

SOAS Centre for Korean Studies Studies  
in collaboration with  
The British Museum

# **Korean Art: Narratives and Displays in Museum Contexts**

## **Book of Abstracts**

## **Introduction to the Korean Cultural Centre UK**

Opened by the Korean 'Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism' in January 2008 the role of the KCCUK is to enhance friendship, amity and understanding between Korea and the UK through cultural and educational activities.

From the KCCUK's central London location near Trafalgar Square, our dedicated team work to further develop established cultural projects and to explore new opportunities to expand our Korean events programme in the UK. We hold regular events at the Centre including exhibitions, language classes and film screenings as our on-site facilities include a gallery, small theatre, lecture room and library.

Our Exhibitions range from traditional Korean art to the contemporary, including collaborations with local artists and curators. We end each year with a showcase of the latest artistic talent through our annual exhibition of UK-based Korean artists.

In 2002, KCCUK began to run the 'K-Pop Academy', a 12-week course that enabled K-Pop fans in the UK to discover more about the culture of Korea. The KCCUK also holds weekly Film Nights in our Multi-Purpose Hall. From contemporary independent films to international blockbusters, Korean Cinema classics and Directors' Retrospectives, we aim to show a wide variety of films and genres that showcase the diversity and excitement of Korean Cinema.

From June to September, as part of London's global celebrations, the KCCUK has presented the largest ever festival of Korean Culture in the UK. 'All Eyes On Korea' featured the creative works of Korea's artists, performers, designers, classical musicians and film-makers at London's most iconic cultural venues.

## **Sang-hoon Jang**

National Museum of Korea/ Leicester University

### **Overseas special exhibition projects of the National Museum of Korea, 1957 to 1984: From the discovery to the display of cultural identity through Korean material culture**

In August 1945, Korea was liberated from Japan's colonial rule. Only then did it secure the political, social, and cultural space within which to establish its identity. The National Museum of Korea (NMK) found a role for Korea's material culture through the act of identity making in that the museum sought to extract Korean identity from Japanese impositions. The NMK which inherited the artefacts that had formed the core of the Japanese Government-General's Museum placed its focus on the key word 'independence'. This word was essential to Korean cultural elites disempowered by colonization. One of the most urgent issues for the fledging political community was to discover the nation's cultural identity, internalize it domestically, and then give publicity to it on the international stage.

By focusing on the NMK's 28 year long overseas exhibition projects between 1957 and 1984, this paper aims to consider how cultural properties have been shaped through material culture in a post-colonial nation-state. The touring exhibitions can be categorized into the first overseas exhibition project titled 'Treasures from Korean Art' and the second titled 'Five Thousand Years of Korean Art'. The first one encompassed exhibitions in 8 US cities (1957~1959) and in 5 European cities (1961~1962), the second one included exhibitions in 3 cities in Japan (1976), 8 cities in the U.S. (1979~1981), and 3 cities in Europe (1984).

This paper examines how Korea attempted to acquire citizenship on the modern world stage through the staging of such overseas exhibitions, and discusses the ways in which the NMK tried to define and display the cultural identity of Korea. From a broader perspective, this paper aims to explore the processes of the propagation of

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cultural properties, particularly through the formation of a Korean cultural self identity within Korea and overseas. By comparing the similarities and differences between the projection of cultural self identity within those two contexts, changes in the museum's objectives and contents are linked to Korea's development as a modern nation-state.

**Koen De Ceuster**

Leiden University

**Where is that North Korean Art Collection?**

**An outsider's thoughts on the importance of North Korean art in museum collections**

North Korea is a fascinating research topic because there is so much to learn about our own practices by looking at (how we look at) North Korea. This general statement can also be applied to the topic of this specific workshop. Hardly any museum outside the DPRK holds (let alone exhibits) a North Korean art collection. One may wonder why this is the case.

Neither an art historian nor a museum curator, I consider myself to be an interested outsider. As a historian of modern Korea, it is by chance that I ended up studying North Korean art theory and practice. My involvement with North Korean art began in 2004 when I advised the Kunsthall in Rotterdam in its preparation of one of the first exhibitions of North Korean art in Western Europe. As I got to know collectors, visited museums and art studios in Pyongyang, familiarized myself with North Korean art theory and eventually met a number of North Korean artists, I found that North Korea's art world offered an interesting window into North Korean society. As I grappled with North Korean art theory and practice, I also critically followed the succession of international exhibitions of North Korean art. My contribution to this workshop will present an inventory and critical analysis of the major exhibitions of North Korean art that have been organized since the end of the Cold War, and in doing so raise a number of questions regarding our practices.

**Hyonjeong Kim Han**

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

**Beyond Time and Space – Korean Art in Encyclopedic and Specialized Museums in the United States**

Korean art was first exhibited in the United States in the mid 1950s, right after the Korean War. In the beginning the exhibitions were organized in Korea, and were intended as a general introduction to Korean culture. In 1957-9, "Masterpieces of Korean Art", the first large special exhibition ever mounted outside Korea, took 187 objects to 8 US cities. Then in 1979-81, there was "5000 Years of Korean Art", another survey-type exhibition of Korean culture, which traveled to Japan, the United States and Europe. From the 1980s onward, more specialized exhibitions of Korean art with specific themes were shown in the United States. This trend towards a more focused and in-depth approach is exemplified by "Auspicious Spirits: Korean Folk Paintings and Related Objects" in 1983, and by "Korean Arts of the 18th Century: Splendor and Simplicity" in 1993. The most recent example is last year's exhibition of Korean ceramics: "Poetry in Clay: Korean Buncheong Ceramics from Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art".

Unlike the special exhibitions of Korean art mostly organized in Korea, It is quite recently that any independent permanent galleries of Korean Art have been set up in the States. The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco was the first museum outside Korea to establish an independent full-time curator of Korean art, dedicating a substantial space for a permanent display of Korean art in 1988. Then, about a decade later in 1999, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) also created its own independent Korean art galleries which, in June

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2009, were expanded to five times their original size in a prominent location. These two US museums, one of them focusing on Asian Art, and the other being a so-called encyclopedic museum, have shared the challenge of creating programs to display Korean art outside its country of origin. Moreover, the artworks in the permanent galleries are mostly traditional objects. Thus, how can a limited number of Korean art objects from a past era truly represent Korea to the outside world? What is the best way to make use of this Korean art to begin a dialogue with 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences who are largely unfamiliar with Korean culture? What relationships can we describe between Korean art and the art of other cultures? This presentation will attempt to answer these essential questions, drawing on extensive practical experience of innovative methods in displaying Korean art at the two museums.

**Charlotte Horlyck**

SOAS, University of London

**Sascha Priewe**

British Museum

**Quo vadis? Displaying Korean Art in the UK**

From the earliest episodes of collecting Korean art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to special exhibitions and the newest displays, this paper traces the developments, legacies and future of the establishment of bespoke galleries for Korean art and culture in museums in the United Kingdom from the 1990s. We will discuss the ways in which attitudes toward Korean art, Korean government initiatives and trends in collecting have informed the displays and narratives seen in UK museums, particularly focusing on the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the British Museum (BM).

The V&A and the BM hold the largest collections of Korean art in the UK, totalling more than two and a half thousand artefacts, and it was in those museums that the first galleries of Korean art were established in the UK. The V&A's gallery of Korean art was funded by Samsung and opened in 1992. In 2000 the BM followed suit by the inauguration of its Korea Foundation Gallery. Both museums did, however, display Korean art prior to the founding of such dedicated gallery spaces. In 1936, for example, Korean ceramics were shown in a display case that formed part of a larger exhibition of the Eumorfopoulos collection of East Asian ceramics that was hosted by the V&A. The exhibition reflected the interest in understanding East Asian art through displays of comparative material from different regions and periods.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century interest in Korean arts and culture have gradually increased, and following Korean government initiatives to promote Korea overseas, the British Museum opened the first large-scale exhibition of Korean art and archaeology in the UK in 1984. There is no doubt that significant changes have happened in terms of how Korean arts and culture is understood, managed, displayed and promoted. This paper explores such developments through the exploration of the Korean collections at the V&A and the BM.