

Every Picture Tells a Story: The New York Unicorn Tapestries and Daesoon Jinrihoe's Simudo Paintings

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Abstract

Both the late 15th-century Unicorn Tapestries now at the Cloisters Museum in New York and Daeseon Jinrihoe's Simudo Paintings present a religious narrative through the symbol of the search for an animal that is then subdued. This is now the prevailing scholarly interpretation of the New York Unicorn Tapestries, with the unicorn representing Jesus Christ, although a concurrent reading alluding to human love cannot be excluded. The article examines the New York Unicorn Tapestries according to their Christological interpretation, rooted in traditions about the unicorn popularized by the German medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen, although in fact much older. It then discusses the Buddhist iconographic tradition of ox-herding paintings that represents an antecedent for the Simudo Paintings and notes the latter's differences and similarities with the New York Unicorn Tapestries.

Keywords: Unicorn; New York Unicorn Tapestries; Hildegard of Bingen; Ox Herding Paintings; Simudo Paintings

Introduction

The seven Unicorn Tapestries, dating from the late 15th century, are now at the Cloisters Museum, a unique New York institution, for which parts of abbeys from Catalonia and France were disassembled stone-by-stone, shipped, and rebuilt along the Hudson River between 1927 and 1938. They are regarded by some critics as the best tapestries of all time. The New York Unicorn Tapestries belong to the same genre of Daesoon Jinriho's Simudo Paintings. Beyond their artistic value, they are didascalic works, where (to echo the title of Rod Stewart's song) every picture tells a story. In both cases, a spiritual message is conveyed through a human encounter with an animal, real or mythical: an ox in the Simudo Paintings and a unicorn in the Unicorn Tapestries.

This article first discusses the Unicorn Tapestries and their interpretation as a Christological metaphor. Then, it presents the Simudo Paintings in their historical context, and evidences their differences and similarities with the Unicorn Tapestries.

The Unicorn Tapestries

The seven Unicorn Tapestries of the Cloisters Museum in New York have many mysterious aspects. They were owned by the French La Rochefoucauld family until they were purchased by John D. Rockefeller Jr. (1839–1937), considered the richest man of all time in 1922. However, it is unknown exactly when, where, or for whom they were woven. It has been speculated that the tapestries were produced as Parisian cartoons in Brussels shortly before or shortly after the conventional end of the Middle Ages in 1492 (Freeman 1976, 13).

The French Revolution, neither recognizing in them symbols of the monarchy nor understanding their religious significance, did not destroy the tapestries, but let local peasants appropriate them in the looting of the La Rochefoucauld chateau in Verteuil. They were used for years as blankets or cloths to cover agricultural products before the La Rochefoucaulds found and repurchased them in the 19th century (Cavallo 1998, 13). That, except for one, they have survived in excellent condition testifies to the extraordinary quality of the tapestries, considered by many to be the best of their age if not of the entire history of art.

There is a whole literature on the letters A-E, which are repeated throughout the tapestries, which according to the prevailing interpretation should indicate the initials of the spouses for whose wedding they were created, but who have not been identified exactly (Cavallo 1998, 32–34)¹. The letters could therefore also have a symbolic meaning, and the E, as it almost always appears reversed, could allude to the Greek letter omega. The pair of letters A-E would thus mean alpha and omega, the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. "Alpha and omega" in Greek philosophy identified the whole universe, as all things have a name of which the initial can only be comprised

between “alpha” and “omega.” In Christian times, this became also a reference to Jesus Christ who for Christians is precisely “the alpha and the omega,” the beginning and the end of all things.

It is also unclear in what sequence the seven tapestries should be read, which only remains in two fragments. The prevailing scholarly hypothesis, although not the only one, is that a totally coherent reading of the whole is not possible. Although produced for the same patron, they would be part of at least two different cycles (Cavallo 1993, 297–327).

The first cycle might have originally included other tapestries that have since been lost. It consists of two scenes and depicts the hunting of the unicorn as an allegory of love. The second cycle of four scenes, on the other hand, depicts the same unicorn hunt as an allegory of the passion of Jesus Christ. The secular interpretation referred to courtly love prevails for another famous series of unicorn tapestries, the one at the Cluny Museum of Paris (Boudet 1999). But the two series are different.

Moreover, a unifying moment comes from the fact that the whole theme of the unicorn and its meanings was explored in depth by Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a German Benedictine nun and the author of numerous influential texts widely read throughout the Middle Ages and beyond (Burnett and Dronke 1998; Flanagan 1998). On October 7, 2012, Hildegard was proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI (1927–2022) a Doctor of the Church, a distinction accorded to theologians the Catholic Church recognizes as particularly authoritative (Benedict XVI 2012).

There is no doubt that Hildegard believed that unicorns really existed, and that the powder taken from their horns had medicinal properties. Although since the Renaissance, and even more so in the nineteenth century, people saw this widespread belief as a typical example of medieval gullibility, many of the ancient accounts of unicorns’ horns most likely refer to rhinoceroses, and traditional Chinese medicine still claims that rhino horn powder has therapeutic properties. In addition, the way the Middle Ages described the unicorn’s horn leads one to conclude that they were familiar with the Arctic cetacean called the narwhal. Its “horn” (actually a tooth) has the twisting pattern typical of medieval depictions of unicorns, and sailors often called it a “sea unicorn.” The “unicorn horns” inventoried among the properties of physicians, who attested to their efficacy, and even Popes of the Middle Ages (and beyond) came in most cases either from the rhinoceros or the narwhal (Giblin 1991; Lavers 2009).

If Hildegard, who was interested in medicine, believed in the medicinal virtues of the horn of the mythical animal, these virtues for her ultimately derived from the circumstance that the unicorn had a mysterious connection with Jesus Christ. She submitted her vision to the great mystical theologian Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and to the Popes of the time. Both approved them, and they were later collected in the *Liber vitae meritorum* (Boudes 2020).

In one of the visions, Hildegard presents us with a universal judgment where a man rotates together with the four regions of the Earth while a unicorn stands near his left thigh and is “intent on licking his knees.” There has been no shortage of those who have interpreted the unicorn in this vision as a kind of minister or lieutenant of Jesus Christ, and certainly Hildegard’s visions are open to multiple interpretations. However, the German nun clearly states that “the man you see rotating together with the four regions of the world indicates God who, at the end of the world, showing his power together with the heavenly virtues, will strike the ends of the earth.” And so the unicorn is Jesus Christ, who “lapping at the knees of Man, that is, receiving from God the power to judge, proclaims that the whole world must be cleansed by fire and must be renewed in another way, and even the wickedness of men must be subjected to his judgment, and what is holy in the righteous and good works of men must be brought to perfection” (*Liber vitae meritorum* VI, 1–14; see Hildegard of Bingen 2013, 112–113).

Hildegard did not invent the reading of the unicorn as a symbol of Jesus Christ, which had a patristic tradition and went back at least to Basil the Great (ca. 329–375: Gallardo Luque 2019). But she made it immensely popular. With her expertise in medicine and natural remedies, she explicitly linked the fact that the unicorn represents Jesus Christ with the therapeutic properties of his horn, well-known in the Middle Ages. A symbol that pre-existed Christianity thus found itself definitively transformed into a Christian symbol.

Hildegard was probably familiar with the *Physiologus*, a text that was itself popular in the Middle Ages. It was a bestiary, probably composed in Alexandria, Egypt, between the second and fourth centuries CE. From the *Physiologus* the Middle Ages drew the legend that it is almost impossible to catch a unicorn, but the animal will willingly allow itself to be caught and tamed if it encounters a virgin, which it is able to recognize as such by smell. One can hunt and even kill a unicorn, but first a virgin must have tamed it (Gallardo Luque 2019, 87–90).

The Christian interpretation of the legend is obvious, but it acquired considerable iconographic complexity during the Middle Ages (Faidutti 1996). The archangel Gabriel, who brings the announcement to the Virgin Mary, is depicted as a hunter. Gabriel induces the unicorn—that is, Christ—to allow himself to be captured by the Virgin Mary and enclosed in her womb as a “hortus conclusus,” a closed garden with a fence. Once the unicorn, or Jesus Christ, came into the world, he became vulnerable and might be killed (García Fernández 1997).

As for the first story, including the unicorn in the Christian narrative of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary, there are numerous representations of it in late medieval art. Some are in tapestries used as tablecloths or altar cloths and preserved in the Swiss National Museum in Zurich. Others in paintings from the circle of the Rhineland painter Martin Schongauer (1450–1491), who had a considerable

influence on contemporary European artists (Lacarra Ducay 1984), one of which is in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France and another in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. The hunter blowing the horn is the archangel Gabriel, signaling the time for the unicorn, Jesus Christ, to allow himself to be enclosed in a fence and incarnate in the womb of the purest Virgin, Mary.

These precedents are important because they show how it is not entirely possible to separate the erotic and the religious meanings in the symbolic cycle of the unicorn. Hildegard herself dealt extensively with human love, certainly presenting it as an image of divine love but enriching her analysis with surprisingly precise details about male and female sexuality (Flanagan 1998). It is likely, therefore, that the first New York tapestry in a logical sequence is the one of which only two fragments remain, and that it originally depicted the incarnation of God on Earth as Jesus Christ.

In the first fragment we see the hunter standing outside the fence and blowing the horn. In the religious interpretation, it is the archangel Gabriel. He has two dogs with him, and two other dogs are present in the second fragment. These four dogs are Truth, Justice, Peace and Mercy (Cavallo 1998, 30). In earlier tapestries, the dogs even carry cartouches with the names of these virtues. They allude to the sacred medieval representations where the virtues, personified, are the “Four Daughters of God” who intervene in the “trial” of the fallen humans, which leads the Trinity to decide to intervene on their behalf through the Incarnation. Already visible in this first fragment are the red and white roses, a symbol of the Virgin Mary’s purity and charity, and we notice how inside the enclosure is a tree, an apple tree, which is the Tree of Knowledge of the Garden of Eden.

These details help us decipher the second fragment. We see the unicorn, Christ, inside the enclosure where Gabriel’s dogs pushed him. One bites him, but it is a love bite. We do not see the Virgin Mary, however, who must have been in one of the lost parts of the tapestry. The red-clad woman in the fragment has an ambiguous and allusive air and is certainly not the Virgin Mary. A comparison with other tapestries of the unicorn, and the presence in the enclosure of the Tree of Knowledge, allow us to conclude that the figure is instead Eve. By her guilt in the Garden of Eden, Eve initiates the process that in the Biblical narrative of salvation leads to the Incarnation. It is therefore likely that the lost portions of this first tapestry also featured Adam.

Let us remember, again, that medieval symbols are always open to multiple interpretations. The first tapestry can also be read as an allegory of love, personified by the hunter, who urges the knight to allow himself to be conquered by his lady. It is probable that this reading was not absent among the earliest owners of the New York tapestries, likely woven for a wedding.

The second tapestry is the most famous of the series. Although art historians point out that the tapestries from the third to the seventh are the result of a much more refined technique, almost prodigious in transferring complex lines and colors onto the fabric,

in its simplicity this second tapestry has struck the imagination of many generations and has often been copied and reproduced, right up to the present day. Those familiar with the Harry Potter saga know that the related books and films, where unicorns play a role of some importance, place it within the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, which is the central location of the story. And today, the tapestry has not escaped the relentless logic of commerce, reproduced on countless T-shirts, mugs, ashtrays, and pillows (Cavallo 1998).

This tapestry is so striking and moving because it tells a universal story. The unicorn is wounded, although love wounds do not seem to hurt too much. It is now inside the enclosure, tied to a pomegranate tree, a traditional symbol since ancient Greece of sexuality and fertility. The collar of his chain symbolizes the bond with the lady. The unicorn lives in happy captivity within the enclosure, which has all the characteristics of a late medieval garden of delights. Hidden in the tapestry are animals such as butterflies and dragonflies. Together with a small frog, almost invisible above the letter A in the monogram at the lower right, these animals reinforce the secular reading of the tapestry (Freeman 1976, 79). The butterfly and the dragonfly in the Middle Ages were symbols of fertility, and an aphrodisiac powder was made from the frog's bones.

However, the flowers cannot be overlooked. They constitute the real wealth of the tapestry. There are about fifty different flowers here, and one hundred and one different plant species have been identified in the series of seven tapestries (Alexander and Woodward 1941), as the study continues with the help of botanical specialists. The majority of flowers in this tapestry have religious significance connected in medieval symbolism to the Virgin Mary: irises, roses, violets, lilies (not coincidentally called "of the Madonna"), and carnations. There are also wild strawberries, which in the Middle Ages were compared to manna and considered the food of the saints in heaven (Freeman 1976, 117).

Ultimately, it makes no sense to consider the secular and religious interpretations as alternatives. Both are present in the polysemantic late Medieval symbolic context. The unicorn is the knight conquered by the lady; and the Middle Ages, unlike later epochs, had no fear of including explicit allusions to sexuality among its symbols. At the same time, the unicorn is Jesus Christ in the "hortus conclusus" that is the Virgin Mary. The idea of voluntary imprisonment can apply to both the secular and the religious meaning.

The key to interpreting the tapestry series according to the Christological meaning of Hildegard is to understand that the unicorn, Jesus Christ, is actually hunted twice. The first hunt is the Incarnation, and it ends with the "imprisonment" of the unicorn within the fence that is the womb of the Virgin Mary. The second hunt is the Passion, and it ends with the death of the unicorn. If we do not divide the seven tapestries into two series, we find it impossible to understand how the unicorn can, at the end of the story, both be captured alive and killed. In fact, they are two different stories.

The tapestry I regard as the third has been differently interpreted as the beginning of

the first hunt or the second hunt (Freeman 1973–74, 25). Discussions cannot be said to be over yet. Here, the unknown artist shows his familiarity with medieval treatises on hunting. The three characters on the left, richly dressed, are noble hunters, while on the right we see three beaters who are servants, although specialized ones. Two lead the hunters while the third, above, calls to the others and signals that the unicorn has been found. Those who think that this tapestry is part of the first series rather than the second insist that its great wealth of vegetation included numerous fruit trees. There are, among others, a cherry tree and a plum tree, while the one the dogs have in front of them is a small date palm tree, all possible symbols of sexuality and fertility. As always, symbols have different meanings. I believe the second hunt should have a beginning, which can only be this one.

Certainly part of a “mystical hunt” for the unicorn, no doubt alluding to the Passion of Christ, are the other four tapestries. In the first of these, the hunters have found the unicorn. In the center of the composition, however, is a fountain with lion-headed mouths, in which several animals are about to drink. And the unicorn, almost unconcerned about the hunters, is engaged in a rather curious activity. He lets his horn be bathed by the water coming out of the fountain.

Hildegard of Bingen teaches us that by immersing a unicorn’s horn in a poisonous liquid, the latter is purified and becomes harmless (Hildegard of Bingen 1988, 200). Throughout the Middle Ages there was no shortage of powerful people who took the wise precaution of dipping a “unicorn’s” horn (coming, actually, from rhinoceros or narwhal) into the water or wine they were about to drink, lest they be poisoned (Lavers 2009, 119). Here, however, Christological symbolism emerges. The water from the fountain of life has been poisoned by sin. Humans are in danger of falling into this irreparably polluted water driven by their vanity, as shown by the pheasant that mirrors itself in it. Only the unicorn, Jesus Christ, can purify this water. It does not care for the hunters because he is engaged in the work of redemption. The men who argue heatedly do not understand what exactly the unicorn is doing, that is, they do not understand redemption. And the character pointing to the unicorn is probably Judas, the apostle who betrayed Jesus.

As always in these tapestries, plants and animals play a very important role. The red roses behind the unicorn are symbolic of martyrdom and Passion. In the foreground, we find a whole series of animals: a pair of lions, a leopard, an ermine, a deer, and a hyena. The animal that, so to speak, should not be there is the hyena, which is usually a diabolical symbol, representing evil ready to make inroads into creation. The others in medieval bestiaries are all symbols of Jesus Christ. The lion is the king of animals as Christ is the king of cosmos and history. The legend that this royal animal’s cubs are born dead, but the lion after three days calls them to life, is an obvious allusion to the Resurrection of Christ three days after he was put into the grave (Freeman 1976, 68).

The leopard is what the Middle Ages called a “panther.” Only much later did zoology distinguish between the two animals. This “panther” has all the colors, just as Christ has all the virtues, and the colors give it incomparable beauty, as Christ is beauty itself. The two meanings of the unicorn hunt continue to be both present, as the panther is also a popular symbol of love in the troubadour world.

The ermine represents the purity of Christ, and the Middle Ages believed the legend that it would rather be caught by hunters than hide in the earth or mud staining its white fur. The deer symbolizes the faithfulness and stability of the Lord, the rock on which the world itself is built. Medieval bestiaries also made it an enemy of the serpent, i.e., the devil, whom it goes after and destroys.

The next tapestry (the fourth) is also inspired by the art of hunting. Manuals state that often the animal pursued by dogs hides in the water to make them lose the trail. But the ruse seldom works. Well-trained greyhounds do not lose the animal, and the experienced hunter will arrange the beaters in such a way as to close off to the prey all escape routes from the water from which it will sooner or later have to exit. Here, however, there is something different from the classic hunting scenes with dogs. One gets the impression that the unicorn is fully aware of the hunters’ presence and does not try to hide at all. It fiercely goes to meet its fate, just as consciously as Christ faced the Passion.

We also note that the hunters and beaters are not the same characters as in the previous tapestry. The stereotypical hooked nose, which certainly would not be politically correct today, may allude to the role of the Jewish people in the Passion story. Also rather sinister is the presence of a pair of partridges, which hide among the plants beside the water, unlike other more peaceful birds. Partridges are presented in bestiaries as particularly sensual and greedy birds. They steal the eggs of other animals, a figure of devils who want to steal grace from humans (Freeman 1976, 86–87). We note in passing that the FR letters at the top seem to refer to a François de la Rochefoucauld who owned the tapestry; they were added at a later date and have no symbolic meaning.

The drama of the unicorn, that is, the Passion of Jesus Christ, continues in a further tapestry (the fifth). Here the unicorn, close to being killed, seems instead to resist, like Jesus when he asks to be spared the bitter cup of the Passion. The fruit plants, including oranges and apricots, assure us that the sacrifice will not be in vain. It will be “fruitful,” and benefit all humanity.

In the sixth tapestry, the attack on the unicorn becomes more frantic and we understand the animal is about to be killed. There is also a very special character in the scene, the hunter on the left playing the horn and from whose spear hangs a sash with an inscription. This inscription reads, “Ave Regina C,” meaning “Hail, Queen of H[eaven].” The sash leaves no doubt that the character is the archangel Gabriel, whose insignia is the greeting to Mary in the Annunciation. But what is Gabriel doing

in Passion? The reference is unusual and even unique, but the identification of the hunter with Gabriel is certain. The artist wanted to insert a connection between the first and second series of tapestries, between the first and second unicorn hunts, which as mentioned above should not be entirely separated. The Passion is the ultimate truth of the Incarnation, and it reveals to us why Jesus became incarnate: to save us through his Passion and death, by doing the work of redemption. Hence the reference to the Incarnation and the rather surprising presence of Gabriel, who in the Gospels is mentioned exclusively as the angel of the Incarnation, right in the middle of an allegory of Passion.

Finally, all is consummated. The last dramatic tapestry, the seventh, the only one where the unicorn is depicted twice, shows us the killing of the animal and its transport to the castle. Above, the unicorn is killed, with a final blow reminiscent of the one to Christ's side on the cross. While from one tapestry to the next normally the faces of the hunters change, here the character blowing the horn is the same as in the previous tapestry: thus, it is still archangel Gabriel, coming to announce the Lord's death just as he had announced his birth (a visual equivalent to what Biblical scholars call a chiasmus).

Further down, the unicorn, loaded on a horse, is carried to the castle, that is, to the grave. The scene is a deposition from the cross: behind the dead unicorn is a bramble bush, reminiscent of the crown of thorns. From the castle comes a woman, reciting the Rosary, and a man, followed by three women, all of them not with the satisfied expression of someone who has organized a hunt that went well but with serious and mournful faces. Two interpretations have been advanced of this procession. Some believe it is Eve and Adam, the price of whose sin has now been paid by the immolated unicorn; and in this case the three women and other characters symbolize sinful humanity. Another, more recent interpretation, however, holds that the man and woman in the foreground are the Virgin Mary herself and the apostle John, followed by the three Marys and other disciples (Cavallo 1998, 75).

Here, too, various animals have symbolic meaning. A lesson for the viewer of the tapestry is imparted by the squirrel, hidden in the lower left corner. Animals that are difficult to spot in early tapestries always have a definite meaning. According to the bestiaries, the squirrel escapes hunters and traps by always remaining at the highest part of the trees. It serves as a lesson to humans, that as long as they remain on the high peaks of prayer and meditation, they do not fall into the traps of the devil (Freeman 1976, 88–89). Over the bramble bush hovers discreetly a dove, the Holy Spirit.

Although here the tapestry, which has also undergone mending so that the monogram AE at the bottom has disappeared, is slightly discolored, a swan, whose song is an omen of good fortune, swims around the castle. This good fortune is resurrection, but all medieval iconographic cycles of the unicorn never show it resurrected (Cavallo

1998, 75). However, there is a definite omen of resurrection in the presence of the oak tree. The oak was a symbol of resurrection already for classical antiquity. Oak branches encircle the neck of the dead unicorn and keep the horn tied to the animal. A hunter holds the horn in his hand, indicating the procession that has descended from the castle. In Hildegard's pharmacopoeia, the unicorn's horn both physically liberates from poisons and is a symbol of Christ liberating humans from their sins (Hildegard of Bingen 1988, 198–200).

Thus the symbol of the unicorn acquires its full meaning. Life is full of poisons, strewn in our path by the devil, and without the unicorn, Jesus Christ, we can hardly escape being poisoned.

The Buddhist Tradition of Ox Herding Paintings

According to French Sinologist Catherine Despeux, in China references to ox herding as a metaphor for enlightenment appeared in Chan Buddhism as early as the 7th century CE. There are also parallels in Taoism and Tibetan Buddhism, although the animals tamed there also include horses and elephants. Buddhist ox herding iconography became common throughout East Asia between the 10th and the 12th centuries (Despeux 1981, 7).

Paintings were preceded by poems, which Despeux classifies into “Puming-type,” or “gradualists,” and “Kuoan-type,” or “immediatists.” The names refer to poems written by or attributed to Puming, a possibly legendary figure who might have lived around the year 1000, and to 12th century Chan master Kuoan Shiyuan. Puming verses advocated gradual enlightenment. Kuoan's enlightenment was an immediate, sudden experience. This was reflected in their different poems on ox herding, which in turn inspired different cycles of paintings. Despeux insists that the fact that the cycles included six, eight, ten, or twelve paintings is less important than their depiction of a gradual or, alternatively, an immediate enlightenment (Despeux 1981, 52–54).

Both series of paintings feature a boy looking for an ox, finding and herding it, and gaining enlightenment as a consequence. In the Puming version, the ox is originally black and only becomes white gradually, which symbolizes the graduality of the enlightenment. In the end, both the ox and the boy himself disappear, as the enlightenment is complete and the phenomenal world is no longer necessary (Despeux 1981, 12–31).

In the Kuoan version, the ox does not change its color. Its herding is instantaneous. In the most famous series depicting this version, produced in Japan by Zen Buddhist priest and artist Tenshō Shūbun (1414–1463), the empty circle resulting from the disappearance of both boy and ox is the eighth painting in a series of ten. In the last painting, we see a beggar and a monk. According to Taiwanese Chan Master Sheng

Yen (1931–2009), “the beggar represents suffering, the monk a practitioner who has completed his practice. He has left the isolation of the mountain and returned to the world to help all beings. He has no vexations, but because others suffer he spontaneously provides help on the path to all needful beings” (Sheng Yen 1996). While some comments identify the beggar with the boy who appears in the precedent paintings, Despeux suggests that both the beggar and the monk may represent the young man who has herded the ox. He is depicted twice in the same painting, before the enlightenment as the beggar and after he has been enlightened as the monk (Despeux 2014).

Daesoon Jinrihoe’s Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex: A Sacred Space and Its Art

Daesoon Jinrihoe’s Simudo Paintings have their antecedents in the ox-herding Buddhist iconography but should also be read in the context of the Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex, which is both a sacred space and a functional center for a variety of different activities (Šorytė 2018), and its different paintings and sculptures (AADDJ 2018b).

Sacred spaces created by Daesoon Jinrihoe are the result of a collective effort wherein many devotees cooperating with one another. Paintings and sculptures are not signed, and the name of the artists is not considered important. The collective exercise of *baewon sangsaeng*, “the resolution of grievances for mutual beneficence” (Kim 2017), through the creation of beauty is regarded as much more significant than the promotion of any one given devotee as an “artist.” This does not mean; however, that Daesoon Jinrihoe did not create its own distinctive style in the visual arts. Although firmly rooted in Korean tradition, it also displays a certain otherworldly character, whose aim is to remind those who look at the buildings, the sculptures, and the paintings that Daesoon Jinrihoe announces the future earthly paradise. While the concept of “symbolism” is now disputed in the West, the movement’s works of art can be defined as “symbolist” in the sense that their symbolic significance is more important than their literal meaning.

Visitors to the Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex enter through the Sungdo Gate, whose name means “Worshipping the Dao,” into the most holy area of the Complex, called “Jeong-nae” (sanctuary inner court). The Sungdo Gate conveys an impression of majesty and is reminiscent of the gates in the royal palaces of the kings of Korea. Upon entering, disciples stand facing the Bonjeon, the main building, and bow with their hands together. On the wall of Sungdo gate, there are mural paintings including the pictures of the four guardian deities in charge of the four directions.

The most sacred place of the Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex is the Bonjeon, a four-storied building that outwardly appears to be only three stories high. On the fourth and the highest floor of the Bonjeon is the Yeongdae, where the founder of the

religious tradition Kang Jeungsan (1871–1909, regarded by devotees as an incarnation of Gucheon Sangje, the Lord of the Ninth Heaven) and other “great deities” are enshrined in fifteen “holy positions.” In the second and third floor, only Kang Jeungsan is enshrined in a holy portrait. The fourth floor enshrined the fifteen categories of Great Deities, including Gucheon Sangje, in holy portraits or holy tablets.

The primary godships include Gucheon Sangje (Kang Jeungsan), Okhwang-sangje (the Great Jade Emperor, whom Daesoon Jinrihoe identifies with the divinized Jo Jeungsan, 1895-1958, recognized by the movement as Kang’s successor in the orthodox religious authority), and Buddha Sakyamuni, who are surrounded by other deities, in twelve holy positions. These include the Myeongbusiwang (the ten otherworldly spiritual kings who judge human souls in the afterlife), the Oaksanwang (the five earthly spiritual kings in charge of the mountains in five directions of Earth), the Sahaeyongwang (the four spiritual dragon kings in charge of the seas), the Sasitowang (the four earthly spiritual kings in charge of the four seasons), Gwanseongjegun (the Chinese general Guan Yu, who died in 220 CE and was divinized in Korean folk religion as a heavenly king protecting against evil spirits or demons), Chilseongdaeje (the Big Dipper kings who are in charge of human lifespan and fortune), the Jikseonjo (paternal ancestors), the Oeseonjo (maternal ancestors), Chilseongsaja (the Big Dipper messengers, who aids the Chilseongdaeje), Ujiksaja and Jwajiksaja (the other two categories of messengers who aid the Chilseongdaeje), and Myeongbusaja (the psychopomp who guides the newly arrived souls in the afterlife).

Outside the Bonjeon, in Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex visitors encounter the Cheonggye Pagoda, which represents the cosmological view of Daesoon Jinrihoe and whose sculptures are at the same time one of the movement’s main artistic achievements. The Pagoda includes four parts: the pedestal, the lower body, the upper body, and the top. In turn, each part consists of different layers. The pedestal has three layers. The first includes a series of engraved pictures called Simudo, which reproduce the Simudo Paintings. In the second layer, the Sashindo Pictures portray the four symbolic animal deities who represent the four seasons and four directions. In the third layer, there are the twelve deities of the Chinese zodiac (Sibijisindo), who correspond to the twelve months and twelve directions.

The lower body of the Pagoda includes three octagonal layers, engraved with the twenty-four divinities who oversee the twenty-four seasonal subdivisions (i.e., twenty-four solar terms in the year, spaced roughly fifteen days apart). The upper body includes seven quadrangular layers, engraved with the images of the twenty-eight divinities in charge of the constellations. The top consists of nine round layers, representing the Ninth Heaven, the highest place in the universe and the seat of Sangje, who coordinates from there the whole universe. The Cheonggye Pagoda does have some of its artistic antecedents in the Korean tradition, yet its project is aimed at representing the peculiar cosmology of Daesoon Jinrihoe.

In the Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex, there are several cycles of paintings and single pictorial works, of which three are particularly important. In addition to the Simudo Paintings there is the mural painting of *haewon sangsaeng*.

The *haewon sangsaeng* painting depicts a woman carrying her baby on her back and walking down a country road, with a snack basket set on her head. The mother's look towards her child is one of unconditional love, and the child can find no other place safer or more comfortable than her mother's back, despite the weight she is carrying. There are no grievances, nor seeds for future grievances, as mother and child are in perfect harmony with each other. *Haewon sangsaeng* implies that all human relationships can be based on trust and love, just like that of the mother and child in the painting. The dignified and harmonious style of the painting evokes Kang Jeungsan's concept of *Injon* (human nobility), wherein humans emerge as the worthiest beings in the Three Realms in the coming era. This is an earthly announcement of the harmony of the future paradise achieved through the practice of *Haewon sangsaeng*.

The Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex also includes what are known as Sacred Paintings, which illustrate the life of Kang Jeungsan and Jo Jeongsan (AADDJ 2018a). The hall where they are displayed is normally accessible to members of the religion only. Compared to the highly symbolic Simudo Paintings, their style is somewhat simpler, and they serve primarily a didactic purpose.

The Simudo Paintings

The Simudo Paintings at the Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex should be read in an ideal conversation with the other paintings and sculptures. They form a whole system of references to Daesoon Jinrihoe's worldview and theology.

In Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Ox-Seeking Pictures (Simudo) number six rather than the ten most frequently found in Buddhist versions. However, in Daesoon Jinrihoe's Pocheon temple complex the Simudo paintings come to nine rather than six. The additional pictures represent the difficulties the boy experiences in herding the ox, losing it, then finding it again. According to David Kim, initially "the boy (devotee or disciple) has not fully realized the meaning of the Dao," although another picture indicates that he "has begun to understand the Daesoon Dao" (Kim 2020, 219–220).

Also, in the Pocheon paintings the ox is initially brown, which clarifies that the Daesoon Jinrihoe version is closer to what Despeux calls a "gradualist" approach to enlightenment. However, the Daesoon Simudo paintings have in common with the non-gradualist "Kuoan" version the fact that in the last panel the boy does not disappear but is depicted as converted into an earthly immortal (Kim 2020, 219).

At the Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex, the Ox-seeking pictures appear twice: first, as mentioned earlier, on the first layer of the pedestal of Blue Rooster Pagoda and then again as a series of wall murals (AADDJ 2017, 59–61; 2018b, 42–45). Also,

at the Museum of Daeseon Jinrihoe at the headquarters, there is a digitally animated version of the Ox-seeking Pictures that is displayed across six screens. Each screen first shows one animated picture to demonstrate how the six appear as a series, but then the progression of the entire story is shown across all of the screens used in unison to form one large screen.

The first Simudo picture is called *Simsim-yuob* (deep contemplation leading to awakening). The boy, under a pine, contemplates the greatest questions of human existence. The second picture is *Bongdeuk-singyo* (to find and follow Heavenly Teachings). The boy finds the hoof prints left by the white ox. These prints symbolize the guidance of divine beings, who introduce the seeker to the truth. But the truth has not yet been grasped, and in the third picture, *Myeoni-suji* (to keep training and overcome hardships), the boy finally starts seeing the ox. The ox soon disappears behind a rocky peak, while the young seeker should follow a bumpy road under a storm and lightning. This is the stage of the problems and difficulties each seeker of the truth should overcome.

But the boy does not give up, and in the fourth picture, *Seongji-useong* (to keep devoting oneself to the Dao of Daeseon Truth), his efforts are rewarded, and he finds and pets the white ox under a clear sky. The seeker has found the truth, and the truth would carry him into a higher life. This is depicted in the fifth painting, *Dotong-jingyeong* (perfected unification with the Dao of Daeseon Truth), where the boy rides the white ox, which means perfected unification with the Dao. He quietly plays the flute while the season has changed to autumn, which “indicates that his cultivation has come to the full fruition” (AADDJ 2018b, 45).

The sixth painting is called *Doji-tongmyeong* (the Later World of Earthly Paradise). The boy has perfectly unified with the Dao of Daeseon Truth and becomes an earthly immortal. The world is transformed into a land of beauty, where heavenly maids play music, elixir plants are in full bloom, and cranes leisurely enjoy peace in a nearby meadow. This represents the earthly paradise, where Daeseon Truth is fully realized (AADDJ 2017, 59–61; 2018b, 42–45).

The Simudo Paintings and the New York Unicorn Tapestries

There are two immediate differences between the New York Unicorn Tapestries and Daeseon Jinrihoe’s Simudo Paintings. First, there are no disputes about the essential meaning of the latter, whether the religious meaning of the Unicorn Tapestries became an accepted scholarly theory only after considerable discussion and dispute. Second, there are no believable alternatives or concurrent meanings of the Simudo Paintings competing with the religious one, while the New York Unicorn Tapestries can also have a secular interpretation as an allegory of courtly love.

As opposite to the New York Unicorn Tapestries, the Simudo Paintings of Daeseon

Jinrihoe have a generally accepted “canonical” interpretation, which is rooted in the Buddhist ox-herding paintings and poems, although with original Daeseon features. They depict the process of spiritual cultivation using the metaphor of a boy finding a white ox. Unlike the Unicorn Tapestries, it is generally accepted that the ox herding iconographic tradition has a clear spiritual meaning, which does not have to compete with another reading as a metaphor of human romantic love. The New York Unicorn Tapestries, however, include the violence of hunting, which is absent in the peaceful Simudo Paintings.

On the other hand, there are also important similarities. Both cycles of paintings tell an important spiritual story through an animal, the unicorn in the New York tapestries and the ox in Daeseon Jinrihoe’s pictures. In both series, the animal is initially wild, and needs to be found and subdued. Although the unicorn is hunted while the ox is peacefully herded, in the second New York tapestry, which concludes the first hunt, the mythical animal has been tamed. It is only in the second hunt that the specifically Christian theme of a bloody sacrifice of the unicorn/Christ emerges and makes the New York tapestries ideologically different from the Simudo paintings.

Just as the unicorn is a symbol of Christ, who said of himself “I am the Truth” (John 14:6), in the New York Unicorn Tapestries, in the Simudo Paintings the white ox represents the Dao of Daeseon Truth. In both series, devotees are invited to a self-cultivation process that makes them progressively united with the Truth.

That this is a universal and powerful theme is confirmed by the fact that Canadian singer and songwriter Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) transposed the ox-herding story into his *Ballad of the Absent Mare*, released in 1979. As one critic wrote, in the *Ballad* “Cohen transforms *Ten Bulls* [the East Asian ox painting cycle] into a modern cowboy story, in which the lost ox becomes a horse, a mare” (“Fjodor” 2020) The mare is found “there where the light and the darkness divide.” The animal is tamed and enters with the cowboy into a Buddhist netherworld where “there is no space but there’s left and right and there is no time but there’s day and night” (Cohen 1979).

Just as it happens in the Simudo Paintings, the cowboy “has become one” with the animal. It “has finally unified himself with the Dao” and “has achieved a perfect condition of a quiet mind and a quiet body” (Kim 2020, 218).

Conclusion

This is the final goal of suffering humanity. That we follow a Christian unicorn, Daeseon Jinrihoe’s white ox, or the horse pursued by Leonard Cohen as a Jewish-Buddhist cowboy, we continue to cultivate our eternal dreams of enlightenment, liberation, and truth.

Conflict of Interest

Massimo Introvigne has been an Honorary Editor of JDTEA since July 2021 but had no role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Note

¹ I rely on Cavallo 1998 and some comments by Freeman 1973–74 and 1976 but the responsibility for the reading presented here is mine

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