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TANG, Frank Yungfong / [ftang@google.com](mailto:ftang@google.com)

## The Composition and Usage of *Irworobongdo*, Five Peaks Screen, in Korean Culture

### Introduction

Five Peaks Screen, as known as *Irworobongdo* [KIM], is a unique Korean art theme, in composition and function, to represent the throne of the Korean Emperor [KOEHLER][CHOE]. It is highly influenced by Chinese and Japanese in artistic style and semantic, but unique in its composition and function. It is unique and continues its impact on Korean culture.

### Functional Usage

Five Peaks Screen is not a single painting, but rather a theme of fixed composition to serve the court of the Korean Empire [PARK]. Before the end of the Korean Empire, it was always placed behind the throne of the Emperor, in his ruling office, informal seating area, and mobile usage. It is the public image of the Korean Emperor [BROWN][WANG]. It is also placed behind the portrait of deceased Emperors [BAG][SON] to represent the benevolence characteristic of the kingship that persists after their death.

### Composition

All historical screens consist of: **Five peaks**: rendered in the same style, with the center peak slightly bigger; **Sun and moon**: Two circles in identical size symmetrically on the upper left and right with exactly the same height, between the first and second peak on each side. Right in solid red, as the sun, left in solid gold or white, as the moon; **River**: Two streams, one on each side, with two or three levels of waterfalls. Flow may change direction in each level; **Ocean**: with splashes in the lower center; **Four pine trees**, red trunks with moss spots. Two on each side

[KIM]. **Empty lower center:** since this region will be visually blocked by the throne so no important object will be drawn in this part. It is the reserved space for the Emperor. Robert Koehler in his tourist book “Throne Hall: Geunjeongjeon.” [KOEHLER]:

“It was said the folding screen was not complete unless the king was sitting before it.”

There are less than thirty historical screens surviving from the Empire era [BROWN][WANG]. High resolution images of fifteen historical screens can be found [Appendix A]. After careful comparison, we notice the variations are obvious in the following: It could be made by a different **number of panels**: single-panel [Illustration 1-2], four-panel folding [Illustration 3-4], six-panel folding [Illustration 5] or eight-panel folding [Illustration 6]. Most of the multi-panel folding screens, except two, can be distinguished by their **number of splashes**, **number of waterfall levels**, and water flowing **directions** on each level. The three single-panel screens all look very similar by these measures and their color usage and stroke styles. They can only be distinguished by the location of **the moss spots**. Two of the six-panel folding screens look very similar and only differ in their **moss spots**, the details of the wave, the strokes depicting the pipe trees and the peaks. Other noticeable variations are their color scheme, line thickness of the peaks, the relative height between peaks, the details of the ocean, the number of blue lines depicting the stream, the relative vertical position of the sun and moon to the peaks. These are all observed variations from the historical “Five Peak Screens”.

### Semantic and Meaning of Components

The semantics of each element in the “Five Peaks Screen” is highly influenced by the Chinese language, Chinese literature and the Confucianism teaching.

Concept of **five peaks** is first introduced in “Rites of Zhou”, written by the Duke of Zhou (1042–1035 B.C.E.). It represents the territory of the kingdom. The exact five mountains for that **five peaks** was not mentioned in its origin text and the set of five for the Chinese version was decided much later in Western *Han* dynasty. Korea adopted the **five peaks** concept a long time ago and historically had designated five mountains in Korea to represent its territorial boundary, even though it changed due to the territory shift. Placing the Emperor in front of the center peak, surrounded by four others, expresses the idea that the king is ruling the whole nation without ignoring any parts of his country.

The concept of using **sun** to represent *yang*, and **moon** to represent *yin* is also rooted from an old Chinese concept. The concept of *yin yang*, the balance of two forces of opposing characters, and their representation by sun and moon, were introduced in *Yi Jing*, “The Book of Changes”, in late 9th century B.C.E. China. Since in Asian architecture, all the houses are built in a “sitting north, facing south” principle, the right side facing the host is always east and the left side facing the host is always west. Therefore, the right side of the painting is to the east and the left side is west. Because the official meeting time is in the early morning, the time of sunrise, **sun** is placed on the right, the east, and the **moon** on the left, the west. This is maintained in all the historical screens but violated in one TV poster [Illustration 13]. River and mountain, *he shan*, in many Chinese poems is a synonym of “country”. The combination of two streams with the five peaks therefore redundantly represents the territory of their kingship. Several elements symbolize longevity. Charles Lachman, in his book discussing “*Shipjangsaengdo*- Ten Symbols of Longevity”, another famous Korean court art, wrote [LACHMAN]:

"The ten symbols of longevity – rocks, water, clouds, sun, pine trees, turtles, deer, cranes, bamboo, and fungus – represent a ubiquitous theme in the *Joseon*-period (1392–1910) visual culture of Korea."

Four of these ten symbols of longevity also appear in the "Five Peaks Screen" - the **rocks, water, sun, and pine tree**. The pattern and **splashes** in the lower portion represents the ocean, which is seldom seen in Chinese paintings because geographically most Chinese scholar painters live far away from them. Since Korea is located on a peninsula and had countless military conflicts with Japan over the sea historically, the artist depicted the ocean to express their defense power countering Japanese naval threat. This addition distinguishes the composition from those from China.

As a whole, the philosophy behind this composition is based on ideas in *Shijing*, the "Classic of Poetry" compiled by Confucius in 6 century B.C.E. in China. Quoted from an introduction article, National Palace Museum of Korea [NPMK]:

"The screen presents a panoramic view of natural elements, such as mountain peaks, the sun, the moon, streams, pine trees, etc., which represent the virtues of kings in the poem 'Tianbao' (天保) in Minor Odes of the Kingdom (*Shaoya*, 小雅), Book of Odes (*Shijing*, 詩經). ... In addition to representing dignity and sacredness, the panoramic symmetry of the composition adds a sense of stability and orderliness typical of a court painting."

In summary, the teaching of Confucianism and Chinese literature strongly influenced the semantics of this art. But the artists also blend in unique elements from Korean culture. The elevation of the moderate and balanced ruling philosophy to this level of public expression

officially blessed by the Emperor is unseen in China and Japan, not in the thousands years of Chinese or Japanese history, not even today.

### **Artistic Style**

There are several surviving historical screens and we cannot analyze all their artistic style due to the page limitation of this work. We observe many of them depicting the **peaks** with similar color schemes found in the famous “A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains” by *Wang Ximeng* (1096–1119 C.E. Song dynasty, China) [Illustration 7]. The abstraction to depict the **splashes** in the ocean is similar to the one in the famous Japanese “The Great Wave off Kanagawa” by *Katsushika Hokusai* (1760–1849 C.E. Japan) [Illustration 8]. The color scheme, strokes, and style to paint the **pine trees** with **moss spots** are similar to the traditional Korean style “*Shipjangsaengdo*, The Ten Symbols of Longevity” painting [Illustration 9]. These all show the artistic styles of many of the rendering of these historical screens are greatly influenced by arts from China, Japan blending with popular Korean style at that time.

### **The Uniqueness**

“Five Peaks Screen” is uniquely Korean!. Its composition and functional usage are not observed in the rest of East Asia. Historically, there are no known paintings to be placed behind the throne of the Chinese Emperor. We know the existence of a scripture panel of Nine Dragons, associated with the Emperorship in China, served as the background of the throne but it is not a “Five Peaks Screen”, not a painting. Neither are we aware of such a custom for the Japanese Emperor. Therefore, we believe such usage of putting a painting with a fixed composition behind the throne to represent kingship is a unique Korean culture.

The second aspect of its uniqueness is its composition and elements. We seldom, if not never, saw any artwork from China, or Japan, depicting both the **sun** and **moon** in the same painting. Such a scene is against the natural experience and therefore illogical. Beside the sun and moon, we observe two mountains, two pine trees, one stream with either one or two waterfalls, and some splashes in the ocean, all symmetrically placed on both sides. This symmetrical composition is unfound in either Chinese or Japanese painting and therefore an unique Korean feature. With all the elements combined in a symmetrical design, even against the reality of the nature scene, this art is a deliberate representation that bends a realistic scene to express a political idea: It is designed to emphasize a philosophy of the Korean kingship- the balanced and moderate political concept from Confusiaism. For most of the country, such as China, the ruler would like to be represented by a single powerful creature or cosmic power to express the power of the Emperor. However, Korean kings, on the other hand, choose to remind their citizens, their officials, themselves, and their children who will succeed them as the future king to focus on the power of balance and moderation to avoid radical approaches in policy making. On the other hand, Japan chooses to only glorify only the sun, in their national flag, and does not value the concept of balancing between *yin* and *yang* as high as Korean. The *Qing* dynasty in China represented their Empire on the national flag by a single dragon chasing a red sun. The succeeding Republic of China uses one single white sun, with twelfth light beams, in the flag, now still flying in Taiwan. The People Republic of China uses one big star with four little stars on their five stars flag. All these examples show the usage of two cosmic light sources to represent the ruling power is a unique Korean feature. Therefore, we believe this composition of showing both sun and moon in identical size, in equal vertical level, only differ in color, with all other elements balanced in a symmetrical design is a unique Korean composition.

## Impacts to Modern Culture

Recently, a great amount of effort has been spent to restore the beauty of several deteriorated historical screens [CHOE][JEONG] to allow more citizens and tourists to view their restored beauty either by visiting Korean palaces or viewing them online virtually. Today, the “Five Peaks Screen” also deeply influenced modern Korean culture. We discuss two of such impacts below:

The key symbols in the Five Peaks Screen can be observed on the modern day national flag of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) [Illustration 10]. The current national flag mostly resembles the flag of the Korean Empire designed [Illustration 11] in 1882, when the Five Peaks Screen panel was in active use. In the flag, the **sun** and **moon** are transformed to be represented by the red (*yang*) and blue (*yin*) inside the *taijitu*. The *taijitu* also represent the bigger center **peak** and the four trigrams represent the other four **peaks** since each trigram represents a direction of east (☰), west (☷), south (☲), and north (☵). The curly wave divides the red and blue half inside the circle to replace the **splash**. The *geon* (☶) trigram also carry the meaning of heave and therefore also replace the **sky**. The *gon* (☷) trigram also carry the meaning of earth and therefore also replace the **ground**. The *gam* (☵) trigram also carry the meaning of water and therefore also replace the **streams**. Therefore, the Korean national flag should be viewed as an abstract manifestation of the “Five Peaks Screen” by using ancient Chinese symbols. This is not an accident since both of them were actively used in the court of the Korean Empire for twenty eight years from 1882 to 1910 to represent the same ruling government.

The “Five Peaks Screen” also inspires many modern day artists to create modern rendition in paintings, crafts, novels, and even dramas in the form of TV series and movies. According to the Korean Culture and Information Service in September 2021 [KOCIS]:

"Avid K-drama fans may recognize one of the highlighted pieces, a folding screen that shows the sun and moon over five peaks that represent the territory of Korea always under the sovereign's absolute power. Titled "*Ihworobongdo*," it is a unique feature of the Joseon court that was always placed behind the king's throne. It has been featured in a number of period dramas and films, including "Mr. Queen" (2020), "Moon Embracing the Sun" (2012) and "Masquerade" (2012)."

The movie "*Masquerade / Gwanghae: The Man Who Became King*" (2012) [Illustration 12] uses the theme constantly as background. The story behind the TV series "*Moon Embracing the Sun*" was based on the same concept of the screen and appears in the main theme in the poster [Illustration 13]. These are a few examples showing the depth of its impact on Korean culture today.

## Conclusion

The historical "Five Peaks Screen" art theme is a unique art work of syncretism. The semantic of its composition is from Confucianism teaching; Meaning of each component are greatly influenced by Chinese languages or literature; Their artistic styles are influenced by Chinese, Japanese and Korean arts. However, Koreans uniquely elevate Confusian's teaching of moderate and balanced philosophy to a new height by composing both a sun and a moon in equal size and equal height in this art theme. It emphasizes the importance of balance and moderation. This composition is against the natural viewing of the sky to emphasize a key philosophical point- balance of policy approach. Koreans choose not to represent their kingship by showing one dominant power with a bright sun. This shows a deep conviction of Korean Emperors to follow Confusian's teaching for his policy. This is unseen in China, Japan or any other countries. This usage is unique! Its composition is unique! This deep conviction did not die with the end of

the Korean Empire but instead, it is carried on to modern day represented by the Republic of Korea national flag and is now expressed in TV series, movie making and many other art forms in South Korea.

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## Illustrations

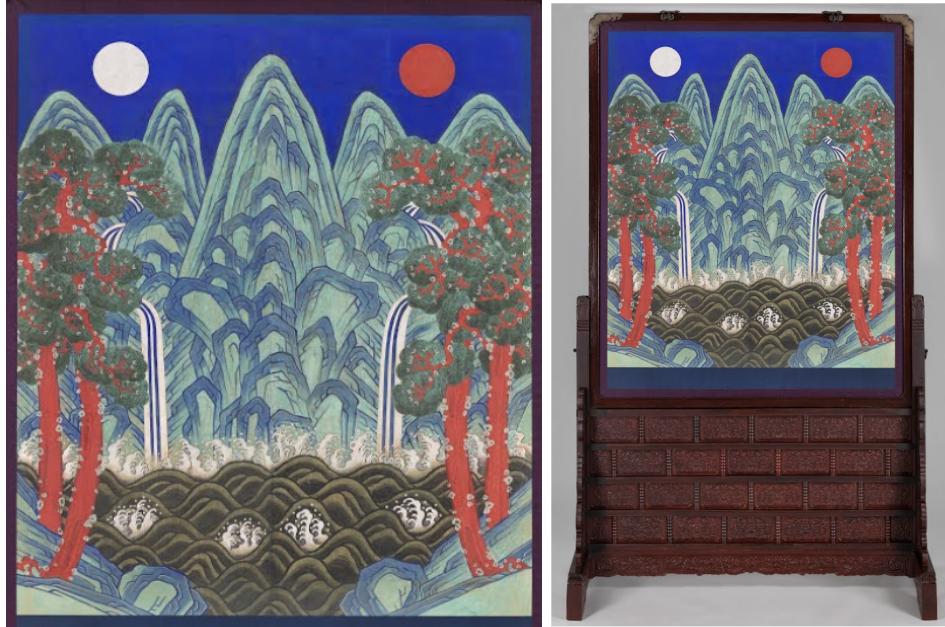


Illustration 1 - 2. Single-Panel Folding Five Peaks Screen (1 panel, 4 splashes, 3 levels of stream, stream direction on the left from the top: right-left-right), National palace museum of Korea, 19th - early 20th century C.E.,

[artsandculture.google.com/asset/SQEIVGAY1Au-aw](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/SQEIVGAY1Au-aw)



Illustration 3. Four-Panel Folding Five Peaks Screen (4 panel, 13 splashes, 2 levels of waterfall, stream direction on the left from the top: right-left), Injeongjeon Hall, Changdeokgung Palace, Seoul, Korea, 19th - early 20th century

C.E., [artsandculture.google.com/asset/2wH99XA5Fcrlow](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/2wH99XA5Fcrlow)



Illustration 4. Upper portion of the Four-Panel Folding Five Peaks Screen (4 panel, number of splashes not visible, 3/2 levels of stream, stream direction on the left from the top: left-right-left), *Geunjeongjeon* Hall, Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul, Korea, 19th - early 20th century C.E., [artsandculture.google.com/asset/vAETj3v7\\_N3NDQ](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/vAETj3v7_N3NDQ)



Illustration 5. Six-Panel Folding Five Peaks Screen (6 panel, 4 splashes, 3 levels of stream, stream direction on the left from the top: right-left-right), *Sajeongjeon* Hall, Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul, Korea, 19th - early 20th century C.E., [artsandculture.google.com/asset/cgEe3INt7Ir\\_TA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/cgEe3INt7Ir_TA)



Illustration 6. Eight-Panel Folding Five Peaks Screen (8 panels, 5 splashes, 2 levels of waterfall), National palace museum of Korea, 19th - early 20th century C.E., [artsandculture.google.com/asset/MAF6\\_W8sSkVo1Q](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/MAF6_W8sSkVo1Q)

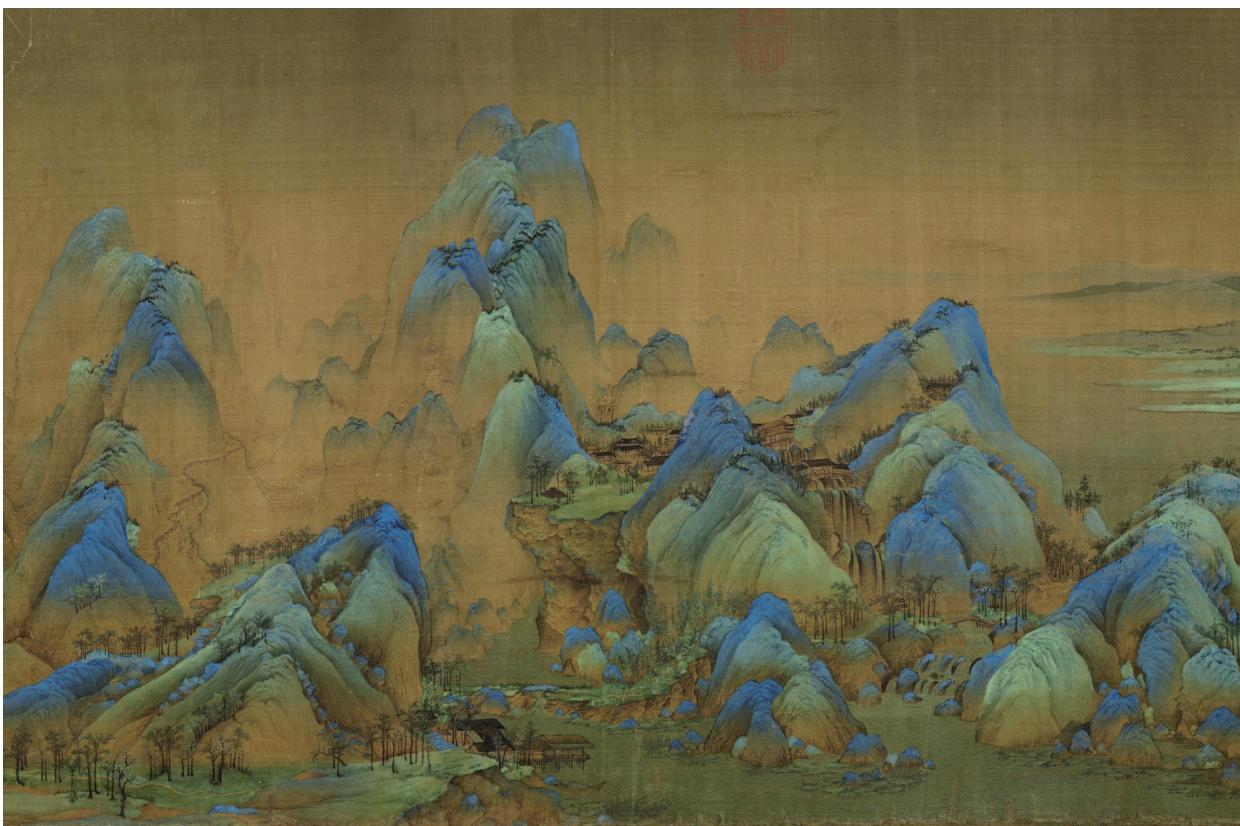
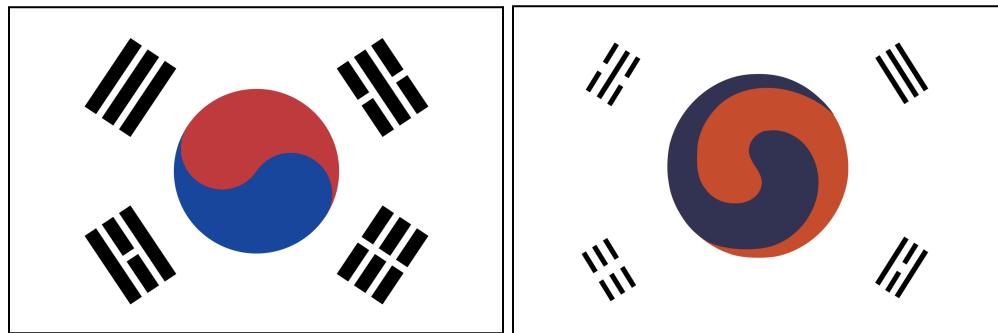


Illustration 7. Section of “A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains” Wang Ximeng, 1096–1119 C.E. Song dynasty, China, Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 51.5 x 1191.5 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing



(left) Illustration 8. "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" Katsushika Hokusai, 1760–1849 C.E. Japan  
 (right) Illustration 9. Set of Sliding Doors Decorated with Painting of Ten Longevity Symbols, 19th-Early 20th century. National palace museum of Korea Medium, Korea



(right) Illustration 10. Flag of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) since 1948  
 (left) Illustration 11. Flag of the Korean Empire (1882).



(left) Illustration 12. Movie poster of "Masquerade / Gwanghae: The Man Who Became King." CJ E&M, 2012.  
 (right) Illustration 13. Poster of the TV series "The Moon Embracing the Sun." MBC, 2012

## Appendix A - High Resolution Images of Historical Five Peaks Screen

### Single-panel Screen:

- [P1S4W3RLR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/SQEIVGAY1Au-aw](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/SQEIVGAY1Au-aw) (same as [Illustration 1 - 2])
- [P1S4W3RLR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/6gFA1i2LRmrSPQ](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/6gFA1i2LRmrSPQ)
- [P1S4W3RLR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/EgFibssSUqhdow](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/EgFibssSUqhdow)

### Four-Panel Folding Screen:

- [P4S13W2RL] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/2wH99XA5Fcrlow](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/2wH99XA5Fcrlow) (inside Injeongjeon Hall, Changdeokgung Palace, same as Illustration 3.)
- [P4SuW3/2LRL] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/vAETj3v7\\_N3NDQ](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/vAETj3v7_N3NDQ) (the upper portion of the painting only, inside Geunjeongjeon Hall, Gyeongbokgung Palace, same as [Illustration 4])
- [P4S8W2RL] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/BAEufpo5jCjE1Q](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/BAEufpo5jCjE1Q)
- [P4S3W2LR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/XAHe3BHhJDewow](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/XAHe3BHhJDewow)
- [P4SmW2LL] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/ZgGl3jzcJVQvNA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/ZgGl3jzcJVQvNA)
- [P4SmW2LR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/xgGN213GJbIwbg](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/xgGN213GJbIwbg)

### Six-Panel Folding Screen:

- [P6S4W3RLR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/WAGA1YFOTJ1ndw](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/WAGA1YFOTJ1ndw)
- [P6S4W3RLR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/cgEe3INT7Ir\\_TA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/cgEe3INT7Ir_TA) (inside Injeongjeon Hall, Gyeongbokgung Palace, same as [Illustration 5])
- [P6S4W3LRL] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/TwE3Qt\\_n-n7FLw](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/TwE3Qt_n-n7FLw)
- [P6SmW3RRL] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/OQHWm4v6n3sJiA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/OQHWm4v6n3sJiA)
- [P6S4W2LR] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/FAHn0I5yvS7hmA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/FAHn0I5yvS7hmA)

### Eight-Panel Folding Screen:

- [P8S5W2RL] [artsandculture.google.com/asset/MAF6\\_W8sSkVo1Q](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/MAF6_W8sSkVo1Q) (same as [Illustration 6])

**Note:** These URLs are annotated with a code inside the bracket for the number of panels (prefixed by 'P'), number of splashes (prefixed by 'S'), number of waterfall levels (prefixed by 'W'), and the left side stream direction (sequence of 'R' and 'L'). 'm' indicates many splashes. 'u' indicates the number is unknown. These codes are just attributes and several paintings may have the same value and therefore lack the required quality to serve as an unique identifier.