

Treasures from Korea: Arts and Culture of the Joseon Dynasty, 1392-1910

(March 2-May 26, 2014)

News Release

The first comprehensive survey in the United States devoted to the art of the celebrated Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), an era that profoundly shaped the culture of Korea in ways that continue to resonate today, will open at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the only East Coast venue for this unprecedented exhibition. *Treasures from Korea: Arts and Culture of the Joseon Dynasty, 1392-1910* contains more than 150 works, among them National Treasures that have never left Korea before. The works range from screen paintings and calligraphy created for the courts to scenes that vividly and colorfully illustrate life across the social classes. Also displayed are ceremonial vessels, outstanding glazed ceramics, and works that reflect the dynamic encounters at the end of the 19th century between the “Hermit Kingdom” and the Western world. Illustrated books, metalwork, sculpture, lacquer, furniture, costumes, textiles, and photographs have been selected to demonstrate the breadth and scope of the dynasty’s artistic achievements. The exhibition comprises works drawn primarily from the collection of the National Museum of Korea, supplemented by loans from public and private collections in Korea and the United States.

Timothy Rub, The George D. Widener Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, stated: “This ambitious exhibition enables us to bring together an exceptional range of arts produced over a period of 500 years that will offer our audiences many rare surprises. We are pleased to have organized this exhibition in partnership with the National Museum of Korea, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, expanding on an initiative that began with an earlier survey of American art presented in Korea. The exhibition will be an eye-opener for many Americans and an opportunity for the vibrant Korean and Korean-American communities in Philadelphia and beyond to discover fresh connections with their cultural heritage.”

The exhibition is organized around themes that illuminate the artistic accomplishments and dynamics of Korean cultural life under the world’s longest-ruling Confucian dynasty, which saw the succession of twenty-seven kings over 518 years. The period is one of deep fascination because it continues to influence modern manners, norms, and

societal attitudes in a country that has today emerged as one of the world's most vibrant economies. The exhibition also sheds light on the external influences that exerted a profound effect on Korea's culture. These include the adoption of the Chinese writing system in the second century BCE, the spread of Buddhism, and the introduction of Confucian values that would impose strict moral codes and standards. As the founding philosophy of the Joseon dynasty, Confucianism provides a unifying perspective for the artistic styles as these evolved over time.

The exhibition's five sections focus on the role of the king and his royal court in establishing a distinctive art and culture throughout the Korean peninsula; the taste for elegant simplicity that was assiduously cultivated at this time; the hierarchies and customs that defined class and the separate roles of men and women; the production of ritual implements in metal and ceramics that gave expression to ancestral worship; the suppression and persistence of Buddhism under Confucian rule; and the direct encounter with Western civilization beginning in the late nineteenth century as seen from internal and external points of view.

Highlights include its expansive folding screen paintings, ranging from those used in Joseon court ceremony to others serving secular functions. *Ten Longevity Symbols*, a fifteen-foot long panorama of mountains, waterfalls, and forest punctuated by branching pines and animated by abundant wildlife, from paddling turtles and foraging deer to white cranes perching and soaring above. Redolent of symbols that originated in the Chinese Daoist cult of Immortality, the ten-fold screen was painted in the 1700s perhaps to commemorate a birthday, probably in a courtly household, with wishes for a long and happy life.

One of Korea's largest temples, Hwaeomsa, located on a mountain slope in Gurye, has lent a spectacular Buddhist hanging scroll, a National Treasure that is seen only (ok?) in Philadelphia and for the first time outside Korea. The 40 foot tall Gwaebul, or banner, is situated in the Museum's Great Stair Hall where temple monks will perform the ritual of the dead to which it closely relates. In the center of the banner is Buddha himself, surrounded by disciples, bodhisattvas, and heavenly kings.

Prized for elegance and simplicity, the ceramics on view represent the pure embodiment of the ascendant Confucian taste; at the same time, some wares in their restraint offer chance associations with modern Minimalist aesthetics, including such works produced at royal kilns as *Bottle with Rope Design* (Treasure No. 1060), and the early 18th century *Moon Jar* (treasure no. 1437). Another outstanding ceramic is the porcelain jar decorated with bamboo and plum trees (National Treasure No. 166), most likely by a court painter, and also on loan from the National Museum of Korea.

Costume on display, striking for its strong blocks of pure color, offers important insights reflecting ranks and roles across the span of Joseon life. A high-ranking

government official's ceremonial robe, or Jobok, contains a cloud and crane pattern and round gold ring ornaments that he would have worn in the presence of the king. Also featured is a Dangui, a garment embellished with symbols of luck and fertility. Only a woman of the imperial family would have worn it, in this case during the dynasty's final waning days. As the jacket's green outer layer blends with the contrasting inner red layer, its silky gauze presents an eye-catching translucent effect.

The exhibition includes numerous interactive tools ranging from touch screen kiosks to a large cinematic screen that assist in the visitor's experience and understanding. When visitors enter the exhibition, they witness a life-size animation of a grand procession culminating in the wedding of King Yeongjo (1724-1776) and Queen Jeongsun. The scenes are taken from the vividly detailed Royal Protocols, a rare courtly document displayed in the next gallery, from which only two pages can be displayed at any time. With the additional help of a digital display monitor placed near the document, visitors can turn all of the pages virtually, and see the lively cast of courtly characters. The team also created twin touch-screen monitors with pop-up windows that provide information explaining symbols that western audiences might otherwise find mysterious. Touch the deer, and it moves; visitors may then explore its special meaning in various levels of depth. Finally, at end of the exhibition, is a station where the visitor may write his or her name in Hangeul, the written language in the native phonetic alphabet developed by the fourth Joseon King, Sejong the Great (1397-1450) and his advisors, that ushered in an unprecedented literacy throughout Korea. Write and print your name in Hangeul and bring it home as a keepsake.

A major scholarly catalogue accompanies the exhibition and a broad range of public programs, ranging from Korean films to a K Pop night, begins on opening day with a Buddhist ritual performance by Korean monks in the Great Stair Hall.

Treasures from Korea: Arts and Culture of the Joseon Dynasty, 1392–1910 is organized by Hyunsoo Woo, The Maxine and Howard Lewis Associate Curator of Korean Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, in close consultation with curators of the National Museum of Korea, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The fully illustrated scholarly catalogue is co-published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art with Yale University Press.

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The exhibition is organized by the National Museum of Korea, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. A reciprocal survey of American art from the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, LACMA, and MFAH recently traveled to the National Museum of Korea and the Daejeon Museum of Art to introduce Korean audiences to American art and culture.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
June 29–September 28, 2014

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
November 2, 2014–January 11, 2015.