Meejung Kim-MaranDET discloses how she restored an important Korean painting to its former glory.

While investigating the collections in storage in 2018, Eleanor Soo-ah Hyun, former curator of the Korean collections, found that a painting by Chang Woo-Soung (장우성 張遇聖, 1912–2005) had brown stains over the surface.

Fortunately, 2018 was the first year of the Amorepacific Project for the Conservation of Korean Pictorial Art at the British Museum and the start of my appointment as project conservator. The Amorepacific Project aims to examine and conserve the Museum’s Korean pictorial collection, and this painting became a prime candidate.

Eleanor brought the painting to my attention and after a careful assessment a treatment plan was devised.

Entitled *Flying Cranes* (새안 塞雁), the modern Korean painter Chang Woo-Soung (soubriquets: Woljeon, 월전 月 田 and Banryongsan, 반룡산人 盤龍山人) created this painting using ink and colour on hwaseonji (the name for a kind of Chinese xuan paper produced and distributed in Korea) in 1983.

Classified as a literary painter because of his subjects and scholarship, Chang Woo-Soung was born in 1912 in Yeoju (province of Gyeonggi-do) into a family of yangban, a name used to refer to cultivated people in Korea during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). This was then the beginning of the Japanese colonial period, and at the age of 18 he began studying traditional painting under Kim Eun-ho (1892–1978), who had been the very last court painter during the Joseon dynasty. The author of royal portraits, he was at the head of a school, including Chang Woo-Soung and Kim Ki-chang, which became one of the mainstreams of ink painting in the 1930s. Named the Hwahoe (後素 會), Kim Eun-ho’s ‘academy’ organised annual exhibitions from 1936 to 1943.

Chang Woo-Soung was responsible for continuing the secular tradition that combined poetry, calligraphy and painting. Nevertheless, he formed a...
more personal style after the liberation from Japan in 1945, his concise vision of the world contributing to a new direction of Korean ink painting. His literary style became known as the ‘Woljeon Style’. In 1994–5, Jane Portal, who was studying in Seoul and is now Keeper of Asia, met Chang Woo-Soung, who donated *Flying Cranes* as a gift to the Museum.

The composition of *Flying Cranes* is divided by a horizontal brushstroke across the top. The moon appears over that stroke in a light grey-blue sky. To the right, vertical brushstrokes depict swaying reeds while a flock of geese flies across the sky on the left. Below the line is a large empty expanse with an inscription along the right edge and a red seal in the upper left. The inscription is in hanja (traditional Chinese characters used in Korean writing) and is a four-line poem:

荒峽三更夜
秋風萬里情
孤飛何處雁
斷續月中聲

In a desert valley in the deep night
The autumn wind blows and drifts far away. Lonely geese fly away somewhere. Their sound interrupted in the moonlight.

Next to the poem are the date, artist’s signature, and seals: 癸亥秋 盤龍山人月田 (Mid-autumn 1983 by Banryongsanin Woljeon). Although the staining did not pose a threat to the integrity and materiality of the paper, the brown streaks did interfere with the composition, ruining the pristine white expanse and hindering the sense of a crisp autumn wind in a desert valley expressed in the inscription. The conservation treatment therefore focused on bleaching and remounting.

Browning and staining on paper is a common phenomenon. After removing the painting from the frame, glazing and the inner frame made of multiple layers of paper attached onto a wooden lattice support, I examined the mounting and the stain pattern, and identified that the damage was caused by gases given off from the mounting materials within the microenvironment inside the frame. It appears that the brown stains originated from the presence of resin inside the wooden materials used for its lattice support, which was not completely dry at the time the painting was mounted onto it. After researching different methods and considering the material and aesthetic qualities, I decided on a bleaching technique of applying hydrogen peroxide solution with brush and sprayer, followed by washing and drying. This was conducted several times. After removing the stains, the painting was lined with several sheets of Korean mulberry paper (*hanji*) and the silk border was reattached. Then the painting was remounted onto the inner frame attached with multiple layers of *hanji* and reframed. From the before and after photographs, it is obvious that the painting has been restored to its intended state and has been revived.

Another aim of the Amorepacific Project is the sharing of skills and collaborating with Korean experts. As a former conservator at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul and a specialist in modern Korean painting, Mr Cha Byung-Kap was invited to collaborate on the conservation of this painting. He came to the British Museum for two weeks in June 2019, making this a fruitful collaborative endeavour between UK- and Korea-based conservators. His consultation was particularly useful since he trained at the same mounting studio, Dong-san-bang in Seoul, where Chang Woo-Soung’s paintings had been mounted.

This is the first object to be conserved as part of the Amorepacific Project for the Conservation of Korean Pictorial Art at the British Museum. The newly conserved painting will be displayed in the Korea Foundation gallery (Room 67) in the near future, with labels describing the conservation process.