

Introduction to Korean Art

Korea—a mountainous peninsula in northeast Asia tied to the continental mainland in the north, facing China to the west across the Yellow Sea, and extending southward toward the Japanese archipelago—has always occupied a pivotal position in East Asian regional affairs. Korea's relations with its larger neighbors, China and Japan, and its role in cultural and technical exchange within East Asia, are a crucial part of the country's history. Yet, it is also important to understand and appreciate the separate and distinct character of Korea's cultural and artistic heritage.

The beginnings of Korea's artistic heritage may be traced back nearly 9,000 years, to the Neolithic period and the earliest known examples of pottery produced on the peninsula. Over the centuries, Korean potters distinguished themselves in the manufacture of celadon, *punch'ŏng* ware, white porcelain, and underglaze-painted porcelain. Korean artisans have produced objects in a variety of other materials—including metal, lacquer, silk, and wood—that, as in the case of ceramics, were initially meant for practical or ceremonial use but came to be appreciated as works of art. In ancient times, articles such as gold jewelry and bronze vessels, weapons, and horse trappings were placed in the tombs of royalty and the aristocracy to serve the deceased in the afterlife.

The introduction of Buddhism in the fourth century brought strikingly different kinds of images and artistic styles to Korea. The impact of this religion on Korean art can be seen in the temple complexes, stone and bronze statues, paintings, and illustrated manuscripts produced on the peninsula from the fifth century onward. Buddhism reached the peak of its influence under the Unified Silla (668–935) and Koryŏ (918–1392) dynasties, as evidenced by the exceptionally elegant and refined works of art dating from those periods.

In the late fourteenth century, with the adoption of Neo-Confucianism by the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) as the new state ideology and dominant social philosophy, the artistic tastes of the elite shifted dramatically in favor of simpler and more austere objects for everyday use. These included plain white porcelain wares and desk utensils made of

natural materials. During the same period, Korean artisans also crafted personal ornaments and domestic articles, especially for women, the nobility, and commoners that are less restrained and more exuberant in style. The weakening influence of Confucian teachings on the arts and the growing impact of foreign (including Western) influences, led in the mid-eighteenth century to a variety of new shapes, decorative techniques, and designs in the production of ceramic ware. This period also saw a new trend in Korean painting with the development of true-view landscapes, the practitioners of which advocated the depiction of actual Korean scenery as an alternative to the classical themes of Chinese painting.

Westerners first became aware of Korean art in the late nineteenth century, largely by collecting Korean ceramics. During the first decades of the twentieth century, when Korea was occupied by Japan (1910–45), Japanese archaeologists and connoisseurs helped to shape Western understanding and appreciation of Korean art. The founder of the early-twentieth-century *mingei* (folk art) movement in Japan, Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961), was particularly influential in inspiring interest at home and abroad in Chosŏn ceramics and decorative arts. World War II marked a turning point in Korea's international visibility, and subsequently, more Western collectors began acquiring Korean paintings, sculpture, ceramics, and metalware. However, compared with the attention given Chinese and Japanese art, which survives in much larger quantities and has been more widely studied, knowledge and appreciation of Korean art in the West is still in its formative stage.

How to Use These Materials

This resource is designed to introduce the Arts of Korea gallery in The Metropolitan Museum of Art to teachers and their students, and to provide them with a general understanding of Korean culture. A wide range of materials is included to give readily accessible information to teachers of many disciplines instructing students of different ages. It is hoped that this publication will encourage educators to use the Arts of Korea gallery as an important part of their teaching activities.

Quick Guide to the Arts of Korea Gallery *pp. 13–14*

For those who require quick information to prepare for classroom work, this concise summary provides basic information about the Arts of Korea gallery as well as a few questioning strategies.

Introduction to Korean Art and

Key Themes in Korean Culture and Art *pp. 7–8, 15–18*

These two sections provide a brief summary of the development of Korean art history and some of the most important factors that have influenced Korean culture and art. The **Key Themes** section presents possible topics that might form the basis of a gallery tour or class on Korean art.

Orientation Material *pp. 19–50*

This section consists of background information for easy reference. The **Timeline of Korean History and Art** (pp. 19–20) provides a convenient list of important historical events and a chronological arrangement of most of the works of art illustrated in this publication. The **Dynastic Chronology of Korea, China, and Japan** (p. 21) and the three **Maps** (pp. 22–24) are useful references.

Because English-language resources about Korea are still limited in number, this publication contains a substantial amount of background material. The **Overview of Korean History** (pp. 25–34) and **Korean Religions and Systems of Thought** (pp. 35–50) outline the context in which Korean works of art were created and used.

The Arts of Korea *pp. 51–76*

The **Overview of Korean Art History** is a synopsis of the development of Korea's artistic tradition. Works of art loaned to the Metropolitan Museum for the inaugural exhibition from several significant collections in Korea are illustrated in this section to supplement the Museum's own Korean art holdings. The section **Artists and Materials** gives general technical information about important types of art and identifies some of the major developments in each area. The **Korean Traditional Music** section is a brief discussion of key aspects of the subject and describes several examples of traditional musical instruments in the Metropolitan Museum's collection, some of which are illustrated in this publication.

Image Descriptions *pp. 77–117*

The images in this publication (also provided in digital format on the CD-ROM as well as in slide format, and two of which are reproduced as posters) illustrate the highlights of the Metropolitan Museum's Korean art collection. The objects were chosen to represent the development of Korean art as fully as possible and to meet the needs of a wide range of educators. Each **Image Description** includes information about the individual work of art (or site) and some points to consider in classroom discussion. It is highly recommended that you show your students the slides and discuss the fundamental aspects of Korean culture before visiting the museum in order to encourage a more careful and critical response to the works of art on view.

Classroom Applications *pp. 119–39*

This resource contains a variety of aids for classroom work, including **Lesson Plans and Activities** and suggested **Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Works of Art** in the Metropolitan Museum's collection. Both sections include activities and questioning strategies to focus students' attention on the works of art and help them understand the cultures that they represent.

Glossary *pp. 141–46*

The **Glossary** provides brief definitions for important terms in Korean art history, along with their pronunciation and references to where they are mentioned in this publication.

Appendixes *pp. 147–52*

Korean Language and Literature

Symbols in Korean Art and Culture

Resources *pp. 153–60*

Korean Cultural Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area

Selected American Museums with Collections of Korean Art

Film and Video Resources

Selected Web Sites

Selected Bibliography for Educators

Selected Bibliography for Students

The CD-ROM included in this publication provides all the text and images in the Resource in an electronic form that can be downloaded and printed. The brochure “The Wild Ones in Korean Art” is suitable for younger students, from grades four to eight. (The other sections of the resource are meant for the use of educators and are not intended for most secondary school students without adaptation.)

Note to the Reader

Throughout the text, unless otherwise indicated, non-English words given in parenthesis are Korean. The abbreviations for other languages are Skt. for Sanskrit, Chn. for Chinese, and Jpn. for Japanese. Unless stated otherwise, the works of art illustrated are part of the Metropolitan Museum’s permanent collection. Footnotes provide supplementary information and sources for additional research. Publications listed in the Bibliography for Educators are referenced in an abbreviated form in the footnotes.

Quick Guide to the Arts of Korea Gallery

Korea, a mountainous peninsula in northeast Asia, possesses an artistic tradition reaching back to the Neolithic period about 9,000 years ago. Through the centuries, Korean artists and craftsmen produced ceramics, lacquerware, metalware, sculpture, paintings, and textiles, for everyday and ceremonial uses by the imperial court and the wealthy, or to serve religious purposes at all levels of society. The objects they created were influenced by the aesthetic preferences of the time (compare, for example, the elegance and refinement of Koryŏ period art with the preference for spontaneity that characterizes works from the succeeding Chosŏn period), as well as the materials and technology then available.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a diverse collection of Korean art, a selection of which is on permanent display in the Arts of Korea gallery in the north wing. Opened in 1998, the gallery embodies traditional Korean aesthetics in its pristine white walls, diffused natural light, and wood floor patterned on that of a traditional temple design. In keeping with the East Asian tradition of displaying works of art for limited periods of time, and for purposes of conservation, most of the works on view are rotated twice a year. The Musical Instruments galleries display a diverse selection of Korean instruments, including drums, flutes, fiddles, and zithers.

When you bring students to the Arts of Korea gallery, encourage them to take a few moments on their own to examine the works of art and to formulate their own responses. Some fundamental themes of Korean art and culture are described below, along with related illustrative images provided in this resource. These topics can be used to organize tours of the gallery and classroom discussion.

Cultural Exchange in East Asia

Korea's geographical location at the crossroads of East Asia—between its two larger neighbors, China and Japan—has had an enormous impact on its history and culture (see **Map 1**, p. 22). Throughout the millennia, many important cultural developments, including the Chinese writing system, Confucianism, Buddhism, and some ceramic production techniques, were imported from China into Korea, where

they were quickly adapted to native Korean needs and preferences. This process continued eastward with the transmission of these practices and concepts from Korea to Japan.

Images 10–14, 25, 26

Green-glazed ceramic wares (known as celadon in Western literature) and landscape paintings in ink are two examples of artistic traditions that originated in China and were transported to Korea, where they underwent innovative changes (for Korean examples, see **images 10–14, 25, 26**).

The Metropolitan Museum has the most comprehensive collection of Asian art in the world. It is therefore possible for you to compare related works of art, such as celadon wares, ink landscape paintings, or grave furnishings, made in Korea, China, and Japan during a single visit to the museum. Comparisons with Chinese and Japanese works of art with similar themes and materials can provide insights into what makes Korean art distinctive. For more suggestions, see the section on **Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Works of Art** (pp. 129–39).

Materials

Images 9, 11, 13, 14, 20

Images 15, 20

Images 8, 14, 17, 31, 32

Images 2, 10, 35

Korean artists and craftsmen worked in many media, including clay, bronze, gold, lacquer, and ink on silk or paper. Artisans frequently borrowed design techniques and decorative motifs from other media. For example, both lacquermakers and celadon potters used the technique of inlay to create designs (see **images 9, 11, 13, 14, 20**). The same decorative motifs, such as scrolling vines (see **images 15** [the base of the altar], **20**), stylized clouds (see **images 8, 14, 17, 31, 32**), and birds (see **images 2, 10, 35**), can be found on objects made of different materials.

Nature

Images 2, 7A, 10,

14, 26, 31, 32, 35

Images 25, 26

Images 6, 21, 23, 24, 28

Images from the natural world—mountains, plants, animals, birds, and waterfowl—are found throughout Korean art. Younger students might enjoy looking at different animals and learning about the stories and symbolic meanings associated with them (see **images 2, 7A, 10, 14, 26, 31, 32, 35** , and the brochure “The Wild Ones in Korean Art”). Landscape paintings not only suggest the appearance and mood of a certain place, but are also generally imbued with philosophical ideas about nature (see **images 25, 26**). Works of art that convey a sense of spontaneity are said to express the freedom and spirit of nature (see **images 6, 21, 23, 24, 28**).

Key Themes in Korean Culture and Art

Discussed below are some of the major factors that have exerted a profound impact on Korean culture, including the production of art. These factors may be used to construct generalized themes for visits to the Metropolitan Museum's Arts of Korea gallery or for classroom discussion. Specific suggestions for the illustration of key themes with images provided in this resource are given in the **Quick Guide to the Arts of Korea Gallery** (pp. 13–14).

Geography

The Korean peninsula lies at the easternmost end of the Eurasian land mass (see **Map 1**, p. 22). During the last Ice Age, which occurred approximately 15,000 to 18,000 years ago, neither the Korean peninsula nor the central islands of Japan existed as separate topographic entities. At that time, the area of the present Yellow Sea formed a wide, unbroken plain stretching between what are now the western shores of Korea and the eastern shores of China's Shandong peninsula. Similarly, to the south, the present Japanese islands of Honshū, Kyūshū, and Shikoku comprised a continuous landmass with the then undifferentiated Korean peninsula. With the melting of the great glaciers, the sea level rose and the map of northeast Asia as we know it was formed. Korea emerged as a mountainous peninsula tied to Manchuria in the north, facing China to the west across the narrow Yellow Sea, and extending southward toward the Japanese archipelago. More than 70 percent of the Korean peninsula's total area, which is approximately the same as that of England and Scotland combined, consists of mountains. The rocky backbone of Korea is fashioned from a long chain of mountains that dominates the eastern half of the peninsula from its northern borders on the Amnok and Tuman rivers almost to its southern extremity. Two notable lateral mountain ranges project westward from this great granite wall. One forms a protective barrier around the fertile Naktong River valley in the center of Korea's southern coast, while the other stretches most of the way across the peninsula's width to north of the Han River valley. Korea's climate is temperate, with

cold, dry winters and hot summers subject to monsoon rains. The land is fertile, and natural resources are abundant.

East Asian Cultural Interaction

The peninsula's geographical location has exercised a critical role in shaping the history of the Korean people (see **Map 1**, p. 22). Archaeological finds reveal that Manchuria and lands to the north played a primal role in the formation of Korean culture, while China began to exert an enormous influence after the start of the first millennium B.C., if not earlier. Archaeology also indicates the steady growth of interaction between the inhabitants of Korea and the Japanese archipelago, which is a mere 130 miles away at the closest point. Because of its geographical position, Korea frequently functioned as a conduit between China and Japan for ideas and beliefs, material culture and technologies. Korea's participation in the interaction of East Asian cultures has often been mistakenly viewed as being entirely passive, with little recognition of the innovative role that Koreans have played throughout their history in the native adaptation and further transmission of such influences as the Chinese written language, Buddhism, ceramic production techniques, and ink-monochrome landscape paintings.

Nature

In Korea, as in other East Asian cultures, the natural world and man's relation to it have inspired the creation of works of art as well as the development of philosophies and religions. Images from nature—animals and birds, plants and trees, mountains and rivers—are pervasive artistic themes, whether expressed in the form of a painting, a ceramic vessel, or a scholar-official's garden retreat.

This emphasis on nature also inspired the creation of artworks that convey an impression of accident and spontaneity, objects that capture the liveliness and spirit found in the natural world. A clay pot with an asymmetrical profile and an uneven glaze was appreciated for its sense of vitality and its unique beauty (see **image 24**). Similarly, in the depiction of a grapevine blown by the wind, the painter sought to go beyond mere representation to convey through line and form a certain mood and sense of rhythmic movement (see **image 28**). This understanding of what is natural differs from the art-historical concept of naturalism in Western art, in which images are often created to

Image 24

Image 28

reproduce as closely as possible the actual appearance of the subject in nature. The Korean word for landscape, *sansu*, exemplifies the holistic attitude toward the natural world. *Sansu* combines the words for mountain and water to represent landscapes and, by extension, encompass all the physical properties of the natural world. Drawing upon the ancient idea that everything in the universe is made up of interrelated opposites (*ūm-yang*; Chn. *yin-yang*), the characteristics of mountains and water represent nature's diversity—mountains are unmoving, hard, and solid, while water is fluid, soft, cool, and dark.

Religious Traditions

During the course of the country's history, Koreans have adopted and practiced different religions and systems of thought: shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and, in recent centuries, Christianity (see **Korean Religions and Systems of Thought**, pp. 35–50).

Although the influence of each of these belief systems has waxed and waned through the centuries, all have played an ongoing role in Korean culture. As is true throughout East Asia, the different systems are neither exclusive nor strictly separated—many tenets and practices overlap, and people traditionally have followed more than one system. Most Buddhist temple complexes, for example, include a small shrine dedicated to Sansin, the native god of the mountains associated with shamanism.

Homogeneity and Continuity

The Korean peninsula's regional partition by the major mountain ranges led to the development of distinctive cultures in the southeast and the southwest, along the central southern coast, and in the north. Cultural diversity among these regions engendered feelings of regional uniqueness, and at times even animosity, that still color intrapeninsular relations today. Yet concurrent with this divisive awareness of regional differences has been a countervailing consciousness of peninsular solidarity. The Korean peninsula has long been viewed by both its occupants and its neighboring societies as a discrete geographical unit inhabited by a population sharing an essentially common cultural identity.

Korean history has been marked by unusually long-lived dynasties, a factor that has enhanced the perception of unity. Having controlled

the southeastern part of the peninsula for at least 700 years, the Silla kingdom (57 B.C.–668 A.D.) succeeded by the year 676 in unifying the peninsula under a single government, the Unified Silla dynasty (668–935), which ruled for nearly three centuries. The subsequent Koryŏ (918–1392) and Chosŏn (1392–1910) dynasties each ruled for about 500 years. This dynastic longevity imparted stability and long periods of peace, as well as conservative tendencies among the ruling elite.

Foreign Intrusions

Chinese, Mongol, Manchu, and Japanese armies have attacked and looted Korea at various times in the country's history. In 1910, Japan formally annexed the peninsula, initiating a period of colonial rule that lasted until 1945. That so few historical records, artworks, or architectural monuments survive from before the late sixteenth century is largely a result of the destruction wrought by these incursions (see *Overview of Korean History*, pp. 25–34).

Dynamic Art Style

Korean art is often described as vibrant, energetic, spontaneous, and sometimes whimsical. Certainly, such characteristics apply to many of the most distinctive works of art produced in Korea, especially the sculpted pottery vessels of the Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C.–668 A.D.; see *image 2*) and the *punch'ŏng* wares (see *image 21*), late underglaze painted porcelains (see *image 23*), genre paintings, and folk art of the Chosŏn period. Yet, the breadth of Korean culture and the versatile skills of Korean artists and artisans are equally manifest in the Buddhist paintings and illustrated sutras, metalwork, lacquerware, exquisite gold ornaments, and celadon wares produced for the court, aristocracy, and religious establishments during the Three Kingdoms, Unified Silla, and Koryŏ periods, all of which reflect the refinement and sophistication that are characteristic of the highest-quality East Asian art (see, for example, *images 4, 9, 10, 12, 15–18*).

Images 2, 21, 23

Images 4, 9, 10, 12, 15–18