

Spotlight on Korean Shamanist Art

Paintings unfettered by conventions true to the spirit of art

By ROBERT TURLEY

My reasons for loving Korean art are its earthy soulfulness, unaffected sincerity, absence of artifice, energetic sense of humor, and effortless reverence for and affinity with nature. These are qualities that I find are well expressed in the folk art of Korea—art that is by and for the people and that is not art for art's sake. It's the same qualities that draw me to early acoustic blues and country music, African art, and any other unfiltered and unfettered expression of humankind's common yearnings, fears, disappointments, and triumphs.

Within the broad realm of Korean folk art, it is Shaman art that I feel embodies the soul of Korea. The Shaman's artifacts, such as paintings, masks, and costumes are a fundamental part of Shaman rituals to protect the home, heal the sick, divine the future, communicate with the deceased, bless and protect the crop, wedding, family, and newborn baby, and provide the people with a sense of well-being and purpose.

While the court ordained official theology and commissioned art supportive of it, and the literati had their forms of expression, the commoner, from a life really lived, created and through the centuries held onto a most syncretic belief system that borrows from Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, ancient animism, and elsewhere, and that encourages and engenders a powerful connection to nature and its energy, and inspires art that exhibits not only this healthy defiance against



DIVERSE INFLUENCES: Doksong, the Hermit Saint, a great example of the uniquely Korean syncretism with combined elements of Taoism, Buddhism, and Shamanism. IMAGE COURTESY OF ROBERT TURLEY

official dogma, but also an open-mindedness and sincerity that guides the creators of these soulful works of art and that explains why these wonderful creations by and for the people speak so

directly to persons of all persuasions even today.

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