REEDS AND GEESE

Seven lively geese animate this Korean screen painting. The four in flight spread their wings in various ways and angle their necks in different directions. Their orange webbed feet poke out from underneath their gray feathered bodies. Below them lies a grassy shore, a body of water, and long, thin reeds at the water's edge. One goose dives for food, his feet and tail humorously sticking up out of the water.

These six vertical panels represent half of a twelve-panel screen painting, which was painted on silk and mounted on a wooden frame so that it would stand upright on the floor (see CD-ROM for additional images). The theme of reeds and geese has a special meaning in Korean culture. The Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters for “reed” and “old man” are the same (no), as are the words for “geese” and “comfort” (ahn). Therefore, traditional Korean paintings of reeds and geese represent a wish for a peaceful life in a person’s later years. Appropriately, the artist who painted this screen, Kim Jin-Woo, included an inscription on the upper left that states that he gave it to an elderly friend as a gift.

Kim also inscribed a poem and interspersed its verses throughout the painting. The poem, which is read from right to left, refers to changing seasons and flying geese. For example, one couplet reads, “The sand is bright, the water is blue, the moss and reeds grow long; This is the time when autumn geese get ready to depart.”