

# Treasures from Korea

Through May 26, the Philadelphia Museum of Art is presenting an extraordinary exhibition, *Treasures from Korea: Arts and Culture of the Joseon Dynasty, 1392–1910*. As the first major exhibition in the United States to survey art and culture of a significant historical period of Korea, this exhibition seeks to broaden the understanding of Korean civilization, featuring 150 objects drawn from the renowned collection of the National Museum of Korea, important temples, and other institutions around the country, and includes National Treasures. The exhibition will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Hyunsoo Woo



**Treasures from Korea: Arts and Culture of the Joseon Dynasty, 1392–1910**  
Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
March 2 – May 26, 2014

THE JOSEON DYNASTY (1392–1910) was the world's longest-ruling Confucian dynasty, reigning in Korea for over 500 years. Its substantial legacy continues to manifest itself in Korea today, influencing modern etiquette, cultural norms, and societal attitudes. The exhibition examines this important chapter of Korean art and offers valuable insights into Korea's past and its enduring influence.

To illuminate the artistic accomplishments and dynamics of Korean cultural life in the Joseon period, the exhibition is organized around five key themes – 'The King and His Court', 'Joseon Society', 'Ancestral Rites and Confucian Values', 'Changes and Continuity of Joseon Buddhism', and 'Joseon in Modern Times'. These themes are unified by a thread of Confucianism, the founding philosophy of the dynasty. It extensively influenced all aspects of the society, providing esthetic standards and specifying the proper manner of production and utilization of objects used in various occasions. Under these themes, paintings, calligraphy, books, ceramics, sculptures, furniture, costumes and metal works together vividly illustrate multi-faceted aspects of Korean history, philosophy, and society.

The first section focuses on the highest artistic achievements of the Royal Court and the central role it played in shaping the unique culture of Joseon society. Most prominently, screen paintings, crafts, costumes, and the books of royal protocols, *Uigwe* (designated as a 'Memory of the World' by UNESCO in 2007) will be featured with detailed textual and visual descriptions about their uses in court rituals and events. The second section explores the diversity and dynamics of Joseon art and culture within the rigid Confucian class system. Two room settings distinctively displaying men's and women's quarters suggest their segregated life styles as different social groups. The Book and letters written in Korean alphabet *Hangeul*, a means of written communication for people of all classes, give a glimpse into the vibrant cultural interplays among different social groups in the society. The third section features ritual wares of various materials and introduces Confucian ancestral rites. As an integral social activity that consolidated the ruler's authority and strengthened hierarchical social structure, ancestral rites were performed at all levels of society, from national to private. The implements not only

**Fig. 1: Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks**  
19th century  
Eight-fold screen;  
colors on paper  
Overall 210-552.3cm  
Private collection

**Fig. 2: Bottle with Rope Design**  
16th century. Porcelain with underglaze iron decoration  
H. 123/8 inches (31.4 cm)  
National Museum of Korea, Seoul. Sinsu 12074  
Treasure No. 1060

**Fig. 3: Jar with Design of Bamboo and Plum Trees**  
16th–17th century  
Porcelain with underglaze iron decoration  
H. 153/4 inches (40 cm)  
National Museum of Korea, Seoul. Deoksu 6294  
National Treasure No. 166

**Fig. 4: Śākyamuni Assembly**  
1653  
Banner painting;  
colors on hemp  
12-7.8m  
Hwaesamsa, Gurye National  
Treasure No. 301



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visually represented such rituals, but also symbolized the ideal of Confucian austerity that was intended to govern the life and thoughts of all people.

The fourth section focuses on religions and belief systems other than Confucianism that primarily took a role to ensure welfare of the society. Buddhism, the greatest counterpart to Confucianism, was increasingly suppressed under Confucian rule. Its longstanding tradition, however, could not be entirely eliminated from daily life across all classes. One of the highlights of this section is the large-scale Buddhist ceremonial banner paintings, or *Gwaebul* (40 ft high). These were uniquely Korean innovations, used as focal points of worship in outdoor Korean Buddhist ceremonial rituals. In this exterior setting, *Yeongsanjae* (designated a 'World Intangible Cultural Heritage' by UNESCO in 2009) were performed on the 49th day following a person's death, in the hopes of helping to effect a smooth transition of his or her soul from this world to the next. *Yeongsanjae* will be performed during the exhibition.

'Joseon in Modern Times', the last section, delineates how the rigid Confucian society proceeded modern Korea while encountering and being challenged by world changes. The featured objects show the adaptations of Western civilization into dynastic traditions and formalities in the late 19th century. This section addresses the cultural issues in the order of time: from the early indirect influence of the Western civilization through China to a series of Western-inspired institutional reforms during the Korean Empire (1897–1910). A range of archival materials contribute to demonstrate the encounters of the East and West toward the end of the dynasty.

*Treasures from Korea* is expected to enhance the public's understanding and appreciation of Korean art and culture while making an important scholarly contribution to Korean art history. 'Joseon in Modern Times' is a subject that has received little proper attention even in Korea, not to mention in this country, until now. Due to the difficult and still politically sensitive history of Korea during the first half of the 20th century, when it was annexed by Japan, this period has not been favored as a research subject. Incorporating this dynamic and important transitional period enables *Treasures from Korea* to be the first truly comprehensive survey of the dynasty's art and culture. A new and broad overview of the art of the Joseon dynasty will benefit all audiences, deepening their knowledge of Korea.

*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 Dongsoo Moon, Associate Curator of the National Museum of Korea, of which efforts supported by curators of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, co-published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art with Yale University Press.



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