled the transmission of skills under the leadership of head monk painters (首門下, K. chuwenjan). This paved the way for the emergence of varied schools, each with its own traditions.
wide area. Depending on their economic power and the scope of the area that they covered, some head monk sculptors were the main force behind Buddhist projects, taking on roles such as fundraising and overall supervision. At times, when the state craft production system was not properly functioning, they also took part in public projects to fulfill the demand for paintings in regional society. The author concludes that Buddhist temples were sacred places and, at the same time, spaces where both sacred and worldly artworks were produced and consumed, with monk painters playing the central role in the creation process.

Song Unsoo’s article titled “Buddhist sculpture Production Methods and the Issue of ‘Ghost-sculpting’ during the Late Joseon Era” examines the issue of “ghost-sculpting” (代作, K. daesok) in the monk sculptor schools (知願, K. yupa) through the relationship between the head sculptor and assistant sculptors. During that period, it was common in the yupa to have one head sculptor and several assistant sculptors divide the work among themselves, each one responsible for a specific task. These schools generally had a vertical hierarchy from the head down to the lowest monk sculptor, and it is thought they had two functions—training of sculptors and the creation of Buddhist statues. The author studies the issue of “ghost-sculpting” in two forms or situations. The first case involved a deputy monk sculptor who was “ghost-sculpting” for the head sculptor monk, including situations when an imminent changeover in the head of a school caused the next head monk to take charge of the work in place of the current head. In records, the current head was still nominally in charge of the school but the style of the next head sculptor was the most apparent on the finished statue. In the second form, the article discusses the area in which Danеung and his school were active, the author’s main interest seems to be the Buddhist and Confucian semantic system applied to the Yongmunsa Temple altarpiece. The Buddhist symbolic elements are studied by dividing them into those from the Pure Land faith and those from Seon Buddhism. The Pure Land elements are the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land depicted at the bottom of the altarpiece and the text engraved in the form of a gatha on either side of the outer frame. The author points out that the nine grades of rebirth is a motif found in other works produced by Danеung, such as the 1684 wooden altarpiece at Gyeyonggusa Temple and the 1689 aureola around the Wooden Seated Amitabha Buddha of Seonseoksa Temple in Seongju. The Seon elements include “myeongim” (明心), meaning illuminating the mind which is engraved in the center of the bottom part of the outer frame. The author suggests that underlying the creation of such new iconography was the theory of the “unity of Seon and Pure Land faith” (宗派一統論), which underlies the practice of yonbul-won (宗派論) or, invoking the Buddha as meditative practice.

Another distinctive feature of the Yongmunsa Temple altarpiece are the engraved hexagrams of the Zibuji (紫微, or I Ching, the Book of Changes), the Chinese classic that is the main scripture of Confucianism, an ancient Chinese belief system. Along the inner edge of the aureola around the principal icon, the eight directions are expressed using the eight trigrams of the Later Heaven, a concept established in Neo-Confucianism. Here the tagged mark (大元, the supreme ultimate) was added to express the idea that the Buddha and the dharma are at the center of the order and principles of the universe. On the outer wooden frame, twelve out of the sixty-four hexagrams are engraved to reveal the Buddhist outlook on time. That is, the twelve declining and growing hexagrams symbolizing the flow and circulation of time were used to express the waxing and waning of yin and yang (陰陽, K. yin-yang).

While the article discusses the importance of this kind of application of hexagrams in the Buddhist art of the Joseon Dynasty. The monks of Joseon, a nation that had adopted Confucianism as its ruling ideology, sought the harmony of Confucianism and Buddhism and explored channels for communication with the outside world while familiarizing themselves with Neo-Confucian knowledge, including the I Ching. While depiction of hexagrams on the wooden altarpiece is a direct expression of Buddhism and Confucianism harmony within Buddhism, or Buddhist art, the author notes that non-Buddhist elements were not accepted unconditionally, as seen in the changes made to the twelve declining and growing hexagrams. Finally, in regard to the agents assembing Confucian elements in the altarpieces, the article emphasizes the role played by the monk sculptor Danеung, but remains open to other possibilities, and closes with the anticipation of further research on this topic.

Lee Yongyun’s “The Buddhist Projects of the Pyeonyang Monastic Sub-lineage and the Artistic Activities of Monk Artisans during the Late Joseon Dynasty” calls attention to the importance of the temples and sub-lineages that commissioned works of Buddhist art. The author suggests that the possibility that monk artisans of the late Joseon Dynasty worked based on the artistic sub-lineages that they belonged to. The most prominent example is the Pyeonyang Eonjo (震洋佛話, 1581-1665) sub-lineage based in Gyeongsang-do Province, and the two monk sculptors Danеung and Takmil (孝密), as well as the monk painter Singyeong (時炯), who formed relations with the sub-lineage. Soyeong Singyeong (時炯神僧, 1682-1717), a second-generation apprentice of Pyeonyang Eonjo, referred to Danеung and Takmil as munye (門人, disciple of a great scholar/artist) and it is thought that the two sculptors actually belonged to the Pyeonyang monastic sub-lineage. Active in the northern part of Gyeongsang-do Province, the two monk sculptors pioneered the distinctive genre of wooden altarpieces. The author suggests that underlying the creation of such new iconography was the faith and thinking of Uiseon (惠天, Singyeong’s teacher and the first-generation apprentice of Eonjo, and that, indeed, the altarpieces would have been made under the active guidance of Soyeong Singyeong. The author also argues that Toeun Singyeong (Descripsio, active 1788-1830), the head monk painter of the Sabalun School, had formed close connections with the apprentices of Hwaseong Jiie (熙烈, 1664-1729), another second-generation apprentice of Pyeonyang Eonjo, and would have been influenced by monks of the Pyeonyang monastic sub-lineage when devising new iconography such as Uiseomu (惠天佛話, the Vajra-being of Impulse Traces) and the Eight Vajra-beings (八佛話). Aside from the groups of artisans, such as monk painters and monk sculptors, the research shed light on the role of the temples and sub-lineages that commissioned works of Buddhist art during the late Joseon Dynasty, and is important for broadening the horizons of research on Buddhist art of that time.

Further Research Directions

Over the past twenty years, research on the Buddhist sculpture and painting of the late Joseon Dynasty has focused on the separate component fields such as monk sculptors, monk painters, schools of artisans, rites, and iconography, and significant results have been achieved. In the history of Korean art, Buddhist art of that time is almost the only field and only period characterized by a wealth of documentary materials and continued (religious) context among works of art. Future research will hence be able to move toward more comprehensive interpretation, encompassing all genres, including Buddhist sculpture, Buddhist painting, ritual implements, and sutras, to draw even closer to grasping the real picture of Buddhist art of that era.