
A Short History of _____ **Korean Art**



You Hong-June

Director
of National Museum of Korea



NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF KOREA



GYEONGJU
NATIONAL MUSEUM

A Short
History
of ————— **Korean**
Art



NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF KOREA



GYEONGJU
NATIONAL MUSEUM

Contents

Korea in Prehistory	3
Art of the Three Kingdoms	13
Art of Unified Silla	34
Art of the Goryeo Dynasty	50
Art of the Joseon Dynasty	62
The Characteristics and Identity of Korean Aesthetics	83
List of Plates	84

Korea in Prehistory

Situated at the eastern edge of the Asian continent, Korea belongs to the broader East Asian cultural sphere. The territory of the Republic of Korea covers approximately 100,000 km², while the entire Korean Peninsula, including the northern half, measures about 220,000 km². Although Korea is often perceived by foreign observers as a small country, Edwin O. Reischauer, in *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation*, argued that Korea is by no means small, writing as follows:

“Though dwarfed by China, Korea is actually a county of average size and of larger than average population. One can emphasize its smallness by saying that it is scarcely larger than the single state of Minnesota, but it would be more meaningful to say that it is not much smaller than the combined areas of England, Scotland, and Wales.”

Even when compared with the 27 member states of the European Union, the Korean Peninsula ranks ninth in size, and



1 Archaeological Site in Jeongok-ri, Yeoncheon

the Republic of Korea alone ranks eleventh—making it clear that Korea is by no means a small country.

The Paleolithic Period

Humans began to settle on the Korean Peninsula at a very early stage. Today, more than one hundred Paleolithic sites attributed to *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens* have been identified across the peninsula. Among these, the Jeongok-ri site—along the Hantangang River in Yeoncheon-gun County, about 60 kilometers north of Seoul and near the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), is especially significant, dating back several hundred thousand years.¹



2 Handaxes
Excavated from
the Jeongok-ri Site
and Other Locations
(Paleolithic Period)

The site garnered international attention when a U.S. service member discovered a handaxe along the riverbank in 1978. Subsequent excavations uncovered Acheulean handaxes, long believed to be confined in Europe and, at their easternmost extent, India.² Their presence at Jeongok-ri extended the recognized distribution of this technology into Northeast Asia and reshaped understandings of the Paleolithic in the region. Today, the Jeongok Prehistory Museum preserves the site and presents reconstructions of the original excavations.

The Neolithic Period

By around 8000 BCE, the Korean Peninsula entered the Neolithic



3 Comb-pattern Pottery (Neolithic Period)

period. Early Neolithic communities first formed along the coasts—at sites such as Gulpo-ri in Hamgyeong-do Province, Osan-ri in Yangyang in Gangwon-do Province, and Gosan-ri on Jeju Island—and by about 4500 BCE this cultural horizon had spread across the entire peninsula.

Comb-pattern pottery is emblematic of the Neolithic period on the Korean Peninsula.³ Its surface

bears geometric designs incised like comb marks; these not only helped reinforce the joins of the clay coils during construction but are also thought to symbolize fish bones. Broadly speaking, comb-pattern pottery on the Korean Peninsula belongs to a Siberian lineage extending from the Altai and Minusinsk through Mongolia to Korea. This distinction accords with Korean phonology belonging to the Altaic—specifically Tungusic—lineage.

During the Neolithic period, communities created rock art in the form of petroglyphs (rock carvings). On the southeastern coast of Korea, petroglyphs occupy a flat panel of cliff face located along the secluded valley of Bangucheon Stream in Ulsan.⁴ Within a space measuring four meters high by eight meters wide, more than 200 animals—including whales, as well as wild boar, tigers, and deer—are carved with lifelike detail. Believed to date to the



4 Petroglyphs of Bangudae Terrace in Daegok-ri, Ulju (Neolithic Period)

Neolithic period, the petroglyph features numerous depictions of whales. Evidence suggests that whales were indeed hunted at the time, as whale bones with embedded harpoon points have been recovered from nearby sites. In July 2025, UNESCO inscribed the site on the World Heritage List.

Bronze Age

Around 1500 BCE, the Korean Peninsula entered the Bronze Age. The bronze culture of Korea, which developed along the Ordos–Minusinsk line of Siberia, took on a form distinct from that of its neighboring China. Korea produced few bronze tools or weapons



5 Dolmen in Bugeun-ri, Ganghwado Island (Bronze Age)



6 Dolmens in Jungnim-ri, Gochang (Bronze Age)

for daily use. Instead, it centered on the production of ritual implements such as mirrors, bells, swords, and ornaments that symbolized the authority of rulers and ritual leaders. Among the most representative artifacts are the lute-shaped bronze dagger, discovered in the northern regions of the peninsula, and the later, uniquely Korean slender bronze dagger.

During the Korean Peninsula's Bronze Age, an early state-level entity known as Gojoseon emerged in the form of a chiefdom. Koreans revere Dangun Wanggeom, the founder of Gojoseon, as the legendary progenitor of the nation. Following Gojoseon, the kingdom of Buyeo arose in the north while Jinglyuk appeared in the southern peninsula. The most emblematic remains of this period are dolmens, megalithic tombs constructed as burial sites for the ruling class. Dolmens on the Korean Peninsula, one of the megalithic monuments found in many parts of the world, are notable for being found in clusters, typically classified into three main types—table type, go-board type, and capstone type. Some sites contain dozens, while others have hundreds grouped together. Spanning more than a millennium of the Bronze Age, approximately 45,000 dolmens have been identified across the Korean Peninsula and in Liaodong, China. Among them, the dolmen sites in Ganghwado Island in Incheon, Hwasun in Jeollanam-do Province, and Gochang in Jeollabuk-do Province have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.^{5, 6}

Artistic activity continued during the Bronze Age. The Cheonjeon-ri Petroglyphs in Ulju, located near the Bangudae



7 Petroglyphs of Cheonjeon-ri, Ulju (Bronze Age)

Petroglyphs, feature abstract motifs such as concentric circles and fern patterns carved into the rock surface.⁷ These symbolic motifs demonstrate a conceptual understanding of objects, indicating the development of cognitive capacities among peoples of the Bronze Age. The rock carvings of the Korean Peninsula reveal certain affinities with traditions found in Mongolia and Central Asia and in certain aspects, also parallel those of Native American cultures.

Emergence of Ancient States

On the Korean Peninsula, the Bronze Age continued until around 300 BCE, when it transitioned into the Iron Age. Following the fall of Gojoseon in the second century BCE, the various chiefdoms of



8 Jar with Horn-shaped Handles
(Proto-Three Kingdoms)



9 Duck-shaped Vessel
(Proto-Three Kingdoms)

the Korean people across Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula gradually evolved into ancient states. In Manchuria, Buyeo and Goguryeo emerged; to the east, Dongye and Okjeo took shape; and in the southern peninsula, the Samhan, or Three Han (Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan) arose, later giving rise to the kingdoms of Baekje, Silla, and Gaya.

Proto-Three Kingdoms Period

By the fourth century CE, these roughly dozen chiefdoms were reorganized into the Three Kingdoms—Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla—and Gaya. The period from the first century BCE to the third

century CE is regarded as the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period, a transitional period leading into the full Three Kingdoms. Entering the Proto-Three Kingdoms period, the Korean Peninsula saw the full development of iron culture and the introduction of Chinese characters (*hanja*). The emblematic objects of this era are the pottery tradition of the Nakdonggang River basin, represented by Jar with Horn-shaped Handles and the Duck-shaped Vessel.^{8, 9}

The Jar with Horn-shaped Handles is believed to have contained liquor during rituals. Meticulously crafted and fired at high temperatures, its gray surface has a soft sheen, while the handles, resembling ox horns, evoke the solemnity and authority of the ceremonial setting. The Duck-shaped Vessel, with a crest affixed upon its head and eyes set on either side, assumes a highly abstract form that gives the impression of a work of fine art. It is believed to have been used as a ritual vessel, and the mallard, a migratory bird, carried a long-standing symbolic meaning as a messenger of the sun.

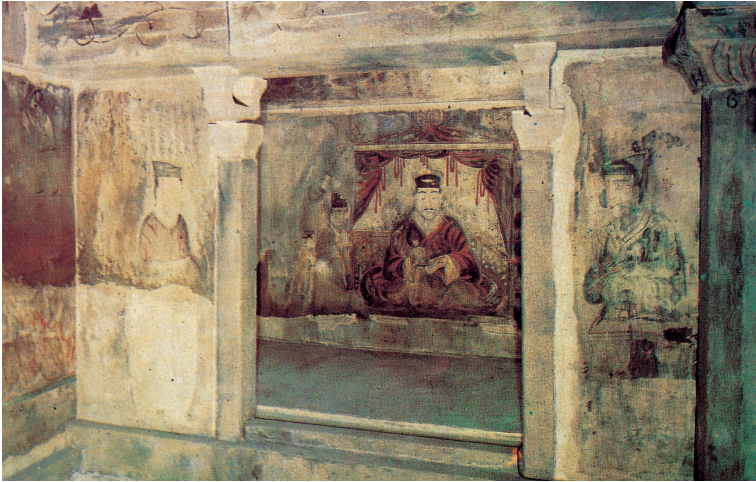
Art of the Three Kingdoms

By the fourth century CE, Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla—along with the Gaya confederacy—had entered the era known as the Three Kingdoms, competing, forging alliances, and at times clashing as they developed into early states. The period continued until the third quarter of the seventh century, when the peninsula was unified under Silla. Gaya, however, never coalesced into a centralized kingdom and was ultimately absorbed by Silla.

The arts of the Three Kingdoms are generally regarded as marking a shift from tomb art to Buddhist art. The surviving tombs of the ruling class in the Three Kingdoms and Gaya display distinctive structural forms and unique characteristics in the composition of their grave goods.

Goguryeo Tombs and Tomb Murals

Goguryeo tombs developed from stone-mound tombs to stone-chamber tombs with earthen mounds. In Ji'an, along the Yalu River—the area of the Goguryeo's first capital—some



10 *Portrait of the Tomb Occupant, Anak Tomb No. 3 (357)*

13,000 tombs have been identified; about half are stone-mound tombs and the other half are stone-chamber tombs with earthen mounds. Representative stone-mound tombs include the monumental, pyramid-like mounds known as Janggunchong (Tomb of the General), Cheonchuchong (Tomb of Countless Years), and Taewangneung (Tomb of the Great King).

In the fourth century, tomb murals began to appear in stone-chamber tombs with earthen mounds built for Goguryeo high-officials and aristocrats. This tradition flourished in the Pyeongyang region after King Jangsu relocated the capital there in 427. To date, about 38 tombs have been identified in Manchuria and around 89 in Pyeongyang and Anak, many of which have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The tomb murals



11 *Cowherd and Weaver Girl, Deokheung-ri Tomb (5th century)*

of Goguryeo, embodying the worldview of the kingdom, stand as the foremost example of its funerary art. Initially depicting scenes of daily life, the murals gradually came to center on images of the Four Guardian Deities, a tradition that endured for nearly three centuries until Goguryeo's fall in the third quarter of the seventh century.

Constructed in 357, the Anak Tomb No. 3 contains portraits of the male occupant and his wife, along with diverse scenes of everyday life that illustrate the daily activities of Goguryeo people.¹⁰ The Deokheung-ri Tomb (early fifth century), the resting place of Jin, who served as Governor of Yuju (Ch. Youzhou) and died at the age of 77, is renowned for its portraits as well as celestial paintings on the ceiling, including depictions of the *Cowherd and Weaver Girl* (Altair and Vega) and other constellations.¹¹ The Chummudeom (Tomb of the Dancers; first half of the



12 *Hunting Scene*, Chummudeom Tomb (5th century)

fifth century), decorated with procession and daily life scenes, features dynamic hunting imagery alongside charming depictions of dancers.¹² These dance scenes stand as vivid visual testimony to historical accounts that highlight the Korean people's fondness for singing and dancing.

In the Gangseo district of Pyongyang stand three Goguryeo tombs of varying sizes. The largest, the Gangseo Daemyo (Great Tomb of Gangseo District, seventh century) is decorated on all four walls of its burial chamber with elaborately executed paintings of the Four Guardian Deities—the Blue Dragon, White Tiger, Black Tortoise and Serpent, and Red Phoenixes. Among these, the Black Tortoise painting, where a turtle entwines with a serpent, is especially admired for its dynamic brushwork.¹³ The



13 *Black Tortoise*, Gangseo Daemyo Tomb (7th century)

murals of the Gangseo Daemyo are notable in particular for not being frescoes painted on plaster but rather executed directly with mineral pigments on smoothly finished stone surfaces, leaving details that remain vivid even today.

Baekje Tombs and the Tomb of King Muryeong

Baekje branched off from Goguryeo and first established itself in the Hangang River basin, later expanding its territory into the southwest of the Korean Peninsula. Its capitals remained for about 500 years in Hanseong (present-day Songpa-gu District in Seoul), about 60 years in Gongju, and about 120 years in Buyeo. During the Hanseong Period, Baekje tombs took the form of



14 Tomb of King Muryeong (Early 6th century)

stone-mound burials similar to those of Goguryeo.

In Gongju, brick-chamber tombs appeared, while in Buyeo the style shifted to stone-chamber tombs constructed of finely cut stone blocks. In Gongju, the Songsan-ri burial complex comprises six tombs believed to be Baekje royal mausoleums. In 1971, while the area was being prepared for maintenance on a hillside, the intact, undisturbed tombs of King Muryeong—who died in 523—and his queen were discovered, an event that astonished the scholarly world.¹⁴ From the tomb of King Muryeong, an epitaph inscribed with the dates of death of the king and queen was discovered, together with some 5,000 artifacts recovered from



15 Gold Diadem Ornaments of King Muryeong and Queen Consort (Early 6th century)

their coffins—including gold diadem ornaments, gold earrings, gold necklaces, hairpins, jade beads, comma-shaped jades, and gilt-bronze shoes—all attesting to the exceptional craftsmanship of Baekje artisans.¹⁵

Kim Busik, one of whom that compiled the *Samguk sagi* (*History of the Three Kingdoms*), described the beauty of Baekje as “humble yet not undignified, splendid yet not extravagant.”

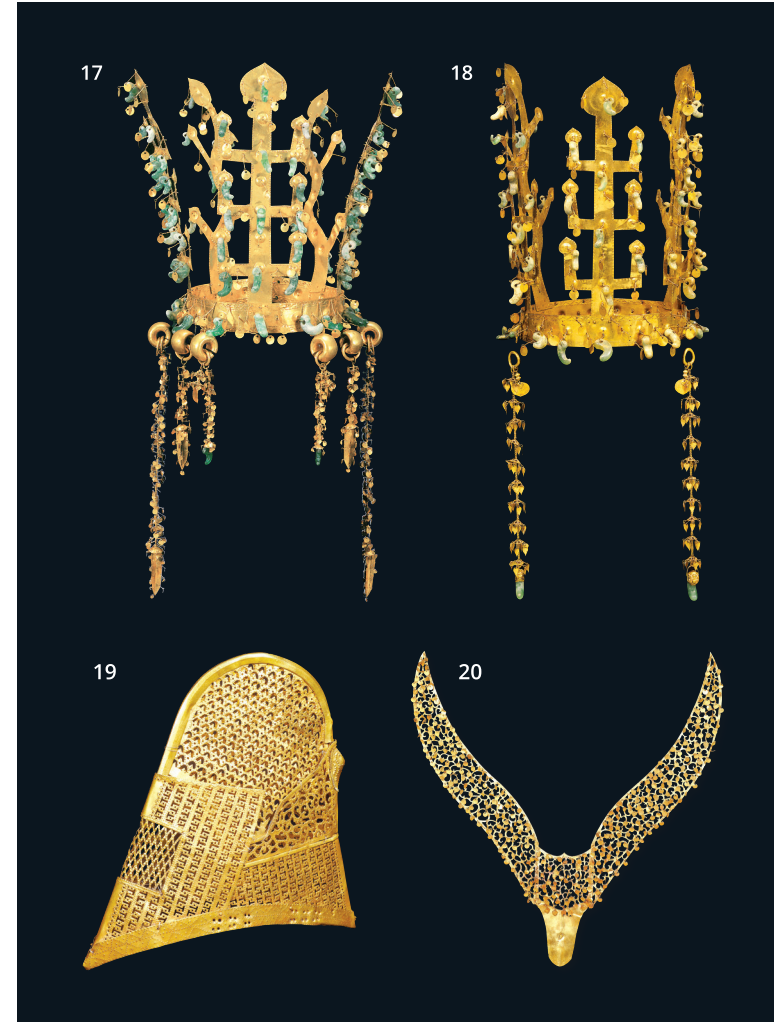
Silla Tombs and Gold Crowns

Silla was founded in 57 BCE. In its early centuries, the throne



16 Daereungwon Ancient Tomb Complex, Gyeongju

alternated among rulers of the Bak, Seok, and Kim clans. From the accession of Naemul Maripgan, or King Naemul, around 350 CE, however, the throne was passed hereditarily within the Kim clan, establishing the Kim royal line that endured thereafter. From around 350 to 500 CE, Silla entered the Maripgan period, the title signifying the “supreme ruler.” During this time, a distinctive burial system known as the “wooden chamber tomb with a stone mound” developed in Gyeongju, remarkable for its monumental scale. The largest of these tombs measure up to 80 meters in diameter and 23 meters in height, with more than 40 mounds remaining today.¹⁶ Excavations have uncovered a wealth of burial goods. From the South Mound of the Hwangnam Daechong Tomb, for example, a



17 Gold Crown from the North Mound of Hwangnam Daechong Tomb (5th century)
 18 Gold Crown and Diadem Ornaments from Geumgwanchong Tomb (6th century)
 19 Gold Cap from Cheonmachong Tomb (6th century)
 20 Gold Diadem Ornament from Cheonmachong Tomb (6th century)

gold crown was found along with more than 22,000 artifacts.

Foremost among these discoveries are the gold crowns. Each crown is adorned with five upright ornaments that symbolize trees or deer antlers and lavishly decorated with comma-shaped jade beads and gold spangles.^{17, 18} To date, six examples have been unearthed. Accompanying these are numerous gold earrings, bracelets, gilt-bronze shoes, and gold cap, among other gold ornaments, vividly attesting to Silla's long-standing reputation as a "nation of gold."^{19, 20}

Maripgan Jijeung, the last ruler to bear the title, in 502 prohibited the practice of burying retainers with the dead, adopted the title of "king" in place of *maripgan*, and formally confirmed the name of the state as Silla, thereby establishing the framework of a true ancient kingdom. The name Silla signifies "virtue and achievement renewed each day and spreading in all directions." Thereafter, royal tombs of Silla were constructed on a smaller scale on the outskirts of Gyeongju.

Gaya

From the first to the sixth century, Gaya in the southern Korean Peninsula consisted of a number of tribal polities united in a confederation under the leadership of a hegemon. It ultimately did not develop into a full-fledged ancient kingdom. Moreover, Gaya left no written records of its history, and its full character has yet to be clearly established. Nevertheless, each of the Gaya



21 Gaya Tumuli in Jisan-dong, Goryeong

polities, such as Geumgwan Gaya (Gold Crown Gaya) and Dae Gaya (Great Gaya), left behind vast clusters of tombs that together form a grand historical landscape.²¹ Seven of these sites have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

From the Gaya tombs have been discovered a wide range of objects once belonging to the ruling elite, including gilt-bronze crowns, gold earrings, and ring-pommeled large swords, as well as numerous iron artifacts such as armor and helmets. Excavations have also yielded large quantities of pottery, including vessel stands, jars, stemmed dishes, and cups, among others, remarkable for both their beauty and variety. The vessel stands suggest the form of trophies, embodying a bold and well-defined aesthetic. The cups and stemmed dishes display highly refined designs; in



22 Varieties of Gaya Pottery

particular, the handled cups possess a strikingly modern aesthetic, appearing as if crafted today rather than fifteen centuries ago.²²

Buddhism in the Three Kingdoms

Buddhism was first introduced to Goguryeo in 372, when a monk from Former Qin China brought Buddhist images and scriptures; it subsequently spread to Baekje and Silla. Buddhist culture, however, reached full development only in the sixth century, ultimately emerging as the ideology of the ancient state. This period bequeathed a remarkable legacy across temple architecture, sculpture, and Buddhist crafts.



23 Stone Pagoda at the Mireuksa Temple Site, Iksan (639)



24 Five-story Stone Pagoda at the Jeongnimsa Temple Site, Buyeo (Late 7th century)

Temple Architecture and the Birth of the Stone Pagoda

The standard temple layout in the Three Kingdoms placed one pagoda and one main hall on a north–south axis with bilateral symmetry. By contrast, Silla’s Hwangnyongsa Temple, which covered roughly 75,000 m², employed an exceptional scheme: one pagoda with three main halls aligned in parallel. Its nine-story pagoda rose to approximately 80 meters. Although now in ruins, the site preserves foundation stones of wooden structures and plinths for Buddha pedestals in the main halls, bearing witness to the monumental scale of the complex.

Baekje’s Mireuksa Temple in Iksan was of extraordinary scale—

roughly twice the size of Hwangnyongsa. Its central precinct followed a one-pagoda-one-main-hall scheme, with left and right wings repeating the plan to create an overall three-pagoda-three-main-hall layout. Notably, the two flanking pagodas were built of stone, marking the first emergence of the stone-pagoda tradition.²³ The Mireuksa stone pagodas translated the structural vocabulary of timber architecture into stone, whereas at Jeongnimsa Temple in Baekje's last capital, Buyeo, the five-story stone pagoda—composed of clearly defined body stones and roof stones—established the paradigm that earned Korea's reputation as a land of stone pagodas.²⁴

Buddhist Crafts of the Three Kingdoms

Pagodas invariably housed reliquaries, enshrining *sarira* (the Buddha's relics) venerated as sacred presences. These reliquary sets, without exception, represent the finest metalwork of their time. A beautifully crafted reliquary was discovered in the West Pagoda of Mireuksa Temple in Iksan.²⁵ At the wooden pagoda of Wangheungsa Temple in Buyeo, a set of gold, silver, and bronze reliquaries was recovered, notable for its refined simplicity.²⁶ From the five-story stone pagoda at Wanggung-ri in Iksan, another set of reliquaries were discovered, consisting of a blue glass bottle and a gilt-bronze jar enclosed within a metal case, vividly attesting to the superb craftsmanship of Baekje metalwork.²⁷

Among Buddhist crafts, the Baekje Gilt-bronze Incense Burner



25 The Sarira Reliquaries from the West Pagoda of the Mireuksa Temple Site, Iksan (639)



26 Reliquaries from the Wangheungsa Temple Site, Buyeo (577)



27 Reliquaries from the Five-story Stone Pagoda in Wanggung-ri, Iksan (8th century)

epitomizes the essence of Baekje aesthetics.²⁸ Discovered at the site of a royal Buddhist temple, the incense burner takes the form of a lotus bud set upon a pedestal in the shape of a coiled dragon, with a lid surmounted by a phoenix (Kr. *bonghwang*) spreading its wings. The body of the incense burner is richly embellished with depictions of animals, human figures, pavilions, and landscapes, culminating at the top in a fantastic scene of five musicians performing. Ten perforations, concealed behind the layered mountain peaks, allow incense smoke to drift upward when lit, enhancing the atmosphere of a mist-shrouded landscape.



28 Baekje Gilt-bronze Incense Burner (6–7th century)



29 Gilt-bronze Standing Buddha with Inscription of "the Seventh Yeonga Year" (539)



30 Gilt-bronze Standing Bodhisattva from Gyam-ri (7th century)

Buddhist Sculpture of the Three Kingdoms

Buddhist sculptures of the Three Kingdoms each display distinctive stylistic traits. Among Goguryeo works, the Gilt-bronze Standing Buddha with Inscription of "the Seventh Yeonga Year" (539) conveys a powerful impression.²⁹ Baekje sculpture is exemplified by the Gilt-bronze Standing Bodhisattva from Gyam-ri, which embodies the distinctive elegance of Baekje art, and by the Rock-carved Triad at Seosan, renowned for its radiant smile.^{30, 31} From Silla, the Rock-carved Seated Buddha in Bulgok Valley of Namsan Mountain in



31 Rock-carved Buddha Triad in Yonghyeon-ri, Seosan (7th century)



32 Rock-carved Seated Buddha in Bulgok Valley of Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju (7th century)



33 Gilt-bronze Pensive Maitreya Bodhisattva with Pagoda-shaped Crown (Late 6th century)

Gyeongju, presents an approachable, this-worldly image.³²

Among them, two main gilt-bronze pensive bodhisattva sculptures, both designated National Treasures of Korea and believed to have been produced in either Silla or Baekje, exemplify the outstanding sculptural artistry of Three Kingdoms Buddhism.^{33, 34}



34 Gilt-bronze Pensive Maitreya Bodhisattva with Three-peaked Crown (Early 7th century)

Through their posture, facial expressions, and garment drapery, these life-sized images of Maitreya Bodhisattva, seated in meditation with a gentle smile as they contemplate the salvation of sentient beings, convey a modern sculptural beauty reminiscent of Rodin's *The Thinker*.

Art of Unified Silla

The rivalries among the Three Kingdoms ultimately ended in Silla's victory, yet Unified Silla governed only parts of the former Baekje and Goguryeo territories. In Manchuria and the northern Korean Peninsula the kingdom of Balhae was established. Due to limited written records and relatively scarce remains, Balhae's history and culture remain only partially understood.

Unified Silla, bolstered by the confidence and strength gained from victory in the wars of the Three Kingdoms, fostered a culture of unprecedented brilliance. The eighth century, in particular, was a rare period of peace in East Asia: in China, the Tang dynasty saw the flourishing of its High Tang culture; Balhae, under King Seong, was praised as the "Prosperous Kingdom of the East"; and Japan entered the Tenpyō period, displaying the maturity of its ancient state culture.

In 674, King Munmu, victor in the wars of the Three Kingdoms, built a detached palace known as Wolji ("Moon Pond"), where an artificial pond and hills were created, a profusion of flowering plants were cultivated, and exotic birds and animals were raised.



35 Wolji, Gyeongju

Covering approximately 16,000 m², the garden of Wolji presents a harmonious interplay of artificial straight lines and natural curves, offering ever-changing vistas that reveal new scenes as one strolls through it.³⁵

Renaissance under King Gyeongdeok in the Third Quarter of the Eighth Century

Unified Silla reached its cultural zenith during the reign of King Gyeongdeok in the third quarter of the eighth century. The driving force behind this flourishing was Buddhism. Emblematic works of the time include Bulguksa Temple in Buddhist architecture, Seokguram Grotto in Buddhist sculpture, and the Sacred



36 Bulguksa Temple, Gyeongju

Bell of Great King Seongdeok in Buddhist crafts.

With the full support of King Gyeongdeok, Kim Dae-seong, one of the most powerful figures of the time, oversaw two decades of grand construction that culminated in the completion of Bulguksa and Seokguram in 774. These monuments vividly embody the harmonious ideal of Unified Silla art. Nestled at the foot of a mountain, Bulguksa was built by leveling the sloping ground with massive stone terraces and arranging a pair of pagodas in the front courtyard, flanking the main hall symmetrically, all within surrounding corridors.³⁶ This layout exemplifies the three classical principles of beauty—balance, symmetry, and proportion—in perfect harmony. In particular, the stone terraces, extending nearly 100 meters, juxtapose natural and cut stones to striking effect,



37 Seokguram Grotto, Gyeongju (Late 8th century)

powerfully conveying the grandeur of the Buddhist Pure Land.

Near the summit of Tohamsan Mountain, Seokguram is an artificial stone grotto temple comprising an antechamber and a main chamber.³⁷ At its center sits the principal Buddha, surrounded by some 40 figures, including bodhisattvas, arhats, and guardian deities (two now missing) arranged in perfect order to embody a complete vision of the Buddha's world. The bodhisattvas and the Ten Great Disciples in relief combine realism with idealization, creating a sacred atmosphere distinct from the mundane world. Architecturally, Seokguram achieves perfect composition and precise execution, integrating architecture, sculpture, and religion



38 Sacred Bell of Great King Seongdeok (771)

into a unified whole, thereby standing as the pinnacle of Unified Silla art.

Completed in 771, the Sacred Bell of Great King Seongdeok is a monumental example of Buddhist bell—3.66 meters in height and weighing 18.9 tons.³⁸ Its sound is both majestic and clear,



39 Three-story Stone Pagodas at Gameunsa Temple Site, Gyeongju (Late 7th century)

with a resonant aftersound produced by a distinctive beating phenomenon, and it has long been praised as one of the most beautiful bells in the world. In acoustics, it is often cited under the specific designation “Korean bell.” The Sacred Bell of King Seongdeok, with its majestic form, bears on its surface not only graceful images of flying celestials but also an inscription of 1,037 characters. The text explains that the bell’s sound is the “perfect sound of truth,” conveying the teachings of Buddhism. In other words, to transcribe the Buddha’s words is to create a sutra, to shape his image is to form a sculpture, and the resonance of the bell embodies the very voice of the Buddha.



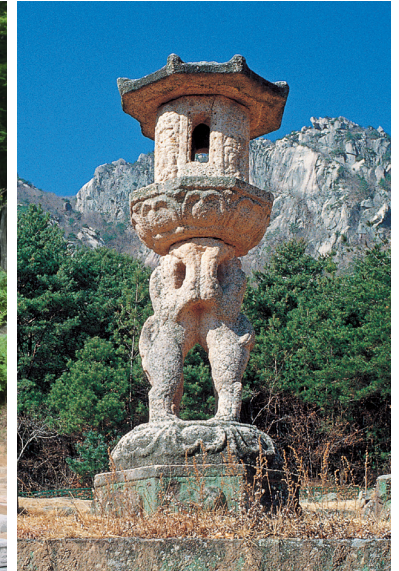
40 Seokgatap Pagoda at Bulguksa Temple, Gyeongju (Mid-8th century)



41 Dabotap Pagoda at Bulguksa Temple, Gyeongju (Mid-8th century)



42 Four Lion Three-story Stone Pagoda at Hwaeomsa Temple (8th century)



43 Twin Lion Stone Lantern at Yeongamsa Temple Site (9th century)

The Prevalence of the Three-Story Stone Pagoda

Unified Silla inherited the stone-pagoda tradition that began in Baekje, and at Gameunsa Temple it emerged in a new form as the three-story stone pagoda. In gratitude for the noble will of King Munmu—who wished to guard the nation even after death and whose ashes were interred at Daewangam (“Great King’s Rock”), an offshore islet in the East Sea traditionally identified as his underwater tomb—the twin pagodas of Gameunsa Temple were built in 682.³⁹ Each consists of a two-tier base, a three-story body, and an iron finial. Together, their monumental scale convey both a

sense of stability and an ascending movement in their form.

Originating with the pagodas at Gameunsa, the three-story stone pagoda attained its canonical form in Seokgatap Pagoda at Bulguksa Temple in the mid-eighth century, where impeccable proportions and refined detail perfected the type.⁴⁰ Thereafter, three-story stone pagodas were erected at temples throughout Unified Silla. While establishing the archetypal Seokgatap type, Bulguksa also developed variant forms, demonstrating the diversity of Unified Silla pagoda design. For example, the ornate, pavilion-like Dabotap stands in contrast beside Seokgatap, while



44 Gilt-bronze Buddha Plaques Excavated from Wolji (Late 7th century)

at Hwaeomsa Temple in Gurye a three-story stone pagoda is uniquely supported by four lion sculptures.^{41, 42}

With the emergence of stone pagodas came the introduction of stone lanterns, typically erected in front of the main halls of temples. The standard form was an octagonal lantern, but with added sculptural details, as exemplified in the Twin Lion Stone Lantern at the site of Yeongamsa Temple in Hapcheon, which displays exceptional craftsmanship.⁴³

Buddhist Sculpture of Unified Silla

Buddha images were produced in large numbers in Unified Silla, both in gilt-bronze and in stone, adopting the Tang style with its



45 Stone Standing Amitabha Buddha and Stone Standing Maitreya Bodhisattva of Gamsansa Temple (719)

realistic and sensuous rendering of the body. The Gilt-bronze Buddha Plaques excavated at Wolji Pond feature the bodhisattvas that appear strikingly natural.⁴⁴ The Stone Standing Amitabha Buddha and the Stone Standing Maitreya Bodhisattva, enshrined at Gamsansa Temple in Gyeongju in 719, display flowing drapery folds whose elegance recalls the sculpture of ancient Greece.⁴⁵

The sculptures of Seokguram represent the pinnacle of Unified Silla Buddhist sculpture. At the same time, with the aspiration of recreating the Buddha's land in Silla, people of Unified Silla carved Buddhas in cliffs and produced stone images throughout Namsan Mountain in Gyeongju. Remarkable examples survive in situ at sites such as the temples of Borisa, Yongjangsa, and Sinseonam.



46 Stone Seated Buddha in Mireukgok Valley of Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju (8th century)

The Stone Seated Buddha in Mireukgok Valley, remaining at the site of Borisa Temple, possesses handsome face and commanding presence while the Rock-carved Bodhisattva at Sinseonam Hermitage, seated with exquisite poise, naturally inspires reverence.^{46, 47} More than a hundred Buddhist structures and sculptures survive today on Namsan in Gyeongju. About two decades ago, a colossal five-meter standing Buddha was discovered lying on its side in the foothills of Yeoramgok

Valley.⁴⁸ Believed to have been toppled by an earthquake centuries earlier, it has since been nicknamed the “Five-Centimeter Miracle,” for despite the fall its face remained perfectly intact.

Seon Buddhism Art in Late Silla

In the ninth century, during the later period of Unified Silla, monks who had studied in Tang China introduced Seon Buddhism to the peninsula. Unlike the doctrinal schools, which emphasized strict dogma, Seon Buddhism embraced the progressive idea that



47 Rock-carved Bodhisattva at Sinseonam Hermitage in Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju (Late 8th century)



48 Standing Buddha in Yeoramgok Valley of Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju (Late 8th century)



49 Iron Vairocana Buddha at Borimsa Temple, Jangheung (858)



50 Iron Vairocana Buddha at Dopiansa Temple, Cheorwon (865)

anyone could attain Buddhahood through practice. Enthusiastically embraced by regional aristocrats, Seon Buddhism spread rapidly across the provinces, giving rise to monasteries such as Borimsa in Jangheung, Bongamsa in Mungyeong, and Silsangsa in Namwon. Among these, nine leading Seon monasteries became known as the Nine Mountain Sects of Seon. From this time onward, the cultural center of Unified Silla shifted from the aristocratic society of Gyeongju to the provincial domains of the regional lords.

Buddhist images also moved away from idealized human figures



51 Stupa of Seon Master Cheolgam at Ssangbongsa Temple, Hwasun (Late 9th century)

52 Stele of Seon Master Cheolgam at Ssangbongsa Temple, Hwasun (Late 9th century)

to powerful iron sculptures that appear to reflect the forceful presence of the regional lords. Representative examples include the Iron Vairocana Buddha of Borimsa Temple and the Iron Vairocana Buddha of Dopiansa Temple in Cheorwon.^{49, 50}

At Seon monasteries, along with pagodas enshrining the Buddha's relics, stupas for eminent monks were also constructed. At temples of the Nine Mountain Seon Schools—such as Ssangbongsa, Taeansa, Silsangsa, and Bongamsa—beautiful octagonal stupas were erected for their founding monks. Among them, the Stupa of Seon Master Cheolgam at Ssangbongsa is celebrated for its exquisite carving, while the turtle-shaped stone base of the adjacent stele appears almost alive, with its front foot slightly lifted.^{51, 52}



53 Seungseongyo Bridge of Seonamsa Temple, Suncheon

The Aesthetics of Mountain Temples

With unification, Silla began the construction of temples in the newly incorporated provinces, extending the reach of Buddhism throughout the realm.

Venerable Monk Uisang established temples on renowned mountains across the country—Hwaeomsa on Jirisan Mountain, Haeinsa on Gayasan Mountain, and Buseoksa on Sobaeksan Mountain, among others—collectively known as Uisang’s Ten Hwaom Temples. From this time onward, Korean temple architecture took on the enduring tradition of the mountain monastery.

With the establishment of the Nine Mountain Seon Schools in the late Unified Silla period, the tradition of mountain monasteries put down firm roots. These temples continued into the Goryeo



54 Buseoksa Temple, Yeongju

and Joseon dynasties, and seven of them, including Buseoksa, Bongjeongsa, Seonamsa, and Beopjusa, have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Mountain monasteries adapt their layout to the natural conditions of their surroundings, following no fixed pattern and each revealing its own distinctive character. Seonamsa Temple conveys warmth and human intimacy through the way its approach road blends seamlessly with nature, while Buseoksa, commanding a sweeping view over the entire Sobaek Mountains, has become a temple beloved not only by Koreans but also by overseas visitors.^{53, 54} The aesthetics of Korea’s mountain monasteries may best be described as the joyful harmony of nature and architecture.

Art of the Goryeo Dynasty

Goryeo (918–1392) was a medieval Korean civilization that flourished for 475 years. Through trade with Arab merchants, it secured a distinct place on world maps under the name “Korea.”

Goryeo adopted Buddhism as its state ideology, carrying forward the Buddhist cultural traditions of Unified Silla. Yet while Buddhist art continued, Goryeo achieved its greatest cultural brilliance not in sculptures or stone pagodas, but in the domain of crafts.

Goryeo Celadon

By the twelfth century, Goryeo had consolidated an aristocratic culture led by high officials and, with the resumption of large-scale exchanges with Song China, entered a cultural renaissance. The most emblematic artifacts of this era are the celebrated Goryeo celadons.

Goryeo celadon embodies an elegant aristocratic beauty in both form and color. This refinement appears in undecorated



55 Celadon Melon-shaped Bottle (12th century)



56 Celadon Incense Burner with Lion-shaped Lid (12th century)



57 Celadon Bird-shaped Ewer with Daoist Priest (12th century)



58 Celadon Peach-shaped Water Dropper (12th century)

celadon wares and, even more strikingly, in sculptural vessels of varied shapes. Representative examples of the latter include the Melon-shaped Vase, the Incense Burner with Lion-shaped



59 Celadon Maebyeong (Prunus Vase) with Inlaid Cloud and Crane Design (12th century)

Cover, the Bird-shaped Ewer with Daoist Priest, and the Peach-shaped Water Dropper—works that approach the quality of sculpture in their artistry.^{55–58} In 1123, Xu Jing, an envoy from Song China who visited Goryeo, wrote in his *Illustrated Account of Goryeo* that Goryeo celadon approached the level of Chinese Ru ware, the imperial kiln ware of Emperor Huizong’s reign, noting that “its exquisite craftsmanship is truly precious.” A Chinese literatus known as Taiping Laoren likewise listed the world’s finest objects and declared, “Goryeo’s jade-green glaze is the finest under heaven.”

While celadon was prized for its beautiful glaze color, it was not suited to incised or relief decoration. In response, Goryeo potters pioneered the inlay technique: after carving the design, they filled the recesses with white or black slip so that the designs would stand out clearly. This innovation not only sustained but also greatly extended the artistic life of celadon in Goryeo.

A representative masterpiece of inlaid celadon is the Maebyeong



60 Celadon Kundika with Inlaid Willow, Lotus, Reed, and Mandarin Duck Design (12th century)



61 Silver-gilt Ewer and Basin (12th century)



62 Silver-gilt Flower-shaped Cup with Stand (12th century)

(Prunus Vase) with Cloud-and-Crane Design.⁵⁹ Its gracefully curved body is filled with feather-like clouds and some 40 cranes animating the open sky: those within the roundels soar upward, while those outside descend, creating a vivid sense of celestial movement.

Another classic work is the Kundika Inlaid with Willow and Waterfowl Design.⁶⁰ Depicting a pair of ducks gliding along a reed-fringed stream, it beautifully conveys the Goryeo taste for meditative calm and quiet lyricism.

Metalwork and Lacquer Ware with Mother-of-Pearl Inlay

Goryeo was renowned for exceptional craftsmanship, yielding masterpieces in metalwork and lacquer ware inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The Silver-gilt Ewer and Basin in the collection of the



63 Bronze Kundika with Silver-inlaid Willow and Waterfowl Design (12th century)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston is a rare complete set, consisting of a lidded ewer with intricate carving and a lotus-shaped basin.⁶¹

Formed by hammering a sheet of silver into shape and embellished with fine line engraving and repoussé, the set of Cup and Saucer was finished with gilding in pure gold, resulting in a lavish silver-gilt vessel.⁶² The Bronze Kundika with Silver-inlaid Willow and Waterfowl Design eloquently conveys the refined lyricism prized in Goryeo art.⁶³

Goryeo mother-of-pearl lacquerware, celebrated for its exquisite technique and refined splendor, was highly admired in its own time. Among the few surviving examples, most are sutra boxes

crafted to house Buddhist scriptures. The Lacquered Sutra Box with Mother-of-Pearl Inlay of Peony Scroll Design exemplifies this tradition, its lacquered surface inlaid with mother-of-pearl chrysanthemums that combine sacred solemnity with radiant decorative beauty.⁶⁴



64 Lacquered Sutra Box with Mother-of-Pearl Inlay of Peony Scroll Design (Late 13th century)



65 Lacquered Rosary Box with Mother-of-Pearl and Tortoiseshell Inlay of Chrysanthemum Scroll Design (Late 13th century)



66 *Jikji*, the world's oldest book printed with movable metal type (1377)

The Lacquered Rosary Box with Mother-of-Pearl and Tortoiseshell Inlay of Chrysanthemum Scroll Design inlay features a design composed by pairing mother-of-pearl inlay with tortoiseshell (hawksbill).⁶⁵ The iridescent glow of the mother-of-pearl mingles with the tortoiseshell's warm reds and yellows, producing an exceptionally beautiful box.

Goryeo Tripitaka and Buddhist Painting

Goryeo achieved remarkable advances in printing. The world's oldest extant book printed with metal movable type, *Jikji* (1377), predates Gutenberg's metal-type printing by seventy-eight years and is inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.⁶⁶

Woodblock printing also flourished, enabling the compilation and publication of the Buddhist canon on three occasions.



67 Janggyeong Panjeon Depositories of Haeinsa Temple

The *Tripitaka Koreana* (the revised Goryeo Buddhist Canon), preserved in the depository of Janggyeong Panjeon at Haeinsa Temple,⁶⁷ comprises 6,815 volumes; its 81,258 woodblocks earned it the name "Eighty-Thousand Tripitaka." The Janggyeong Panjeon itself is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

In addition to printing, the transcription of scriptures reached remarkable heights in Goryeo. The *Lotus Sutra* and *Flower Garland Sutra* were often copied in gold ink on indigo paper. Among the most precious examples is the *Illustrated Manuscript of the Lotus Sutra with the Seven-Story Pagoda* (1249), created in prayer for national peace.⁶⁸ This extraordinary work presents all seven fascicles of the sutra accompanied by an illustration of



68 *Illustrated Manuscript of the Lotus Sutra with the Seven-Story Pagoda* (1249)

a seven-story pagoda. Its meticulous detail and devotion inspire solemn reverence in the viewer.

In the late Goryeo period, numerous Buddhist paintings of modest size were created to enshrine in small temple halls. These richly colored works earned high acclaim abroad; the Yuan-dynasty art history text *Huajian* (*Examination of Painting*) extolled Goryeo Buddhist painting as “unsurpassed in delicacy.”

Goryeo Buddhist paintings most often featured Amitabha Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, and Kṣitigarbha, deities associated with prayers for blessings. Among them, the Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara—showing the bodhisattva receiving the young pilgrim



69 *Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara* by Seo Gu-bang (1323)

70 *Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara* (14th century)

Sudhana at Mount Potalaka—represents the pinnacle of East Asian Buddhist painting. One seated *Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara* by Seo Gu-bang (Sen-Oku Hakukokan Museum, Japan) displays exquisite refinement in the rendering of costume—the red robe draped with a white sash is at once delicate and sumptuous.⁶⁹ Another standing *Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara* (Sensōji Temple, Japan), holding a willow branch and a ritual water vessel, conveys a figure of unsurpassed grace.⁷⁰

Art of the Joseon Dynasty

The Joseon dynasty was a Confucian state that embraced Neo-Confucianism as its guiding ideology. Although Neo-Confucianism was developed in Song China, it was Joseon that it was adopted as a national creed and sustained for more than five centuries. Edwin Reischauer, in his book *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation*, described Joseon as “a model Confucian society.”

In the Joseon period, cultural authority rested with the *yangban* (scholar-officials), whose personal and social virtues were grounded in Neo-Confucian ideals. This gave rise to the *seonbi* (Confucian scholars) spirit, which came to define medieval Korea, much as medieval Japan was shaped by the ethos of *bushido* (Samurai’s code of conduct).

Joseon art esteemed restrained elegance and unadorned beauty over ostentation. Representative examples include the solemn architecture of the Jongmyo Shrine housing the royal ancestral tablets, the serene purity of white porcelain, and the modest yet functional design of furniture for *sarangbang*, where men studied and received guests.

Joseon experienced two cultural renaissances. The first unfolded in the fifteenth century under King Sejong, who created Hunminjeongeum (Hangeul), considered one of the world’s most sophisticated phonetic scripts, reorganized court music to suit Korean traditions, and oversaw the compilation of Book of Geography of Eight Provinces, thereby laying the foundations for a five-hundred-year dynasty. The second blossomed in the eighteenth century under Kings Yeongjo and Jeongjo, when culture flourished and painting produced masterpieces of true-view landscape, genre painting, and literati painting, alongside the refined beauty of white porcelain.

Palace Architecture

Joseon architecture sought harmony with the natural environment. Rather than pursuing monumental scale, it emphasized spatial experience through the design principle known as ‘borrowed scenery,’ incorporating surrounding mountain forms into the architectural setting. Over the course of five centuries, the Joseon royal palaces were repeatedly destroyed by war and fire and rebuilt, leaving the five extant palaces of today, including Gyeongbokgung and Changdeokgung.

As the principal palace of the Joseon dynasty, Gyeongbokgung asserts royal authority through its orderly north-south axis, with the main throne hall Geunjeongjeon Pavilion dramatically framed by Bugaksan and Inwangsan mountains rising like a natural screen



71 Gyeongbokgung Palace



72 Gyeonghoeru Pavilion of Gyeongbokgung Palace

behind it.⁷¹ Gyeonghoeru, a grand two-story pavilion capable of accommodating a thousand guests, commands panoramic views of the surrounding landscape from every side.⁷²



73 Changdeokgung Palace



74 Secret Garden of Changdeokgung Palace

Beloved by successive Joseon kings, Changdeokgung Palace arranges its buildings along the site's natural slopes, creating an intimate, human scale.⁷³ Behind the palace lies Biwon (Secret



75 Main Hall of Jongmyo Shrine

Garden), whose composition exemplifies the harmonious interplay of nature and design through a design principle of “borrowed scenery.” Seventeen pavilions are set throughout Biwon Garden; no two alike, each attuned to the vistas of the surrounding valleys.⁷⁴

The main hall of Jongmyo Shrine, enshrining the spirit tablets of past kings, is widely acclaimed as a masterpiece of East Asian architecture. Supported by 20 columns, the hall stretches to 101 meters in length, fronted by a broad forecourt known as the *woldae* (“lunar platform”) that unfolds like a great stone terrace.⁷⁵ Low tiled walls encircle the precincts, deepening an atmosphere of profound stillness and reverence. Architect Frank Gehry has likened the significance of Jongmyo in the East to that of the Parthenon in the West.



76 Folding Screen of the Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks (19th century)



77 Folding Screens with Images of Peonies (19th century)

Decorative Painting of the Palaces

Since the palaces were timber structures, painted decoration took the form of folding screens—typically in sets of eight or ten panels—rather than murals. These screens varied in function, but



78 *Folding Screen of Chaekgado* (19th century)

behind the king's throne one invariably stood the *Folding Screen of the Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks*, embodying a wish for the nation's enduring stability and prosperity.⁷⁶ For outdoor ceremonies such as royal weddings, large *Folding Screens with Images of Peonies* were set up.⁷⁷ Each panel painted with nine stylized peony blooms, emblems of wealth and honor, the folding screen created an opulent, celebratory atmosphere. Another form of decorative painting was *chaekgado*—painting with image of bookshelves filled with books and scholarly objects—often displayed in the king's study.⁷⁸ The shelves in the painting arranged books, varied treasures and scholarly accoutrements, giving pictorial form to the literati ideal.

Painting of the Joseon Dynasty

Painting reached an unparalleled level of cultivation during the



79 *Portrait of Jang Mal-son* (15th century) 80 *Self-portrait* by Yun Du-seo (1710)

Joseon dynasty. From the dynasty's outset Joseon established the Dohwaseo (Royal Bureau of Painting), whose court painters produced works required by the state such as decorative paintings and portraits of kings and meritorious subjects, while also creating landscapes and other paintings for connoisseurship. Alongside the Dohwaseo court painters, scholar-literati adept at painting created diverse works for pure appreciation. Together, these two groups—court painters and literati painters—formed the twin pillars of Joseon painting. The former renowned for incisive realism, the latter for conveying an inner, contemplative spirit.



81 Complete View of the Geumgangsan Mountains by Jeong Seon (1734)



82 Clearing After Rain on Inwangsan Mountain by Jeong Seon (1751)

Portraiture reached an exceptional level in Joseon. Beyond faithful likeness, painters sought to convey character and presence—an approach that gives these works their singular dignity. The *Portrait of Jang Mal-son* (a fifteenth-century meritorious official) illustrates Jang seated in court robes, the assured rendering of costume and bearing projecting authority.⁷⁹ In the seventeenth century, the literati painter Yun Du-seo created his renowned *Self-Portrait*, a work embedding his troubled feelings in an image of striking intensity.⁸⁰

In Joseon, paintings made for pure appreciation encompassed many genres—landscape, figure, genre scenes, bird-and-flower, animal painting, and the Four Gentlemen (plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum). In the eighteenth century, the great painter Jeong Seon pioneered true-view landscape, capturing Korea's



83 *Village School*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings* by Kim Hong-do (Late 18th century)



84 *Wrestling*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings* by Kim Hong-do (Late 18th century)

own scenery. His masterpieces include *Complete View of the Geumgangsan Mountains* and *Clearing After Rain on Inwangsan Mountain*.^{81, 82} The former renders Geumgangsan's myriad peaks from a dramatic, aerial viewpoint, while the latter depicts Inwangsan's austere rock pinnacles glistening after rain; its dynamic brushwork and layered ink tones approaching pure form.

The eighteenth century marked the second renaissance of Joseon culture, when the distinguished painters Kim Hong-do and Shin Yun-bok emerged, leaving behind a wealth of genre paintings that vividly portray contemporary society. Kim Hong-do, in particular, depicted the lives of common people with striking

immediacy, offering a window onto everyday customs in an age before photography. His *Village School* shows young pupils studying under the watchful eye of a stern teacher, while *Wrestling* captures the excitement of a marketplace match as spectators cheer with lively enthusiasm.^{83, 84} It is noteworthy that Kim often omitted backgrounds to intensify the dramatic intensity of each scene.

By contrast, Shin Yun-bok portrayed the refined amusements of the *yangban* (scholar-officials) in richly colored paintings. *Moonlit Rendezvous* shows a couple meeting by moonlight: the man, in a black hat and black outer garment, gazes with unmistakable



85 *Moonlit Rendezvous*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings* by Shin Yun-bok (Late 18th century)



86 *Banquet in the Rear Garden*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings* by Shin Yun-bok (Late 18th century)



87 *Wintry Days* by Kim Jeong-hui (1844)

affection, while the woman draped in a long veil suggests a shy reserve.⁸⁵ In *Banquet in the Rear Garden*, three couples gather by a pond in a private garden, the scene suffused with the mellow gaiety of an evening in full swing.⁸⁶ In Shin's genre paintings, the setting itself carries great weight—the background is not mere a backdrop but an active agent in shaping mood and meaning.

In the nineteenth century, the eminent evidential scholar Kim Jeong-hui advanced a literati aesthetics that valued the artist's spirit and the calligraphic structure of brush and ink over descriptive realism. He embodied this ideal in *Wintry Days*, a restrained landscape rendered with austere clarity.⁸⁷

Among figure paintings, *Bodhidharma* by the seventeenth-century painter Kim Myeong-guk—remembered in anecdotes for his heavy drinking—stands out. With a few bold, swift strokes, he renders the foreign, vigorous presence of the patriarch who founded Seon (Chan) Buddhism.⁸⁸ In animal painting, the sixteenth-century royal descendant Yi Am created the beloved *Puppies*, depicting



88 *Bodhidharma* by Kim Myeong-guk (Early 17th century)

three dogs—one black gazing into the distance, one white playing with a grasshopper, and one yellow dozing—each with a distinct pose and expression that together evoke a scene of tranquil ease.⁸⁹

In the late nineteenth century, with painting's increasing popularity among commoners, folk painting (*minhwa*) emerged as a distinct genre, characterized by simplified, schematized forms.



89 *Puppies* by Yi Am (Mid-16th century) 90 *Magpie and Tiger* (19th century)

A quintessential example of these naive paintings is *Magpie and Tiger*, traditionally hung on the main gate at New Year to invite good fortune.⁹⁰ Here, the fearsome tiger is rendered as a familiar, even endearing figure, while the magpie teases it, creating an image of playful wit that delighted viewers.

Ceramics of the Joseon Dynasty

Joseon ceramics developed along two great streams: buncheong



91 Buncheong Flattened Bottle with Incised Fish Design (15th century)



92 Buncheong Flattened Bottle with Abstract Design (15th century)

ware and white porcelain. Buncheong continued the Goryeo tradition of inlaid celadon but was produced at regional kilns across the peninsula. These vessels, coated overall with white slip and decorated in a variety of techniques, yield an unpretentious and even naive sensibility.

The Buncheong Flattened Bottle with Incised Fish Design features a witty composition: four fish swim in a line while one darts in from the opposite direction, joined by a smaller companion.⁹¹ The Buncheong Flattened Bottle with Abstract Design displays a geometric arrangement astonishingly modern for the fifteenth century.⁹² From the late fifteenth century, buncheong production move beyond direct state control, allowing the free, experimental forms that distinguish the ware.



93 White Porcelain Bottle (15-16th century)



94 White Porcelain Faceted Bottle with Underglaze Cobalt-blue Chrysanthemum Design (Early 18th century)

Although Joseon ceramics began with buncheong wares, by the late fifteenth century the court adopted white porcelain as its official ware with the establishment of official kilns, making Joseon a “land of white porcelain.” The hallmark of Joseon porcelain is, in a word, reverence for pure white. While many traditions embraced richly polychrome wares, Joseon favored plain white and the serene world of blue-and-white porcelain, a preference shaped by the long-standing cultural affinity for white attire and by the *seonbi* (Confucian scholar) ethos of frugality and substance.

Across the five centuries of Joseon, the development of white



95 White Porcelain Jar with Underglaze Copper-red Lotus Design (Late 18th century)

96 White Porcelain Jar with Underglaze Cobalt-blue Plum and Bamboo Design (16th century)

porcelain clearly reflects changing aesthetic sensibility. A sixteenth-century White Porcelain Bottle, one of the early forms, conveys noble dignity through its snow-white glaze and elegantly curved body.⁹³ By contrast, an eighteenth-century White Porcelain Faceted Bottle with Underglaze Cobalt-blue Chrysanthemum Design, from the Geumsa-ri kilns exudes a quiet refinement aligned with literati taste.⁹⁴ At the end of the eighteenth century, White Porcelain Jar with Underglaze Copper-red Lotus Design from the Bunwon-ri kilns evokes a sense of abundance and plenitude.⁹⁵



97 White Porcelain Moon Jar (Early 18th century)

Joseon blue-and-white porcelain yielded countless masterpieces. The sixteenth-century White Porcelain Jar with Underglaze Cobalt-blue Plum and Bamboo Design epitomizes, with its poised and graceful design, the dignity of Joseon porcelain.⁹⁶ Above all, the White Porcelain Moon Jar stands as the ultimate embodiment of Joseon white porcelain.⁹⁷

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, moon jars were produced at an impressive height of about 45 centimeters, their generous, softly rounded forms evoking the fullness of the moon. In an era before mechanical power, such a perfectly rounded jar could not be thrown in one piece on a hand-turned wheel. Instead, potters formed two large bowl-like hemispheres and joined them vertically to create the vessel. Unlike the chill of geometric straight lines, the moon jar embodies warmth through its gently rounded curves. Its slight asymmetries, rather than perfect regularity, deepens its aesthetic appeal. Unadorned, softly contoured, and suffused with a soft milky white, the white porcelain moon jar eloquently reflects the lyric spirit and sensibility of the Korean people.

This tradition of Joseon white porcelain endured into the modern era, continuing until the closure of the official kilns in the late nineteenth century.

The Characteristics and Identity of Korean Aesthetics

Korea has been part of the East Asian cultural sphere for more than two millennia. The identity of Korean art lies in the way it developed its own distinct culture within the shared universals of East Asia. It is akin to how Germany, the Netherlands, and France embraced Italy's Renaissance in the sixteenth century, thereby enriching the Renaissance culture of Europe.

Korean aesthetic traits emerge most clearly in comparison with those of China and Japan. The Japanese art critic and founder of the *mingei* (folk-craft) movement, Yanagi Muneyoshi, observed—when comparing the three traditions of ceramics—that China is distinguished by form, Japan by color, and Korea by the beauty of line. He added that Korean ceramics evokes human warmth, a tactile intimacy that makes one want to hold it.

In fact, the aesthetics that run through Korean art have favored a felicitous harmony with nature over monumental artifice, a love of pure white over brilliant color, and the warmth of human familiarity over rigid formality. The traits of Korean beauty are aptly captured in the *Samguk sagi*, which records that it was “humble yet not undignified, splendid yet not extravagant.”

List of Plates

Korea in Prehistory

- 1 Archaeological Site in Jeongok-ri, Yeoncheon; Historic Site (© Jeongok Prehistory Museum)
- 2 Handaxes Excavated from the Jeongok-ri Site and Other Locations (© National Museum of Korea)
- 3 Comb-pattern Pottery; H. 50.2 cm, The National Museum of Korea
- 4 Petroglyphs of Bangudae Terrace in Daegok-ri, Ulju; National Treasure (© Korea Heritage Service)
- 5 Dolmen in Bugeun-ri, Ganghwado Island (© Ganghwa-gun County)
- 6 Dolmens in Jungnim-ri, Gochang (© Gochang-gun County)
- 7 Petroglyphs of Cheonjeon-ri, Ulju; National Treasure
- 8 Jar with Horn-shaped Handles; H. 42.3 cm, Horim Museum
- 9 Duck-shaped Vessel; H. 32.5 cm, The National Museum of Korea

Art of the Three Kingdoms

- 10 *Portrait of the Tomb Occupant*, Anak Tomb No. 3
- 11 *Cowherd and Weaver Girl*, Deokheung-ri Tomb
- 12 *Hunting Scene*, Chummudeom Tomb
- 13 *Black Tortoise*, Gangseo Daemyo Tomb
- 14 Tomb of King Muryeong (© Gongju National Museum)
- 15 Gold Diadem Ornaments of King Muryeong and Queen Consort; H. 30.7 cm (left), National Treasure, Gongju National Museum
- 16 Daereungwon Ancient Tomb Complex,

- Gyeongju (© Gyeongju National Research Institute of Culture Heritage)
- 17 Gold Crown from the North Mound of Hwangnam Daechong Tomb; H. 27.3 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
 - 18 Gold Crown and Diadem Ornaments from Geumgwanchong Tomb; H. 27.5 cm, National Treasure, Gyeongju National Museum
 - 19 Gold Cap from Cheonmachong Tomb; H. 19 cm, National Treasure, Gyeongju National Museum
 - 20 Gold Diadem Ornament from Cheonmachong Tomb; H. 45 cm, Treasure, Gyeongju National Museum
 - 21 Gaya Tumuli in Jisan-dong, Goryeong; Historic Site
 - 22 Varieties of Gaya Pottery (© The National Museum of Korea)
 - 23 Stone Pagoda at the Mireuksa Temple Site, Iksan; H. 14.2 m, National Treasure (© The National Museum of Korea)
 - 24 Five-Story Stone Pagoda at the Jeongnimsa Temple Site, Buyeo; H. 8.3 m, National Treasure (© Baekje World Heritage Center)
 - 25 The Sarira Reliquaries from the West Pagoda of the Mireuksa Temple Site, Iksan; H. 13 cm (jar), National Treasure, Iksan National Museum
 - 26 Reliquaries from the Wangheungsa Temple Site, Buyeo; H. 10.3 cm (far right), National Treasure, Buyeo National Museum
 - 27 Reliquaries from the Five-Story Stone Pagoda of Wanggung-ri, Iksan; H. 10.5 cm (bottle), National Treasure, Iksan National Museum
 - 28 Baekje Gilt-bronze Incense Burner;

- H. 64 cm, National Treasure, Buyeo National Museum
- 29 Gilt-bronze Standing Buddha with Inscription of "the Seventh Yeonga Year"; H. 16.2 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 30 Gilt-bronze Standing Bodhisattva from Gyuam-ri; H. 21.1 cm, National Treasure, Buyeo National Museum
- 31 Rock-carved Buddha Triad in Yonghyeon-ri, Seosan; H. 280 cm (center), National Treasure, (© Korea Travel Organization-Photo Korea)
- 32 Rock-carved Seated Buddha in Bulgok Valley of Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju; H. 142 cm, Treasure (© Korea Travel Organization-Photo Korea-Jeon Hyeongjun)
- 33 Gilt-bronze Pensive Maitreya Bodhisattva with Pagoda-shaped Crown; H. 83.2 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 34 Gilt-bronze Pensive Maitreya Bodhisattva with Three-peaked Crown; H. 93.5 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea

Art of Unified Silla

- 35 Wolji, Gyeongju; Historic Site (© Korea Travel Organization-Photo Korea-양지뉴필름)
- 36 Bulguksa Temple, Gyeongju; Historic Site (© Korea Travel Organization-Photo Korea-Angénieux Film)
- 37 Seokguram Grotto, Gyeongju; National Treasure (© National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage)
- 38 Sacred Bell of Great King Seongdeok; H. 365.8 cm, National Treasure, Gyeongju National Museum

- 39 Three-story Stone Pagodas at the Gameunsa Temple Site, Gyeongju; H. 13.73 m (West Pagoda on the right), National Treasure (© Gyeongju National Museum)
- 40 Seokgatap Pagoda at Bulguksa Temple, Gyeongju; H. 10.75 m, National Treasure
- 41 Dabotap Pagoda at Bulguksa Temple, Gyeongju; H. 10.29 m, National Treasure
- 42 Four Lion Three-story Stone Pagoda at Hwaeomsa Temple; H. 7.17 m, National Treasure (© Korea Heritage Service)
- 43 Twin Lion Stone Lantern at the Yeongsamsa Temple Site; H. 2.3 m, Treasure (© You Hong-June)
- 44 Gilt-bronze Buddha Plaques Excavated from Wolji; H. 27 cm (left), Treasure, Gyeongju National Museum
- 45 Stone Standing Amitabha Buddha (Right) and Stone Standing Maitreya Bodhisattva (Left) of Gamsansa Temple; H. 275 cm (right), National Treasure, National Museum of Korea
- 46 Stone Seated Buddha in Mireukgok Valley of Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju; H. 436 cm, Treasure (© Korea Heritage Service)
- 47 Rock-carved Bodhisattva at Sinseonam Hermitage in Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju; H. 1.4 m, Treasure (© Kim Seongcheol)
- 48 Standing Buddha in Yeoramgok Valley of Namsan Mountain, Gyeongju
- 49 Iron Vairocana Buddha at Borimsa Temple, Jangheung; H. 251 cm, National Treasure (© Central Buddhist Museum)
- 50 Iron Vairocana Buddha at Dopiansa Temple, Cheorwon; H. 91 cm, National Treasure

- 51 Stupa of Seon Master Cheolgam at Ssangbongsa Temple, Hwasun; H. 2.3 m, National Treasure
- 52 Stele of Seon Master Cheolgam at Ssangbongsa Temple, Hwasun; H. 1.4 m, Treasure
- 53 Seungseongyo Bridge at Seonamsa Temple, Suncheon; Treasure (© Korea Travel Organization-Photo Korea-Jeong Daun)
- 54 Buseoksa Temple, Yeongju (© Yeongju City)
- Art of the Goryeo Dynasty**
- 55 Celadon Melon-shaped Bottle; H. 22.6 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 56 Celadon Incense Burner with Lion-shaped Lid; H. 21.2 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 57 Celadon Bird-shaped Ewer with Daoist Priest; H. 21.4 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, USA
- 58 Celadon Peach-shaped Water Dropper; H. 8.7 cm, Treasure, Private Collection
- 59 Celadon Maebyeong (Prunus Vase) with Inlaid Cloud and Crane Design; H. 41.7 cm, National Treasure, Kansong Art and Culture Foundation
- 60 Celadon Kundika with Inlaid Willow, Lotus, Reed, and Mandarin Duck Design; H. 37 cm, National Treasure, Kansong Art and Culture Foundation
- 61 Silver-gilt Ewer and Basin; H. 38 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA
- 62 Silver-gilt Flower-shaped Cup with Stand; H. 12.1 cm, Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 63 Bronze Kundika with Silver-inlaid Willow and Waterfowl Design; H. 37.5 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 64 Lacquered Sutra Box with Mother-of-Pearl Inlay of Peony Scroll Design; W. 41.9 cm, Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 65 Lacquered Rosary Box with Mother-of-Pearl and Tortoiseshell Inlay of Chrysanthemum Scroll Design; Diam. 12.4 cm, Taimadera Temple, Japan
- 66 *Jikji*; Metal Movable Type Edition, 24.6 × 17.0 cm, The National Library of France (BnF)
- 67 Janggyeong Panjeon Depositories of Haeinsa Temple (© Korea Heritage Service)
- 68 *Illustrated Manuscript of the Lotus Sutra with the Seven-Story Pagoda*; Gold on Indigo Paper, 250 × 61 cm, Tōji Temple, Japan
- 69 Seo Gu-bang (dates unknown), *Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara*; Color on Silk, 165.5 × 101.5 cm, Sen-Oku Hakukokan Museum, Japan
- 70 *Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara*; Color on Silk, 142.0 × 61.5 cm, Sensōji Temple, Japan
- Art of the Joseon Dynasty**
- 71 Gyeongbokgung Palace, Historic Site (© Nulwa)
- 72 Gyeonghoeru Pavilion of Gyeongbokgung Palace; National Treasure (© Korea Travel Organization)
- 73 Changdeokgung Palace; Historic Site (© Royal Palaces and Tombs Center)
- 74 Setret Garden of Changdeokgung Palace (© Royal Palaces and Tombs Center)
- 75 Main Hall of Jongmyo Shrine; National Treasure (© Korea Heritage Service)
- 76 *Folding Screen of the Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks*; Color on Silk, 149.3 × 351.8 cm, National Palace Museum
- 77 *Folding Screens with Images of Peonies*; Color on Silk, 201 × 52 cm (each), National Palace Museum
- 78 *Folding Screen of Chaekgado*; Color on Silk, 153 × 352 cm, National Palace Museum
- 79 *Portrait of Jang Mal-son*; Color on Silk, 165 × 93 cm, Treasure, Private Collection
- 80 Yun Du-seo (1668-1715), *Self-portrait*; Light Color on Paper, 38.5 × 20.5 cm, National Treasure, Private Collection
- 81 Jeong Seon (1676-1759), *Complete View of the Geumgangsan Mountains*; Light Color on Paper, 130.7 × 94.1 cm, National Treasure, Private Collection
- 82 Jeong Seon (1676-1759), *Clearing After Rain on Inwangsan Mountain*; Ink on Paper, 79.2 × 138.2 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 83 Kim Hong-do (1745-1806), *Village School*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings*; , Light Color on Paper, 26.9 × 22.2 cm, Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 84 Kim Hong-do (1745-1806), *Wrestling*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings*; Light Color on Paper, 26.9 × 22.2 cm, Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 85 Shin Yun-bok (ca. 1758-after 1813), *Moonlit Rendezvous*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings*; Light Color on Paper, 28.2 × 35.2 cm, National Treasure, Kansong Art and Culture Foundation
- 86 Shin Yun-bok (ca. 1758-after 1813), *Banquet in the Rear Garden*, from the *Album of Genre Paintings*; Light Color on Paper, 28.2 × 35.2 cm, National Treasure, Kansong Art and Culture Foundation
- 87 Kim Jeong-hui (1786-1856), *Wintry Days*; Ink on Paper, 23.3 × 108.3 cm, National Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 88 Kim Myeong-guk (dates unknown), *Bodhidharma*; Ink on Paper, 83 × 57 cm, The National Museum of Korea
- 89 Yi Am (1499-?), *Puppies*; Color on Paper, 86.0 × 44.9 cm, Treasure, Private Collection
- 90 *Magpie and Tiger*; Light Color on Paper, 91.7 × 54.8 cm, Private Collection
- 91 Buncheong Flattened Bottle with Incised Fish Design; H. 22.3 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, USA
- 92 Buncheong Flattened Bottle with Abstract Design; H. 23.5 cm, Private Collection
- 93 White Porcelain Bottle; H. 36.5 cm, Treasure, The National Museum of Korea
- 94 White Porcelain Faceted Bottle with Underglaze Cobalt-blue Chrysanthemum Design; H. 27.5 cm, The National Museum of Korea
- 95 White Porcelain Jar with Underglaze Copper-red Lotus Design; H. 44.6 cm, The Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka (Gift of Ataka Eiichi).
- 96 White Porcelain Jar with Underglaze Cobalt-blue Plum and Bamboo Design; H. 29.2 cm, National Treasure, Horim Museum
- 97 White Porcelain Moon Jar; H. 45 cm, National Treasure, Private Collection

A Short History of Korean Art

Written by You Hong-June

- Director, National Museum of Korea
- Former Administrator, Korea Heritage Service
- Former Professor, Yeungnam University and Myongji University
- PhD in Philosophy

Translated by Park Shinhee

- Translator, AKP Art Translation

Proofread by Dr. Park Hyung Yu

- Associate Professor, Middlesex University, UK

Published on October 22, 2025

Published by National Museum of Korea and Gyeongju National Museum

Produced by NULWA

© You Hong-June

