all, down on one knee as he cuts a child’s throat, his colossal backside not only in the viewer’s face but also inches from the face of the child’s desperate mother. The heroic scale of the picture, some eight feet by twelve, adds to the interpretative puzzle for a modern eye: why make a vast male arse the focal point of a major religious painting? It’s impossible, too, not to wonder if the Dutch, whose art embraces the everyday, the suggestive and the downright lewd, kept a straight face about it, then and afterwards.

Rubin doesn’t mention Cornelis – she focuses mainly on painters and sculptors of the Italian Renaissance and their work, from a stooping labourer in a Giotto fresco turning his backside towards Christ to Michelangelo’s insistence on seeing the male nude, in two or in three dimensions, from every conceivable angle. One of her themes is that though the male bottom may be sexy, its baring had long been a sign of derision (as in mooning), with certain vernacular meanings – in one Signorelli mural, the Devil, whom the artist shows tempt ing a pilgrim, has his leggings down to show his tight white underpants, ‘embod ying the expression andare a fare in culo – go to Hell’. Rubin notes too that in the 15th century military costumes became far more tightly fitting, inviting eroticised display; St Bernardino of Siena explicitly attacked such dress as ‘invitations to sodomy’.

She also notes early on the favouring of a back view, be it clothed, nude or semi-nude, for executioners and other agents of violence, such as the flogger of Christ in the Flagellation. In this unfinished engraving, Mantegna’s sculptural manner allows the viewer’s face but also inches from the throat, his colossal backside not only in the heightened expressive value. This is a low-life or hired thug, his conscience as disposable as his breeches, his injury to Christ compounded by the insult of his baring his buttocks to us. But he is also a beautiful and virile figure. Two conceptions of the male backside, the derisory and the idealised, seem to coexist in Mantegna’s depiction of him.

Rubin examines the eroticisation of Donatello’s David, created, she insists, with no intention of arousing illicit desire, but ‘queered’ by Horst Janson in the 1950s – the formidable John Pope-Hennessy thought Janson’s teasing-out of homoerotic meanings had left a ‘trail of slime on a great work of art’. But homoerotic exploration clearly had its part in the sophisticated court culture of 15th-century Florence. The latent queerness of Donatello’s work was surpassed in the final years of the century by the unignorable sensuality of Michelangelo’s marble Bacchus, one of the first monumental nudes of the Renaissance, showing a youth on the brink of manhood, upright but teetering as his breeches, his injury to Christ power, is averted and arms are raised, the face of the child’s desperate mother. The

Do you suffer from pyŏk? If so, do you hide your pyŏk or do you flaunt your pyŏk?

The term, connoting a certain obsessive attachment to things, lit up 18th-century Korea. According to Sunglim Kim in Flowering Plums and Curio Cabinets, it may be translated as ‘addiction, compulsion, passion, mania, fondness for, weakness for, love of, fanatical devotion, craving, idiosyncrasy, fetishism, and even hobby’. Today it suggests a ‘bad, ingrained habit of taking excessive pleasure from something’, extreme thrift or creeping thievishness.

But, as Kim explains, in the waning years of Korea’s Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) pyŏk became a badge of honour among the changin, an energetic caste of professionals and brokers to yangban aristocrats seeking recognition as artists, collectors and patrons in an age of burgeoning consumerism. Originally a term of opprobrium rooted in the Confucian belief in the virtue of austerity, displaying one’s pyŏk – through collections of swords or mourning dresses or paintings of flowering plum trees – became a declaration of cultural sophistication.

Obsessive accumulation is itself now a global phenomenon: in 2018, the World Health Organization declared ‘hoarding disorder’ a worldwide malady. But if all happy materialists appear alike, each ambivalent materialist seems ambivalent in their own way. Misgivings about the embarrassment of riches that merchants accumulated in the Dutch Golden Age led artists to drench their sparkling still lifes with skulls and assorted memento mori. The art of pyŏk was neither mournful nor pathological. ‘Dallying too much with objects kills one’s will,’ Confucianism

James Delbourgo

The Art of Pyŏk

Flowering Plums and Curio Cabinets: The Culture of Objects in Late Chosŏn Korean Art
By Sunglim Kim
(University of Washington Press 304pp £54)
warned; material things should be used, not displayed. Displaying one’s pyŏk, however, was wilful. It entailed a collective striving for new status through taste in things.

These ambitions were advanced with exquisite artistry through ch’aekkŏri, examples of which are captivatingly reproduced in this book to enchant the reader’s eye. Ch’aekkŏri are a form of still-life painting, inspired by Chinese duobaoge, showing a range of objects and books lining handsomely geometrical wooden cabinets. They embodied a new naturalism in Korean art, Kim tells us. More sober than the glinting luxuriance of Dutch still lifes, yet more consumerist than the courtly cabinets of curiosities to which Kim likens them, they glorify both the private possessions of individuals and collective chungin consciousness.

Yet the beautiful geometries of the ch’aekkŏri struggles to contain disorder within. ‘We truly live in “somebody else’s” world,’ declared a 1924 newspaper article reflecting on the deformation Japanese occupation wrought on Korean culture. The theme resounds throughout Kim’s story. Eighteenth-century ch’aekkŏri combine Asian and European objects (books, vases, clocks) and artistic styles. Sometimes they meet our gaze with diagrammatic flatness; at others, they absorb it with perspectival depth. They’re luminous artefacts of Korea’s increasing exposure to global trade, a quietly sublime effect of shopping for things from China and Europe.

But that cosmopolitan sublimity, that subtle buying and borrowing of styles, exploded into the politics of imperialism and nationalism when the Japanese, drunk on the inebriating modernisations of the Meiji Restoration, occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945 and brutally subjected it. Japan’s Meiji Restoration, occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945 and brutally subjected it. Japanese art historians like Sekino Tadashi dismiss late Chosŏn art as insufficiently Korean. Collecting could destroy or salvage the nation. The Japanese would ‘civilise’ Korea by plundering its treasures and imposing their own taste. But Korean connoisseurs like O Sech’ang hoped to save Korean-ness by cataloguing the nation – witness his encyclopaedic Biographical Records of Korean Painters and Calligraphers – to preserve, or rather create, its canon.

Kim’s achievement is to recover the ch’aekkŏri and vivacious flowering plums of late Chosŏn art by masters like Cho Hāryŏng from this double damnation, and explain how Koreans ultimately turned to the West as a way out. The timely paradox of her story is that the Westernisation and globalisation of Korean art were driven by the urge to find national ways of seeing and being. The emblems of this paradox are many. The National Museum of Korea displays a Corinthian helmet that was awarded to Son Gi-Jeong for winning the marathon at the Berlin Olympics of 1936, but because Son was forced to compete under the Japanese flag, the helmet is more a symbol of Korean endurance than Western civilisation. Koreans’ openness to Western art at the end of the Chosŏn period mirrors China’s embrace of Western science during the twilight of the Qing dynasty. Both were driven by the search for national resources to combat the political turmoils roiling East Asia, rather than ineluctable abstractions like modernity, progress or the West.

In our own age of Tiger totems and Crazy Rich Asians, when South Korean wealth and materialism have become proverbial, Kim refreshingly points out the persistence of Korean thoughtfulness about the relationship between shopping and being. Her discussion of the work of contemporary artists such as Im Susik and Kim Minsu, who photograph and paint modern ch’aekkŏri, is revealing. Minsu’s 2010 painting The Tiger Reveals Modern Wealth and Prosperity juxtaposes lotus flowers and Starbucks mugs. This global mish-mash is nothing new: we have, as historians love to point out, been here before. Many fear the future and loss of identity anyway. Viewed from the West in 2019, the history of Chosŏn pyŏk strikingly prefigures contemporary concerns about trade, tariffs and tribe. What’s fascinating and ultimately mysterious about the Korean story is how beguiling objects accumulated from many places across many decades suggested an easy cultural fluidity – until pyŏk’s beautiful puzzles came into sudden and violent political focus.

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19th-century ch’aekkŏri (anonymous)