

WONKYUNG BYUN, CURATOR
A PINE TREE TELLING US ABOUT “THE PINE TREE”

The most frequent question people have when they see photographs by Bae, Bien-U, is, “What kind of tree is it?” The question is probably not about the tree itself, but about the kind of tree, the material of the pictures, the function and usage of the tree. The artist says these trees can be easily found around the royal tombs in the mountains of Kyongju in Korea. However, the question still remains unsolved. The meaning of an object can be explained differently according to the place it is located, its culture, or the people who live there. This is because the meaning of a certain object is applied differently by people with different points of view in different locations. When an artist has spent all his life exploring and describing a certain object, it is worthwhile to listen to the stories of the artist’s personal experience and the meaning he attaches to the object.

Pine is the most important symbolic tree in East Asian, Sinitic, culture, which includes Japan and Korea. It has often been used as a major subject in literature and other fields of art. The word for *pine tree* carries dignity,¹ and the tree is extraordinarily popular.² Koreans love pine trees not because the tree has a special beauty or practical value, but rather because it has a special meaning for the people. The pine tree is strongly fixed in the minds and habits of Koreans from the cradle to the grave. Koreans are born in the earth covered with thick forests of pine trees, and parents congratulate their newborns by putting pine branches on the doors. Koreans use pine needles, bark, and pollen as special ingredients for holiday dishes. And they bury the dead in coffins made of pinewood surrounded by pine forests, since the people have a belief that the pine tree is a messenger to deliver the souls of the dead to heaven. In an

old town in Korea, people treat the tree as a divine being. They pray to the tree for the health of their families, for their husbands’ safe returns home, and their children’s successful futures. And some pine trees are officially taken care of by the government.

Korea has four distinct seasons, and almost all the trees and grass turn yellow and lose their leaves in the winter. But pine always stays green and withstands the cold and snowy season without any change. Among all of the trees and forests in Korea, Koreans gaze most respectfully at pine trees. People can feel the vitality of pine trees, which can survive between rocks on cliffs and along windy seashores against strong waves.

Pine trees, moreover, played a major role in the production of Choson white porcelain, famous for its gentle and noble beauty—its role in transforming mere earth into pure white beauty by baking the surface of the china in a fire of over 1,200 degrees Celsius without ash or flakes from leftover dirt.

Also, pine trees were cherished by gentlemen who enjoyed poetry with calligraphy and painting. The ink sticks they used for their works were made from pine and the mild, but thick, ink with a deep aura is made of ash from the pine. East Asian culture has quite a long history of painting mountains and water (rivers, waterfalls, and so on), and of these subjects, pine trees have been the most popular.

They complement rocks to perfectly create a mountain scene with trees. Pine has no fancy flowers, no wide or splendid leaves, and no fruit to fill the stomach and quench the thirst. But, in itself, pine gives comfort and power to Koreans who have suffered much throughout history.