

THE TEN SYMBOLS OF LONGEVITY SCREEN – English Transcript

Hello, welcome to the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. My name is Minchae and I'm a Korea Foundation Intern here at the JSMA. Today I am really excited to show you one of my favorite Korean Art Collections of the JSMA.

This piece is one of the JSMA's most important Korean collections, the *Ten Symbols of Longevity Screen* called a *Sipjangsaengdo*.

Sipjangsaengdo is a painting depicting 10 types of natural objects symbolizing long life and eternal youth. This piece is particularly made in the form of a folding screen combining ten panels. In the first eight panels, all 10 symbols of longevity are vividly illustrated.

In fact, not all the 10 symbols last forever like the sun and mountains, but they were included because they have a special association with longevity in Korean culture.

Let's take a closer look at the *Ten Symbols of Longevity*. What elements could be symbols of longevity? I'd like you to write them down or draw pictures of them.

We will pause here so you can respond.

How many did you find? Did you find all ten symbols of longevity or more than ten?

Typically, these ten symbols are the sun, clouds, mountain, water, pine tree, rocks, deer, crane, turtles, and mushrooms of immortality called *Yeongji*. However, there are more symbols of longevity, such as the moon, peaches, and bamboo.

Depending on the theme, the painter was able to effectively bring together and harmonize the different symbols on this very large canvas. Sometimes, only one symbol is shown, and the painting is called something else. Rather than *Sipjangsaengdo*, we just call this *Jangsaengdo* without the word *sip*, meaning 10.

Now, shall we move on and find out in more detail about these symbols?

The pine tree is one of the most common longevity symbols in all of the East Asian art. It symbolizes endurance and resilience because the pine tree remains green throughout the harshest of winters. **Cranes** symbolize not only longevity but also a wide variety of virtues and desires, from wisdom to promotion at court. This is because people regard the crane as a messenger that can communicate with heaven. **The mushrooms, Yeongji** is regarded as a source of immortality, and people believed that if they ate *Yeongji*, they would never die.

Although these symbols of longevity are often seen in Chinese and Japanese culture, the grouping of ten symbols in *Sipjangsaengdo* is not present in other parts of East Asia and appears to be uniquely Korean.

In this respect, the ten symbols are important in revealing a unique Korean cultural tradition. Particularly, these were some of the most far-reaching motifs used in the *Joseon* period,

judging from surviving artifacts such as textiles, jewelry, furniture, ceramics, and much, much more...

Joseon is the last Korean dynasty ruled by Yi's family for over 500 years, from 1392 to 1910. During this time, *Joseon* adopted Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism was an official state belief that emphasizes appropriate social rules and orders. This belief helped *Joseon* to strengthen the position of the dynasty internally and externally. So naturally, the court system and culture developed based on this belief.

Like this screen, art reflects so many things, especially culture, and society. Can you think about artworks that reflect your culture and society? I'd like you to describe that artwork and share your thoughts with your friends or classmates.

We will pause here so you can respond.

Now let's look at the remaining two panels. What do you see? Please note that this will be a crucial hint for the next question.

It is a record of the names and positions of 14 medical officials who participated in the treatment of crown prince *Yi Cheok* (later known as King *Sunjong*) who had smallpox.

In general, the specific dating is difficult, as most of the surviving royal paintings are unsigned and anonymous. This is because most royal paintings are produced together by various court painters in *Dohwaseo**. Nevertheless, due to the information contained in these two panels, the JSMA's *Ten Symbols of Longevity* is considered the only *Ten Symbols of Longevity* that can estimate the background and timing to date.

What do you think this piece was made for? And what makes you say that? I'd like you to guess and describe your ideas about it in 2 to 3 sentences by referring to the hints I gave you before.

We will pause here so you can respond.

Crown Prince *Yi Cheok* (1874-1926) was the final ruler of the *Joseon* dynasty. He was born in 1874 between King *Gojong* (1852-1919) and Empress *Myeonseong* (1851-1895). Everyone had high expectations of him when he was appointed as the crown prince to succeed to the next throne in the following years. He was smart enough to be able to read the *Thousand Characters Classic* when he was just five years old.

On December 12, 1879, the six-year-old prince got smallpox and recovered in only nine days. It was a big celebration of the country enough to conduct *Jeunggwangsi** and release all criminals below death row.

Officials who participated in the treatment of the crown prince commissioned a folding screen to commemorate his complete recovery and wishes for longevity, and this is the *Ten Symbols of Longevity Screen*.

The theme was perfectly suited for expressing wishes for peace for the court, and a long and

healthy life for the royal family. So, the ten symbols of longevity were widely produced and displayed at the royal court. The ten symbols of longevity screen was generally used in a ceremonial capacity for celebrations of the new year, banquets, and significant anniversaries as decorative backdrops.

However, paintings of the ten symbols of longevity were not only produced at the royal court. Wishes for long life and eternal youth are not only limited to royalty but also a universal human desire around the world. The desire for longevity transcends class and era. So, the ten symbols of longevity paintings were initially used in royal courts, but later the theme spread to every level of society.

Those wishes remain with us today, and it seems perhaps even more desperately these days, with many people having a hard time mentally and physically over the past few years due to the global pandemic.

Considering this, I hope you take the time to wish for the well-being and health of yourself and the precious people around you while appreciating the *Ten Symbols of Longevity*.

And as we finish our tour of *Ten Symbols of Longevity*, I'd like you to make your own *Sipjangsaengdo*. You can make your own new symbols of longevity as well.

Thank you for your attention. I hope you enjoyed learning about *Sipjangsaengdo*, and I look forward to seeing you all at the JSMA soon.

**Dohwaseo*: The Joseon Dynasty government office responsible for producing paintings.

**Jeunggwangsi*: an irregular civil service examination conducted during a major event in the country during the Joseon dynasty.