

6. Saimdang as an Artist

Saimdang had a holistic personality. She qualified as a devoted daughter, a judicious wife, and a wise mother. She was also a great artist with astonishing intelligence and exquisite skills in the classics, poetry, writing, and, above all, calligraphy and painting.

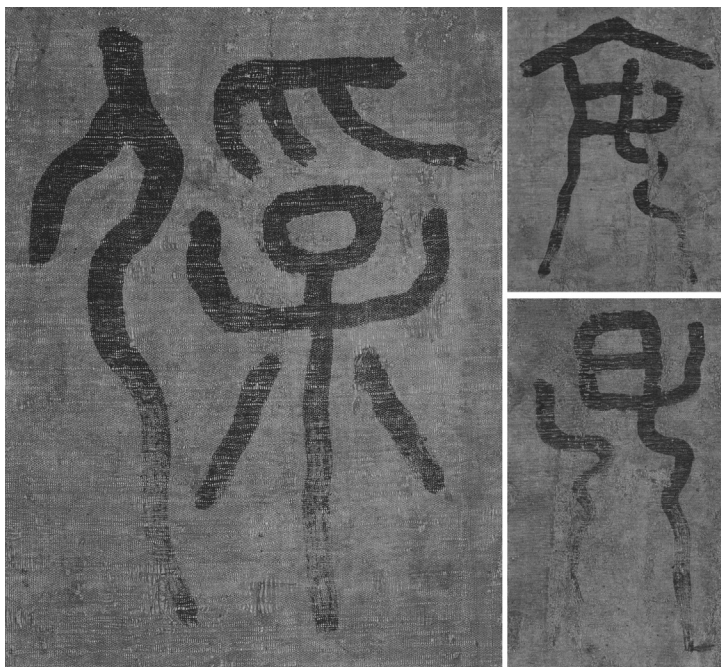
Authentic calligraphic styles

Saimdang was a prolific calligrapher. However, only six cursive scripts and one regular script are left to our great regret. These pieces nonetheless eloquently bear witness to Saimdang's noble mind and spirit the orthodox style of her Chinese calligraphy, which was true to the ideal of "horseshoe and silkworm head,"⁷⁾ strikes an awe into the beholders.

In particular, the six pieces of cursive script had been passed down over generations in the in-law family of Saimdang's youngest sister's

⁷ This describes the ideal shape of the horizontal stroke of the Chinese character for the number one of which the beginning should look like a horse shoe and the end like the head of a silk worm [Editor's note].

granddaughter. Kwon Cheo-gyun, the son of Saimdang's fourth younger sister, was in possession of these scripts. However, the scripts became the treasure of the family of Kwon Cheo-gyun's son-in-law when his daughter took them with her after her marriage to Choi Dae-hae thereafter, the scripts were passed on in that family down to Choi Don-gil in Dusan-ri, Gangneung-si. The originals are now exhibited at the Ojukheon Museum in the form of a folding screen. Their engravings, which were made in 1868 by Yoon Jong-eui, Magistrate of Gangneung, are also archived there for fear of loss.



Saimdang's scripts

江南雨初歇山晴雲
散濕未可盡晴梳
東風風正一

烟人乘曉離帶月
過江村正落潮水
木橋夜到

此二詩其多門
風京連梅嶺水城
木對世重

海客歸 離雲煙沙
多風家大河所
東子新 看者

東井道客夜月生
梅嶺 順風塵
河清多一博

擊鼓江楓晴雨潮
野亭在清江夜雨
老心此初上

Saimdang's scripts

Exquisite works left by Saimdang

Saimdang's paintings brought forth eulogies from numerous scholars early on. Eo Suk-kwon's *Paegwan-Japki* [story collector's miscellaneous records], which contains the story of how Saimdang taught the classics to Yulgok at an early age, reads:

Shin Saimdang studied painting early on, and her skills were so exquisite that people praised that her grapes and landscapes were second only to those of the famous painter An Kyeon who lived during



Saimdang's painting

the reign of Sejong. Seeing her paintings, how can we disparage⁸⁾ them only because they were done by a woman, and how can we ever reproach her for doing what a woman is not supposed to do?

It is hardly imaginable that a woman who lived in the Joseon era could reach such a high level of artistic achievements, in addition to cultivating virtues and high moral standards. Although they say that Saimdang put much effort into emulating⁹⁾ An Kyeon's paintings from an early age, she showed clearly that the real driving force for establishing one's own artistic space is innate talents rather than learning and practicing.

Saimdang's paintings can be classified into seven categories, namely, grasses and insects, grapes, birds and flowers, fish and bamboo, plum flowers, orchids, and landscapes. Only about 40 paintings have been attributed to Saimdang. They are color and ink monochrome paintings, and each of these paintings is evaluated as a great gem of Korean art.

The colophons written on these paintings by dozens of well-known persons, such as King Sukjong, and famous poets and scholars, including So Se-yang, Song Si-yeol, Hong Yang-ho, and Kwon Sang-ha, do not spare superlatives in praising the artistic qualities of Saimdang's paintings.

Saimdang's paintings are characterized by delicate brushstrokes. Their extremely delicate details strike an awe into the beholders' heart, even though they are seen on paper that has faded after the lapse of four centuries.

8 To dismiss a word or act as being of little worth [Editor's note].

9 Acquiring knowledge and skills by following in the footsteps of a spiritual teacher without receiving a person-to-person instruction [Editor's note].



Saimdang's paintings

