



# 100 Thimbles in a Box



The Spirit and Beauty of Korean Handicrafts



Debbi Kent & Joan Suwalsky

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As Korea continues to forge ahead in the era of globalization, *100 Thimbles in a Box* provides a timely and necessary reminder of the persistence and beauty of traditional Korea. This thoroughly researched and elegantly photographed book is more than a source of knowledge—it is itself a piece of art. Debbi Kent and Joan Suwalsky have seamlessly blended culture, art, and history to offer readers an extensive overview of Korean handicraft, tradition, and identity.

**Jai Ok Shim**

Executive Director, Fulbright Korea

While many theorists and art historians have tried to pinpoint the beauty and essence of Korean craft, its familiarity and universality have kept it from being fully understood and properly appreciated until this book. Ideal for the general reader, *100 Thimbles in a Box* covers various themes and media in Korean art. As they explore the hidden symbolism and unique uses of Korean handicraft, the two authors trace connections between Korea's past and present. Offering abundant visual material, this book illustrates how Koreans have enjoyed art and culture in every moment of their lives.

**Hyonjeong Kim Han**

Associate Curator for Korean Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

*100 Thimbles in a Box* will be treasured by everyone who loves traditional Korean culture and art. For adoptees and adoptive parents, however, it will also serve to nurture and support individual and family identity and pride. This beautiful volume will keep Korea close to all of us who love Korea, whether we are joined to it by birth, adoption, or simple admiration for its rich cultural heritage.

**Margie Perscheid**

President, Korean Focus

This beautiful book is a perfect introduction to Korean handicraft traditions for English-speaking audiences. Visually stunning, it places traditional art forms in the philosophical and religious contexts in which they have grown over the past 5000 years, describing how they were (and still are) made, and how they were central to the lives of the Korean people. It offers a clear explanation of the symbols that permeate handicrafts, their origins, and their functions: to bestow blessings and protect from harm. In a final chapter, the status of handicrafts in modern Korea is explored with explanations of how they are being preserved through the efforts of expert artisans and reborn in the beautiful work of modern Korean artists. This fascinating book will whet the appetite of any reader to learn more about the vibrant, engaging folk art that has colored the everyday lives of Koreans for generations.

**Byung Goo Choi**

Director, Korean Cultural Center in Washington, D.C.

Discovering the beauty hidden around us in our everyday lives—pausing to appreciate, for example, the humble glory of a wildflower—that brings warmth to our hearts. There are not many books that describe, as *100 Thimbles in a Box* does, the familiar grace and charm of Korean handicraft in terms of its symbolism and the various techniques involved in producing it. I believe that this book will help many individuals come not only to understand Korea, but also to love it.

**Kim Yeonsoo**

Former Director, Research Division of Artistic Heritage,  
National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage in Korea



## **100 Thimbles in a Box**

**The Spirit and Beauty of Korean Handicrafts**

Written and photographed by Debbi Kent & Joan Sawalsky

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**"100 thimbles in a box"** represent a wish for blessed longevity.

A Korean bride in the Joseon Dynasty created beautiful thimbles out of silk, embroidered them with auspicious images, and gave them to the women in her new husband's family.

In this way, she conveyed her respect by wishing them long and happy lives.

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The handicraft traditions of Korea, many of them stretching back thousands of years, paint a vivid portrait of the Korean people—their ways of thinking and viewing the world, their values, their spontaneity and sense of humor, and their conception of beauty. Starting with the earliest ceramics over 10000 years ago and continuing to the present day with the exquisite work of artisans designated as holders of Important Intangible Cultural Heritages, handicrafts in Korea have served the needs of the culture while

also reflecting and embodying it. They help us understand a culture that has withstood centuries of invasion and cultural exchange only to emerge with a distinctive identity unlike any other in East Asia. Through the crafts shaped by the hands of Korean artisans over millennia, we come to know this vibrant culture that has much to teach all of us about the creation of beauty, the love and respect of nature, and harmonious living in a difficult and challenging world.

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

Handicrafts: Mirrors of the Soul  
 Philosophical, Spiritual, and Religious Traditions in Korea  
 Historical Timeline of the Korean Peninsula





Handicrafts (*sugongnye*) in any culture are a reflection of the people who create them. Working with the raw materials available to them, people make the things they need—creating shelters, making clothing, and fashioning containers and utensils with which to store, prepare, and consume food. When basic needs have been met, there is energy and incentive to improve, refine and embellish these artifacts. In times of peace and plenty, luxury items appear and craft can become art.

The creation of the materials needed for the business of living is also profoundly shaped by the beliefs, needs, and historical circumstances of the group. Thus, the buildings, bracelets, and bowls crafted by the hands, hearts, and minds of any given group are uniquely representative of that group and no other.

Met Weaving, Kim Hong-do, 18th c.

A small land of rugged mountains and fertile coastal areas surrounded on three sides by water, Korea has traditionally been a society of farmers and fishermen. A deep and abiding reverence for nature characterizes Korean thought and behavior and has strongly influenced their art and material culture up to the present time. Natural materials—wood, clay, stone, and fiber—figure prominently in their handicrafts. The aesthetics reflected in the handicraft traditions, sometimes referred to collectively as “endearing imperfection,” and including simplicity, an unaffected spontaneity, asymmetry, and humor, also reveal the culture’s affinity with nature and the desire to be in harmony with it.

Craftsmanship in Korea has always meant more than simply making objects. In the Joseon Dynasty, craftsmen were called *jangin*. Oddly, while *jangin* were considered to be of a low social status, their work was seen as extremely important. They were believed to be special people who possessed “heaven-sent talent” and who had a responsibility to use that talent to make beautiful things for people. Time, energy, materials, and dexterity were considered to be the craftsman’s “four virtues” or tools. Unless the four virtues were all used, and used in harmony, the things produced by a craftsman were not truly whole. It has been said that Korean craftsmen, in addition to mastering technique, had to learn how to instill their hearts and souls into each artifact that they created.





Korean handicraft traditions have always had two purposes. First, the products of the artisans' hands meet the needs of people as they go about the business of living. Second, handicrafts have long been decorated with beautiful symbols that serve very important functions—to help ward off danger and to invite blessings. Throughout Korean history, symbols have been very powerful. The role they played in the everyday lives of the people

cannot be overstated, and to understand that role is to be able to better appreciate Korean culture and its people. Manual talent was considered to be heaven-sent, and fine Korean artisans have always believed that their responsibility is to put their souls into their work. The result is an enormous array of lovely handicrafts, with messages of auspicious meaning bequeathed to anyone wise enough to accept the blessings sent their way.

## Chapter 2

# Symbolism in Korean Handicrafts

The Origins of Korean Symbols

Individual Symbols

Groups of Symbols



# The Origins of Korean Symbols



Top: The shape and design of this comb-patterned vessel are unique to the Neolithic people of the Korean peninsula, such that Korean Neolithic culture is often referred to as the 'comb-pattern pottery culture.'  
Bottom: A duck-shaped vessel from the Yeongnam region, dating from the 3rd century AD.

A symbol stands for or represents something else. In particular, material objects or images of them are often used to represent something that is invisible, mythical or beyond human perception. From the Neolithic Age to the 21st century, the Korean people have fashioned and decorated everyday objects, religious artifacts, and pieces of art and handicraft with symbols that reflect their deepest beliefs, hopes, and fears. The symbols have changed little over the centuries and have roots in and connections with the various spiritual and religious traditions that have been dominant in Korean history—animism, shamanism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

To understand the use of symbolism in Korean arts and handicrafts, one must first appreciate the deep connection that the Korean people have had with nature for many thousands of years. Man has always been seen as a part of nature, not superior to it or separate from it. The goal and highest form of a good life throughout Korean history has been defined as living in close harmony with all aspects of nature. Tied to the land and its resources for their livelihood and welfare, the earliest inhabitants of Korea were intimately connected with and directly affected by nature's beauty, bounty, cycles, and sometimes deadly effects. In awe of its power, people believed that elements in the natural world—sun and moon, rocks and mountains, rivers and lakes, trees, plants, and animals—were imbued with spirits. These spirits affected men's lives for good and for ill. Revering nature but also needing to exert some control over their own survival, early groups of people attempted to deal with the forces that surrounded them by finding ways to ward off evil spirits and attract the benevolence and protection of good ones.



Reproduction of one of the Bangudae Petroglyphs, located in Ulsan. Depicting tigers, whales and wild boars, the petroglyphs symbolize a prehistoric people's hope for a successful hunt.



A hwaerae stands watch over Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul.

Symbols, whether carved on cave walls or embroidered on pillow ends, served and still serve to both placate and engage nature's spirits in man's quest to survive and prosper. The power of symbols to repel evil and bring blessings thus became an essential function of folk art and handicraft. All classes of Korean people, from the royal court to the most humble villagers, surrounded themselves with these symbols—in the palace, the government office, the temple, the scholar's studio, the artisan's shop, the village, the farmer's home. Architecture, furnishings, decorative pieces, household implements, and clothing were all decorated with symbols that gave them magical power as well as aesthetic appeal. In modern day Korea, symbols still abound and continue to touch the lives of men, women, and children every day.

In this chapter, we present many of the most important symbols, telling a bit about the origin and meaning of each one. We encourage the reader to notice that the same symbols are incorporated into many different types of handicrafts and take a variety of forms depending on the artisan or the period of history in which the artifacts were made. Having learned why symbols exist and are so prevalent, we hope the reader will better appreciate the meaning of the handicrafts pictured throughout the book. Try to imagine an object in its original context, and try to imagine the effect that it would have had on the people looking at it. Did they feel encouraged by its presence? Did they feel safer or more reassured? Did it make them hopeful for blessings to come? Did it comfort them in times of hardship and loss? Did it help them to better understand and accept their place in the natural or human scheme of things? The artifacts themselves, bearers of symbolic power, come alive in this way, sharing their spiritual messages with each of us.







## Chapter 3 Ceramics & Clay

Celadon  
Stoneware  
White Porcelain

Earthenware Pots  
Roof Tiles  
Walls and Chimneys



Reverent about nature and always striving to live in harmony with it, Koreans have used earth as a building material to fashion walls, tiles, and vessels. Korean pottery, known to have existed since at least 8000 BC, is universally considered to be some of the finest in the world. *Cheongja*, or celadon, was perfected there in the 12th century AD, and was considered by the Chinese to be one of the "twelve best things in the world." During the Japanese Invasion in the Joseon Dynasty, the Japanese admired

Korean pottery so much that they moved entire villages of Korean potters to Japan to work for the Emperor, thereby profoundly influencing Japanese ceramics to this day. Today, Korea remains a world leader in the ceramic arts, with contemporary potters continuing to both produce traditional pottery and to create new forms that expand upon their distinguished heritage.

Celadon *Cheongja* 청자

*Cheongja* is the well-known Korean porcelain pottery known as celadon. Originally brought to Korea from China during the Unified Silla period, celadon was refined by Korean potters over several hundred years, especially in kilns in the southern and eastern parts of the country, reaching its zenith in the mid-12th century in the Goryeo Dynasty. During this time, innovations in technique, pattern, and form resulted in a distinctively Korean art form that is considered by many to be Korea's greatest artistic achievement.

Unlike Chinese celadon glazes, which were thick and created a heavy, majestic effect, Korean potters developed unique glazes which were thin and translucent, faintly revealing the clay surface of the pot and resembling "the blue of the sky after the rain." Visiting envoys from China, who considered Korean celadon "first under heaven" and one of the "twelve best things in the world," carried many of these treasures home with them. There was much for these envoys to choose from since, during its height of popularity in the Goryeo Dynasty, celadon was used for tableware (bowls, cups, small dishes, wine pots, and bottles), as well as items for the writer's desk (brush holders, water droppers, and flower vases.) Other celadon pieces included incense burners and water sprinklers (*yeonjeon*) used in Buddhist ceremonies, tiles used on roofs and floors, cosmetic boxes, oil bottles, and pillows.



10th century Chinese celadon pot



A pattern is stamped into the clay.



Slip in a contrasting color is applied to the stamped pattern.



After drying, the slip is scraped away so it remains only in the pattern.



A design may also be carved by hand into the clay and filled with slip.



Or the slip may be applied on top of the design for a raised effect.

In its early phases, Korean celadon was decorated with subdued incising of patterns, by stamping and by molding. Later, potters developed a unique decorative technique known as *sanggam* that consisted of carving patterns on the surface of the unfired clay vessel. These patterns were filled with white or reddish slip (clay dissolved in water) before the vessel was fired for the first time. Following the first firing, the piece was glazed with celadon glaze and fired again in a very hot kiln. The result was a lovely inlaid pattern under the glaze that often included multiple colors on a single piece. Flowers, animals, and geometric patterns were most commonly used to decorate these pieces.



Flying cranes, clouds, and peonies were very popular themes. This technique died out, however, with the coming of the Joseon Dynasty and its austere Confucian philosophy. Today, however, the *sanggam* technique has been revived by Korea's highly skilled contemporary ceramic artists who are creating celadon pieces in myriad forms and in varying shades, from very pale to very dark green. Celadon is readily found in shops and markets throughout Korea, with pieces signed by the most famous potters commanding prices of many thousands of dollars.





Bone needles dating from 3000 BC indicate that the needlework tradition in Korea is a very long and ancient one. Almost exclusively the work of women, the provision of clothing for all seasons and all occasions, the weaving and embellishing of linens and other household necessities, the construction of wrapping cloths, and the intricate knotting and embroidering of personal ornaments have consumed much of the time

of Korean women throughout history. At the same time, these necessary labors have given rise to some of the most beautiful and unique of Korean craft traditions. The quality of workmanship, the creativity, the infusion of auspicious symbolism, and the joyful use of color that characterize Korean needlework are some of the great treasures of Korean culture.

## Chapter 4 Fiber Arts

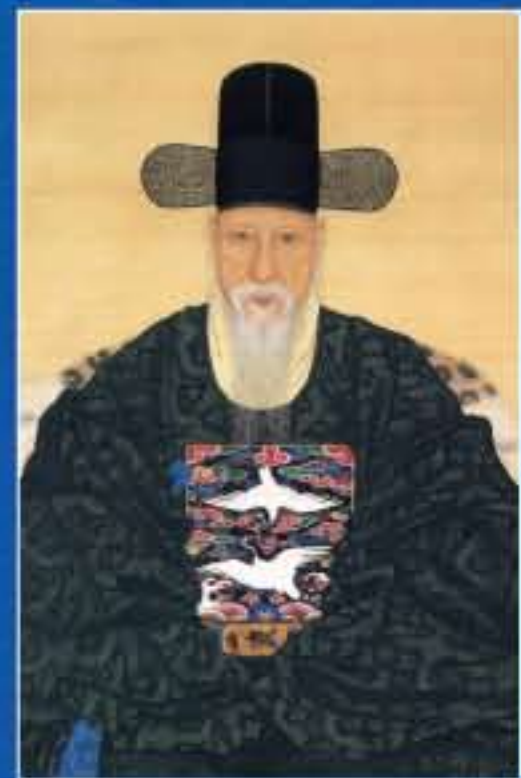
Thimbles	Wrapping Cloths
Embroidery	Korean Patchwork
Ornamental Knotwork	Traditional Costume
Gold Leaf Imprinting	Accessories for Hanbok



# Embroidery *jasu* 자수

*Jasu*, or embroidery, is a highly valued art form in Korea with an ancient history. It is believed that it was practiced as long as 8000 years ago, with the use of stone and bone needles. Although real examples of embroidery from ancient times have not survived, its early existence is inferred from old wall paintings and historical texts. According to one account from the Three Kingdoms Period, "On an auspicious day in early May, officials held their morning meeting. They wore purple clothes with wide sleeves over blue pants. Their hats were decorated with flowers and birds embroidered in gold."

As embroidery continued to be practiced throughout Korean history, it changed to adapt to the times. For example, themes of nature were widely used early on. But later, when Buddhism became the official state religion, Buddhist symbols were also incorporated into designs, and pieces such as surplices and altar covers were made by Buddhist monks for their temples.



As the wealth of the upper class increased during subsequent historical periods, embroidery also became a way of signifying rank and status. During the Goryeo Dynasty aristocrats became so infatuated with their increasingly lavish lifestyle that the royal court was forced to repeatedly prohibit them from wearing embroidered dragon or phoenix designs (symbolizing the king and queen) or gold leaf on their clothing. In 1454, King Danjong of the Joseon Dynasty established a formal dress code that required officials to wear embroidered insignia on the front and back of their clothing. The royal family wore round insignia embroidered with mythical beasts believed to have divine powers. Civil officials wore depictions of birds, while those in the military wore images of beasts. Finally, the crane was adopted as the single official emblem of civil servants, while the tiger became the emblem for military officers.



During the Goryeo Dynasty, the court established the *subang*, an embroidery workshop operating within the palace walls that made all of the objects needed for the royal household. Young women who were chosen as apprentices at the age of 10 spent the rest of their lives working in the *subang*.



Han Sang-soo, called "a living treasure for the craft of embroidery," and named Intangible Cultural Asset No. 80, with two magnificent examples of her work.

With the imposition of austere Confucian principles in the Joseon Dynasty, embroidery assumed a new role. Women were drastically restricted in their activities and thus spent most of their time at home in the women's chambers. Embroidery became the one creative outlet remaining to them, and has been described as "the way that Korean women relieved their feelings of oppression and their sorrows, stitch by stitch in their secluded quarters." In that way, the rich tradition that had evolved over thousands of years was preserved.

Interestingly, although most Korean traditional crafts have been done by both sexes, embroidery has always been practiced only by women. Throughout most of history, embroidery involved not only stitching designs, but also creating the materials to be used. A woman had to start by picking mulberry leaves to feed her silkworms. She spun, wound, and dyed the thread from the cocoons, and designed what she planned to make. Only then could she concentrate on embroidering a piece of cloth.

Although embroidery undoubtedly originated as a way of decorating garments, the Koreans have traditionally used it to embellish many personal, household, and public objects, and this is still true today. One can easily find examples of embroidered chests, pillows, wrapping cloths, *norigae*, jewelry, wall hangings, screens, and paintings, just to name a few. The amazing artistry and technical skill that characterize Korean embroidery are thankfully alive and well. In an effort to preserve this art form, the Korean government has named it an Intangible Cultural Heritage—*jasujang*—promoting support for master artisans and the training of apprentices.





## Chapter 5

# Paper

Handmade Paper

Fans

Kites

Lanterns

Paper made from the inner bark of paper mulberry trees, *hanji*, is one of Korea's finest inventions. First developed between the 4th and 7th centuries AD, it was admired throughout Asia for its beauty and durability. Koreans have used it for centuries in their homes and daily lives, as well as in their literary and artistic endeavors. The heated *ondo*/floors of Korean homes as well as lattice windows

and doors were covered with *hanji*. Household items such as baskets, bowls, fans, lanterns, kites, shoes, and even clothing have been fashioned from paper. There is a long and beautiful Korean tradition of making chests and other types of boxes from layers of paper that are then lacquered to preserve them. *Hanji*, both in its production and many applications, epitomizes Korean ingenuity and creativity.



## Fans Buchae 부채



There are two types of Korean fans: *danseon*, which is rounded, flat, and rigid, and *jeopseon*, a folding fan. A more refined version of *jeopseon* is called *hapjukseon*, which was believed to have been invented in Korea by a Buddhist monk in the Goryeo Dynasty. Legend has it that he loved a woman whom he could not pursue, so he made a fan in her shape to carry with him and remind him of her. The folding fan was admired by Chinese envoys to Korea and was carried back home with them, subsequently gaining popularity across Asia.

Both types of Korean fans were traditionally made of thin bamboo ribs covered with *hanji* or silk. The selection of the bamboo was of utmost importance. If not grown or harvested properly, the color and quality of the wood were not considered fine enough for beautiful fans. *Jeopseon* were made of bamboo ribs, overlapped and hinged together at the base. *Danseon* were made with a skeleton of very thin bamboo strips either flared straight out from a wooden handle or bent into lovely designs such as leaves, birds, and fishtails. Paper or fabric was carefully glued onto the bamboo framework, pulled tight to reveal the bamboo frame, and then finished along the edges. Fans were frequently painted or decorated with cutout *hanji* patterns, often incorporating symbols of good fortune. The handle was shaped, carved or decorated, and a *maedeup* loop was attached.

Jo Chung-ik, a master of traditional fans, created the original drawing technique for the tricolor *samtaegeuk* symbol that appears on many of the *danseon* fans seen in Korea today.



A tightrope walker uses a fan to help her balance during a performance known as *Julagi*.

In the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, *danseon* were usually carried by women and *hapjukseon* by men. During the summer heat, fans were used to cool, to brush away insects, and to shade the face from bright sunlight. It became a custom for the king to present fans to his officials on Dano Day, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, the beginning of summer. The custom was adopted by commoners, who also began to exchange fans on this day.

But fans have also served many functions other than purely utilitarian ones. A gentleman or lady was not properly dressed until they had their fan, whether in summer or winter. *Yangban* used fans to gesture dramatically while reciting poetry. Fans were given as gifts (sometimes containing secret messages) and served as tokens of agreement in pledges. In the traditional wedding ceremony, both bride and groom hid their faces with fans. And at funerals, mourners used them to shield their faces as a sign of respect.

Shamans have used fans in many of their ceremonial dances as one means of enticing the spirit being addressed to grant the prayers being sought. In the 20th century, one

of those dances was the basis for the development of the well-known Korean fan dance, the *buchaechum*. Originally created for a single dancer, the *buchaechum* is now performed by a large group of identically dressed dancers using feathered folding fans painted with peonies to create beautiful visual effects as they move in synchronized waves of motion to represent a large, fluttering flower



The *mudangchum*, or shaman dance.



The popular Korean fan dance, or *buchaechum*, is relatively new. It was created in the 20th century and has its origins in the shaman dance.



## Chapter 6

# Inlay

Metal Inlay  
Mother-of-Pearl Inlay  
Ox Horn Decoration

Korean craftsmen have mastered several forms of fusing contrasting materials together as a way of beautifully embellishing furniture, ceramics, and other household and personal items. Inlaying metal, shell, ox horn, and clay onto wood, metal, ceramic, or paper surfaces creates designs of breathtaking beauty. Several of

these techniques are uniquely Korean and epitomize the highest levels of artistic creativity and workmanship. Not surprisingly, these traditional crafts make extensive use of symbolism in their execution, weaving meaning and artisanship in the effort, always to assure good things for the Korean people.



## Ox Horn Decoration *Hwagak* 화각

Known only in Korea, *hwagak* is the art of decorating small wooden pieces of furniture or accessories with ox horn that has been flattened and painted on the reverse side with bright, auspicious designs. Possibly crafted as early as the Three Kingdoms Period, *hwagak* is believed to have first been made of tortoiseshell, a rare material that became increasingly difficult to find. More plentiful and easier to obtain, ox horn was substituted during the Goryeo period. Regardless of the material, the process of making these transparent decorative sheets was extraordinarily difficult.

Clean, white horns from young bulls were boiled for hours until soft. The horns were then hollowed out and flattened over a charcoal fire. After being ironed under a press for several more hours, the horn was polished to make a thin, transparent sheet 0.5 mm or less in thickness. When the sheets were ready, they were trimmed and painted on the reverse side with designs executed in the traditional colors of red, blue, green, yellow, and white. Glued to wooden surfaces and smoothed with an ivory stick, charcoal, or soy sauce, the sheets protected the painted undersurfaces for extremely long periods of time. As a result, numerous ox horn artifacts from the Joseon Dynasty have been found in pristine condition.



The steps required to transform the raw bull's horn into a delicately painted, transparent sheet are many and arduous.



Various stages in the *hwagak*-making process, featuring the work of Lee Jae-man, a master of the craft.



During the Joseon Dynasty, colorful ox horn pieces were most often created for women and included jewelry boxes, combs, spools, measures for the sewing box, and small chests. The painting depicted favorite themes, including the Ten Symbols of Longevity, flowers, birds, the Four Gentlemen Plants, and light-hearted scenes of everyday life.

It was during the early Joseon Dynasty that this art form reached its peak. Because of the labor and expensive materials involved, it was produced solely for royalty and the upper classes. The ruling class continued its exclusive use of *hwagak* until the 17th century, when two wars brought about by the invasions of foreign forces caused the decline of the dynasty and thus a relaxation of some of its restrictions. As a result, *hwagak* began being produced for commoners, and the industry grew and thrived for the next 200 years. However, it suffered a serious blow in the early 1900s when a devastating flood in Seoul destroyed the many *hwagak* workshops located near the Hangang River, from which the industry never quite recovered. As a result, painted ox horn began to be replaced by celluloid imitations.



A beautiful example of *hwagak*, which means "brilliant horn."

Fortunately, there are still several master craftsmen who continue to practice *hwagak* today, creating beautiful antiques of tomorrow. Because of the extreme skill and amount of time required to create one of these pieces, they are very expensive and are usually available only in museum shops and showrooms featuring the work of National Treasures.







## Chapter 7 Metal

Furniture Hardware  
Bells  
Royal Gold



Since the Bronze Age, the Korean people have used metal and metal alloys to create household items, fittings, tools, weapons, religious items, and personal ornaments. As early as the Silla and Goryeo periods, these arts reached great heights of sophistication. One of the five basic elements in the Korean cosmology, metal is strong and enduring but can also be shaped to life's purposes. In this sense, metal

might be taken as a metaphor for the Korean character, which has endured intact through centuries of hardship, bending to shoulder the burdens of invasion and periodic conquest but never breaking. Whether in the form of a beautiful fish lock on a Korean chest or the stately, sonorous sound of a temple bell, metal continues to support and express the Korean spirit.

# Royal Gold *Geumje Gwansik* 금제관식



Gold was plentiful in the southeastern part of the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, the capital city of Silla was called Geumseong ("City of Gold"). Crowns have been excavated from royal burial chambers that were exceptionally well fortified, happily protecting their precious contents from robbers throughout the centuries. The best known of these tombs are Geumgwanchong ("Gold Crown Tomb") and Cheonmachong ("Heavenly Horse Tomb") near Gyeongju, but all have yielded elaborate crowns of pure gold (thought to have been made for kings) and giltbronze and gold-plated bronze (undoubtedly for lesser royal figures). A number of these have been designated as National Treasures.

Although Koreans have worked with metal since the Bronze Age, it wasn't until the Three Kingdoms Period that gold was used. Both the Baekje and Silla kingdoms are known for their mastery of goldsmithing, and some of the most beautiful Korean artifacts have been recovered from tombs dating from those eras. Among the stunning pieces made for royalty and the aristocratic elite are elaborate pins and earrings, gilt-bronze shoes, gold girdles and belts, swords with gold hilts, saddle fittings, and, perhaps most the famous and striking of all, gold crowns.



Top: Elaborate gold earrings decorated with gold threads from the Bubuchong Tomb near Gyeongju

Bottom: A gold belt from the 5th–6th century found in Cheonmachong Tomb. Hanging from the belt are a variety of pendants, including fish, sheathed knives, and a pair of tweezers. Gold belts such as these are unique to Korea and have no real counterparts elsewhere in Asia.

These unassuming grassy mounds near Gyeongju are typical of the royal tombs of the Silla Kingdom. Their construction—a wooden chamber, either below or above ground, covered with thick layers of large rock and then earth—served to protect the golden artifacts buried deep inside for centuries.



The crowns were composed of two parts—an inner cap of rigid gold mesh that may have been covered with silk, and the actual outer crown. In addition, chains made of gold with pieces of jade were attached to the outer band of the crown. The main part of the crown typically had several treelike protrusions, each with three or four branches, commonly thought to represent the Siberian shamanist idea of the world tree, although others interpret them to be mountains or birds. Each crown also typically had two antler-like prongs that also suggest a strong link to Korean shamanism and reindeer. At the same time, some have compared the level of goldwork seen on the crowns with work done by Greek or Etruscan artisans and have suggested that the Silk Road may actually have stretched all the way to Korea. Interestingly, however, there are no Chinese influences in these crowns.

The most famous crown of all, National Treasure No. 191, shown at left, is 27.5 cm high, with gold chains that range from 13 to 30.3 cm in length. Seventy-seven pieces of jade, both green and blue, are attached to the trees, antlers, outer band, and gold chains of the crown. Small gold "mirrors" are liberally attached as well. It is easy to imagine that the crown, when worn by the king in bright sunlight, would present a vivid image of the "sun on earth," a traditional and highly symbolic role for Silla royalty.



An elaborate gold ornament that was attached to the silk burial cap of King Muryeong of Baekje [501–523 AD]





## Chapter 8

# Wood

Masks  
Drums  
Totem Poles  
Spirit Poles

Stamps and Molds  
Wedding Geese  
Funerary Figures

Temple Doors  
Furniture  
Windows and Doors



Inhabiting a land of rock and forest for many millenia, the Korean people have a deep reverence for nature and natural forms. The indigenous Korean religion of shamanism posited that the goal of a fully human life is to live in harmony with nature. Wood is considered to be a warm, beautiful, strong, and malleable material that is a gift from nature and, appropriately, returns to nature. In addition to playing

an essential role in heating and cooking, it has been used throughout Korean history to construct buildings, to cover doors and windows, to make furniture and countless other items for the home and the farm, to create objects used for safeguarding, celebrating, and entertaining, and finally, to fashion the conveyances and guides that help ease the soul to the afterlife at the time of death.

The Korean mask dance (*talchum*) or mask play (*talori*) originated in the Three Kingdoms Period and developed through the Goryeo and Joseon Dynasties into the form seen today. It was unique because, unlike dance traditions in many other cultures, it was not performed by professional actors or dancers. Rather, members of the community spontaneously took the roles of the dancers and enacted a performance that was never the same twice.

Based on even earlier shamanistic rites in which masks were donned in an attempt to drive out evil spirits, illness or bad luck, the *talchum* became a way in which the common people expressed their criticism of the aristocracy and the clergy and poked fun at themselves. By creating spoofs—the stupid nobleman and his clever servant, the drunk Buddhist monk who chases women, the eternal love triangle of husband/wife/concubine—and mocking the village gossip or meddling grandmother, *talori* was able to provide comic relief from the stresses of everyday existence.

Traditionally, all mask dancers were men, even for female roles. Combining comic dialogue, dancing, singing, and pantomime, the plays were commonly performed at night around a campfire and were accompanied by *nongak*, or farmers' music. Several different acts of no set length were performed, and often the audience joined in with the performers, making for a rowdy party! When the play was over, the masks were burned and new ones made for the next performance.



The masks that are used in the plays vary according to the region in which they are made. Those from the central part of the country tend to be made of wood, while masks from the west coast are often made of paper. Sometimes gourds are used. Some masks are quite realistic, while others are clearly caricatures of the person being portrayed. Most have a black cloth attached to the back of the mask that helps hold it in place and gives the illusion of hair. Generally, a white mask indicates a young person, red denotes a middle-aged person, and black tells the audience that the character is elderly.

Probably the most famous masks are those that have been made in Andong's Hahoe Village since the middle of the 12th century AD. Each carved from a single piece of wood, they have hinged chins that can be moved by the actors as they perform to simulate a wide range of emotions.



According to legend, a Hahoe village resident, Bachelor Heo, was instructed by the gods to make twelve masks, but he was to have no contact with other people until he finished. He locked himself in his house and proceeded to follow orders. As he was working on the chin of the very last one, a young village girl, who was in love with him, peeked in through his window. As a result, Heo was punished by the gods and died, and the last mask was never finished. To this day, this mask—the *imae* or "fool"—is portrayed without its lower jaw.

The people of Hahoe believed their masks had magical powers that would protect their village, so unlike in other regions, their masks were not burned at the end of the dance or play but carefully stored in a local shrine. You can imagine their dismay when three of the original masks disappeared. Two are believed to be in a neighboring village, and the third has been found in a museum in Japan, probably stolen by Japanese invaders over 400 years ago. The remaining nine masks have been designated as National Treasure No.121.

Some of the many masks that appear in the Korean mask dance



*Chogwari*  
Drunken monk

*Gaksi*  
Bride

*Mya*  
Old woman

*Maltugi*  
Servant

*Waeryangnye*  
Barmaid

*Yangban*  
Aristocrat

*Ilune*  
Flirtatious  
young woman

*Nojang*  
Old man

*Jung*  
Monk

# Funerary Figures *Kkokdu* 꼭두



In traditional Korean village life, family members who died were buried in the family burial plot, which was often located in the countryside, some distance from the village. The body had to be carried from the home to the burial site, and the journey between the two places was considered to be a time of danger for the deceased, who was no longer "here" but not yet "there." To ward off evil spirits on this journey, small figures known as *kkokdu* were attached to the funeral bier that carried the coffin. Carved for the occasion out of wood (because they were usually burned after the burial), the figures were of several types, colorfully painted, and relatively crude in execution. Four different types of human figures were included, each one 9 to 12 inches high, playing four different roles.



Long overdue, the first museum dedicated to the display and preservation of *Kkokdu*, with a collection of 20,000 artifacts, opened in Seoul in 2010.

Guide had the important job of leading the deceased on the journey of death. Guides were usually men of importance (noblemen, government officials, scholars, or monks) with solemn expressions. The Guide was usually shown riding an animal—a mythical beast, a blue dragon, a horse, a bird, or even a turtle. Occasionally, perhaps for the funeral of a child, the Guide was depicted as a child himself, often seated snugly on the back of a bird in flight.

Guard protected the deceased during the journey. With menacing expressions and often carrying weapons, Guards were usually powerful male figures (military officers, warriors or police officers) mounted on various types of animals.

Caregiver served the deceased during the journey. Most often women, Caregivers were occasionally depicted with smiling faces, although most were solemn. Sometimes they carried objects with them to better serve the deceased, such as jars, cups, and flowers.

Entertainer had the role of lightening the mood of the somber occasion. Jugglers, acrobats, musicians, or dancers, Entertainers were lively and positive, frequently smiling as they capered about. Surely, the journey was easier for the deceased because of the humor and sense of perspective on the natural cycle of life and death that Entertainers provided.



In addition to these human figures, dragons and phoenix, symbolizing the transcendent power of the king, served to further protect the deceased on their journey. Dragon faces were placed on the front and back of the bier to ward off evil spirits, aided by two more on top, one yellow and one blue, with their tails braided together. A phoenix sat on each of the four corners, symbolizing the flight from this world to immortality.

*Kkokdu* represent a little-known but significant and very appealing type of Korean folk art. Common during the Joseon Dynasty and into the Japanese occupation, they tell us much about village life and beliefs in rural Korea.



Guide



Guard



Caregivers



Entertainer



Dragon



Phoenix



While the *hanji* paper used to cover windows and doors was remarkably strong, it was still necessary to apply fresh paper every year in preparation for winter, using a special paste made of wheat flour.

Korean houses, traditionally small, modest, and environmentally friendly, were not intended to be judged from the outside. Rather, the heart of the house was the interior, where the family lived together. Windows and doors (*changho*) provided some of the only architectural ornamentation for these homes, and served to connect the interior life of the house to the environment surrounding it. They allowed diffuse light and air to enter, creating lively designs, adding visual warmth, and enhancing the quality of life within.

Traditionally, doors were made by master carvers and windows by lesser carpenters. Built from wood, they had frames covered with open lattice designs and then covered on the



inside surface with *hanji*. Leaves and flowers were sometimes inserted between layers of paper for a decorative effect. *Changho* have been described as "plump, yet concise, possessing a sense of simplicity." Interestingly, Korean doors and windows did not fit snugly into the openings in the walls of the house. They commonly had cracks that had to be covered with specially cut pieces of paper.

Before the Goryeo Dynasty, the lattice designs consisted of simple vertical lines. In Goryeo times, designs became more elaborate and refined. With the advent of the Joseon Dynasty and its Confucian ideology, there was a return to simpler patterns, although the more elegant Goryeo designs were still retained. Each design had its own name, some of which incorporated symbols of everlasting life, wealth, or great blessing. This symbolism further enhanced the personal, lively spirit of the house. These doors and windows are still seen in Korea today, especially on traditional homes that have been preserved or restored.





Although strongly influenced by the Chinese, Korean painting evolved over the centuries to be unique in most respects. Less rigidly constrained than Chinese artistic traditions, Korean painting thoroughly blends elements of shamanist, Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian belief to faithfully reflect the Korean character. Varieties of folk painting were enjoyed by all classes, from the king to commoners, and could

be found in the palace, the *yangban* home, and the farmhouse. Boldly composed, dynamically executed, and brightly colored, folk paintings were also filled with the deep and persistent Korean longing for longevity, good fortune, and protection from evil. Functioning as talismans as well as decorations, they filled and enlivened palaces, temples, and homes with affirmations of the Korean mindset, heart, and soul.

## Chapter 9 Painting

Folk Paintings  
Paintings of Ten Longevity Symbols  
Paintings of Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks  
Character Paintings

Scholar's Study Paintings  
Folding Screens  
Genre Paintings

Literati Paintings  
Documentary Paintings  
Architectural Painting



The art of *minhwa* is alive and well in Korea today as artists are modernizing traditional folk art designs through the use of contemporary colors and compositions.



*Minhwa*, literally translated as "painting of the people," is a style developed by the common people in Korea during the Joseon Dynasty. Prior to that, art in Korea was created by scholars and court artists and was prohibitively

expensive for everyday people. *Minhwa* gave commoners the opportunity to create their own art. This art, in turn, was used to decorate their homes, bringing the power of the symbols it always contained into their daily lives



Korean folk art has several defining characteristics. It is largely created by unknown and untrained artists who do not sign their work. It is made for people to use in their homes and daily lives, and it serves practical and religious purposes. *Sehwa* (New Year painting) was traditionally believed to possess the power to bring happiness and repel evil spirits, and the importance of this role in *minhwa* at all levels of Korean society cannot be overstated.

In *minhwa*, bright colors predominate. Familiar themes tend to be repeated, but individual works are spontaneous and original. The works portray humor, satire, and a positive view of life. Some of the animal figures have human-like faces, allowing the artists to express their emotions in their paintings. In short, *minhwa* reflects and serves the hearts and minds of the Korean people.

Traditionally, *minhwa* was displayed both inside and outside of the home on walls, gates, doors, and windows. Folding screens and scrolls made with folk paintings were ubiquitous. Folk paintings were also applied to clothing, linens, pottery, and furniture. They were embedded in brickwork and carved in stone. These cheerful, spontaneous pieces of art were a part of every seasonal celebration and rite of passage. For example, symbols of longevity were displayed on the *hanbok* used for a baby's first birthday. The same themes appeared in the homes of every class of people, regardless of status. Although the quality of the materials and craftsmanship varied among the classes, any Korean of any class would know the meaning of any piece of folk art. This universal appeal and shared meaning were defining characteristics of folk paintings, more true in Korea than in other Asian cultures.

Until 100 years ago, Korean folk art and the artisans who produced it were considered unworthy of serious consideration by art historians. However, in the 1970s, Jo Ja-yong, a Korean engineer and architect, devoted much of his time and energy to collecting, exhibiting, and writing about Korean folk art. Because of his efforts, *minhwa* has garnered the appreciation it deserves, and many Korean museums today house collections of folk art.





# Documentary Paintings *Girokhwa* 기록화



A portion of the 64-foot-long scroll, entitled, *Royal Procession to the City of Hwaseong*, commissioned by King Jeongjo in 1795 to commemorate his visit to his father's tomb. He was accompanied by more than 6,100 people and 1,400 horses.

An important but relatively little-known type of Korean painting from the Joseon Dynasty, documentary paintings are the equivalent of modern photographs of important events. Executed by the professional painters in the government bureau of painting, the paintings were commissioned by the king, his high officials, or sometimes by *yangban* elite to document significant events.

Surviving paintings provide invaluable information about court rites presided over by the king, royal processions, ceremonial installations of government officials, court banquets, religious ceremonies, battle scenes, and martial arts performances. Often these paintings were mounted on large ten-panel screens with a poem or other inscription that described the event.



If a documentary painting includes the king's throne, it is almost always empty, as it was considered improper to portray the royal family.

*Girokhwa* are fascinating to examine closely. They typically use multiple points of view simultaneously—including bird's eye, side, three-quarter, and reverse perspective—in order to portray all aspects of the events being pictured. They are also painted in minute, exquisite detail. Often the people in the paintings are no bigger than a human fingernail, yet all are painted as individuals with varying facial expressions and even behavioral differences. In one painting of a royal procession that includes thousands of soldiers, one horseman can be seen to be falling asleep as he rides, while another turns to chat with the soldier behind him. Historically very accurate, they depict the costumes of the time, the duties of the individual participants, the scope of the ceremonies, and the way in which events were choreographed.

One of the most popular categories of documentary paintings depicts the turtle ships (*geobukseon*) that, under the command of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, played a crucial role in repelling the Japanese invasions of Korea (1592–1598). The original painting of *geobukseon* was mounted on a magnificent twelve-panel screen that stands today in a memorial shrine dedicated to the Admiral. In it, an armada of turtle ships joins the main vessel, which itself carries a painting on its bow of the four symbols that guard against evil coming from all four directions—the dragon, tiger, phoenix, and tortoise. The ships carry sailors and even women, who provided food to the troops. The painting appears to depict a triumphant victory procession, although that may not have occurred in reality, since Admiral Yi himself died during the final battle. The original painting, and many other versions of it, celebrate the deep pride that the Korean people feel for the technical genius and heroic accomplishments of Admiral Yi, who is considered to be one of Korea's greatest national heroes.

Paintings of *geobukseon* were displayed at court, but also in the homes of *yangban* and even commoners. Such was the pride of the Korean people in the turtle ships and their feats.



*Dancheong* is the name used for a style of embellishing temples and palaces with elaborate, brightly colored, painted designs. The five symbolic colors related to the Five Elements—red (fire), blue (wood), yellow (earth), black (water), and white (metal)—are used, together with green and some neutral tints.

This elaborate, time-consuming form of decoration had several purposes. Most obviously, it conveyed beauty and dignity. Since it was used primarily on royal palaces and temples, it set them apart and conveyed their authority. In addition, the paint was a strong insecticide and preservative that both protected the wooden buildings and covered imperfections in materials and workmanship.

Technically, applying *dancheong* was a refined skill, traditionally reserved for highly trained monks and craftsmen. Each color was painted by a different artist. It was the job of a master craftsman, who was chosen to plan and supervise a new *dancheong* production, to assess the building and develop the design.



This design was transferred to sheets, and the outlines of the design were pricked with pins. The sheet was then held against the wood and patted with a bag of chalk dust, which transferred the design to the wood. Prior to this, however, the wood was primed with a coating made from a green mineral powder, crushed seashells and a wheat starch binder. The paints were made from finely ground mineral particles (some of which were very rare and costly) mixed with glue and water. The paints were heated in order to apply them, and they had to be stored underwater when not being used. Finally, camellia oil was painted over the entire finished design to protect it from the weather.



There was a definite sequence to the colors and how they were applied, following a code derived from Buddhist symbolism. The designs incorporated symbols of protection and good luck and represented heaven, earth and resurrection. Patterns that were commonly used were those typically seen in Korean art—the lotus, pomegranate, peony, chrysanthemum, clouds, phoenix, dragon, tortoise, and crane. But flying horses, lions and even giraffes could be depicted as well. Exterior painting was always placed above the lintel of the building, while on the interior it could extend to the floor.

Over the centuries, versions of *dancheong* appeared in Japan and China (the word *dancheong* was originally derived from the Chinese characters for red and blue). Today, however, the art form is only actively practiced in Korea. It is easy to find lovely examples of *dancheong* throughout the country, as traditional palaces and temples are repainted when existing designs fade. The modern synthetic paints that are now used, however, are less vivid in color and less durable than the very complex traditional paints. Nevertheless, these pieces of architectural art bring centuries of Korean philosophy, thought, and culture into the present for everyone to enjoy.



Changdeokgung Palace



Hanbok installation by Suh Young-Hee

The long cultural legacy of Korean traditional handicrafts has entered upon very exciting times. Handicraft techniques that had been handed down from generation to generation over thousands of years were threatened with near extinction during the first half of the 20th century when Korea was ravaged by occupation and war. Fifty years after the end of the Korean War, however, the South Korean people have rebuilt a country that is among the most modern in the world. Knowing that a future

that does not harbor the past will be greatly diminished, they have put much energy and wisdom into recovering and preserving the nation's handicraft traditions. Today those traditions live on, available for those who want to continue to create beautiful, traditional artifacts as well as for contemporary artisans to use as a springboard for modern interpretations sure to enrich generations for years to come.

## Chapter 10

# Handicrafts in Korea Today

A Culture in Crisis

Living National Treasures

Five Generations of Superior Craftmanship

Traditional Themes Coming of Age

Reaching to the Past to Create the Future

Pushing the Envelope

The Tradition Lives On



## A Culture in Crisis

The first half of the twentieth century was a very difficult time for Korea, with the Japanese occupation, World War II, and the Korean War all exacting a devastating economic and social toll. Korea's culture was attacked as well, as the Japanese systematically tried to erase the sense of identity that had developed on the Korean Peninsula over thousands of years, mandating that people take Japanese names and learn to speak Japanese. Arts and crafts were modified to suit the tastes of the Japanese market, and many Korean masterpieces were taken to Japan. The Korean War, in addition to dividing a nation with a 5000-year history into two parts that are still technically at war to this day, also resulted in physical and economic ruin. At the end of the war in 1953, many historic buildings and the magnificent art in them had been destroyed. Craft industries were devastated, and the Korean people were simply struggling to survive.



However, the Korean people quickly began to address cultural issues in the aftermath of the war, including the revival and protection of traditional arts and handicrafts. In July, 1960 the first of a series of articles about traditional Korean artisans was published in the national daily *Hankook Ilbo*. The author Ye Yong-hae travelled around the war-torn country locating and interviewing accomplished traditional artisans. Those who had not given up practicing their craft were desperately poor and discouraged. Ye's articles were published as the book, *Living Human Treasures (Inganmunhwajae)*, coining the phrase that has been used ever since to honor these important artisans.

Influenced by this book and other calls for action, the Korean government enacted the Cultural Heritage Protection Law in 1962, a mere nine years after the end of the Korean War. Four categories of preservation were originally designated (that number has increased to seven today): Important Tangible Cultural Heritages, Important Intangible Cultural Heritages, Folklore Heritages, and Monuments. Traditional handicrafts are considered to be Important Intangible Cultural Heritages, and the designated expert artisans who make them are called holders (*boyuja*). In a similar but distinct process, holders are also named at the province and city level.

## Living National Treasures



Holders of the Important Intangible Cultural Heritages are expected to transmit their expertise to the next generation, and they must demonstrate and display their skills to the public on a regular basis. They identify trainees who then go through an arduous, multistep training process that promotes only the most talented to the role of apprentice. Holders and their apprentices are paid a monthly stipend and receive health insurance. They also receive special protection in times of war or other emergencies. If holders fail to carry out their obligations, fines are imposed and their designation is sometimes withdrawn. When a holder dies, his or her designation is cancelled, and if there are no other holders or suitable successors, the handicraft is no longer supported. Although the preservation program has been extremely successful, a persistent problem has been finding enough young artisans willing to devote the years of training needed to master what many consider to be outdated practices that are not relevant to the modern world. To counter the risk that holders may die without a successor, their skills are being systematically documented on film so they are not lost forever.

In addition to preserving its own cultural legacy, Korea has been instrumental in promoting preservation on the international stage, proposing to UNESCO in 1993 that it institute a worldwide Living Human Treasures program. This was accomplished in 2003 with the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Since that time, a number of Korean Intangible Cultural Heritages and holders have also received UNESCO designation, thus increasing awareness of Korean traditional culture, including handicrafts, around the world. Korean holders today proudly note their UNESCO designation on their business cards.

The UNESCO program targets a broader range of cultural entities than Korea has typically protected, including cultural practices that do not require special training by individual artisans. Korea decided to similarly widen its own preservation program, especially after China named several Korean practices—the traditional wedding ceremony, the sixtieth birthday celebration, the games of swinging and seesaw, and the Arirang folk song—as intangible aspects of Chinese culture based on the fact that they were practiced in ethnic Korean communities in China.

Kim Hae-jin, holder of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 22—decorative knot making—has practiced her craft for over 40 years. In 2004, she donated her entire body of work to the National Museum of Korea and shifted her efforts almost exclusively to teaching.

## Five Generations of Superior Craftmanship



Kim Doek-hwan, holder of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 119, is the fourth generation of his family to practice the art of *geumbak*, or gold leaf decoration. As is required of all holders, he has an apprentice who is learning the art form from him—his son, Kim Gi-ho—meaning that the only remaining master of gilding in Korea will pass it on to the fifth generation of his family. Since the mid-1800's, when Doek-hwan's great-grandfather was a gold leaf artisan in the court of King Cheoljong, the tradition has been passed down from father to son. The family takes great pride in their craft as well as a sense of obligation to preserve it.

Can this exquisite craft remain relevant in modern times? During the Joseon Dynasty, gold leaf was used only to decorate clothing worn by the royal family on special occasions. Today, although it appears on *hanbok* worn by all groups of people, the designs are increasingly applied by modern methods such as iron-on transfers. The very complicated and time-consuming techniques and the high cost involved in applying gold leaf in the traditional way make it difficult to practice the craft today. And this, in turn, poses the question that is important for many crafts in contemporary Korea: is there a role for traditional *geumbak* in the 21st century?



Both Master Kim and his son are exploring ways to modernize the craft, developing alternatives to the traditional glues made from fish bladder, and experimenting with artificial gold. Gi-ho is developing a range of gilded items other than clothing, including business card and cell phone cases, framed compositions, bookmarks, ties, and plates, which are sold at the family's workshop, *Geumbagyeon* ("Feast of Gold Leaf"). Both men feel encouraged by the government's decision to renew *geumbak* as an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, and are committed to finding ways to carry this unique and cherished family tradition into the future.

Today Kim Doek-hwan (left) is Korea's only surviving gold leaf master. Fortunately his son, Kim Gi-ho (right), will ensure that the art form continues. Gi-ho works with centuries-old designs in the traditional manner, but as shown on the left, he is also adapting these designs to give them contemporary appeal.

## Traditional Themes Coming of Age

In English, the word "tradition" comes from Latin and means something that is handed over, delivered, or entrusted. Traditional customs and practices do not simply endure in a static state. Instead, they are actively transferred from one generation to the next. And, since handicrafts are made to meet the needs of people, they must adapt as people's needs change. It has been written that when Koreans adopted Western styles and cut off their long hair, ten traditional crafts immediately became obsolete.



Korea is a land where the past and the present already visibly coexist. To walk down a street in Seoul is to see, at any turn, evidence of both the 21st century and centuries past. Turn one way and you see an ancient royal palace; turn the other and a steel skyscraper looms. Koreans value this juxtaposition of the old and new. So, while traditional handicrafts and techniques are being meticulously preserved, they are also constantly interfacing with modern society and the contemporary art scene.

Contemporary artists in Korea often reach back to traditional themes in their work, not necessarily using traditional techniques per se, but rather incorporating the icons and meanings of the art and craft traditions of the culture into their work. Thus, handicraft traditions influence modern creativity, and contemporary artisans and artists influence the form in which traditional handicrafts are passed on to the future. In addition, some Living National Treasures are simultaneously preserving old techniques in their pure form while exploring ways to "push the envelope" and adapt traditional forms to modern sensibilities and tastes.

Top: A very contemporary interpretation of traditional Korean *seon* by artist Won Sung-can. Bottom: Referring to himself as a "drawing architect," Gilsook Boy has always been fascinated with the process of reinterpreting traditional architecture, injecting his own humor and whimsy in the process.



Increasingly, master craftsmen and craftswomen are exploring ways to assure the survival of the traditions they have mastered. Perhaps more than anyone, they understand the role that these crafts have played in Korean history, but they are also aware that there is less demand for them today than there was in the past. While many artisans do not believe that traditional techniques and forms should be altered in any way, others argue persuasively that changes are appropriate and necessary so that the traditions don't become so obsolete that they completely disappear.

## Metal Inlay

Hong Jung-sil (Important Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 78) studied metalcraft as a student but was unaware of metal inlay until she happened to see an example of it in an antique store in the 1970s. Captivated by the beauty of the piece, she was told that inlay was no longer practiced in Korea. Luckily, however, she found Lee Hak-eung, the last surviving metal inlay craftsman of the Joseon royal palace. Although he had not worked for 10 years, he agreed to teach her. Mastering the time-consuming and intricate traditional techniques, today Hong creates stunning pieces of art, some of them combining traditional and contemporary themes. Concerned that the craft will truly disappear unless it is adapted to modern culture, she has created a handicraft research institute to study ways to preserve the beautiful tradition that she stumbled upon one lucky day.

## Lacquer Painting

A technique that originated in Korea before the Three Kingdoms Period, lacquer painting was later largely replaced by mother-of-pearl lacquerware during the Joseon Dynasty, and it essentially disappeared from Korea. In 1979, Kim Hwan-kyung (Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Seoul Metropolitan Government No. 1) saw painted lacquerware on a visit to Japan, where the art form has always been favored over mother-of-pearl techniques, and decided to try to revive the indigenous Korean art form at home. After 30 years of research he has reinvented and mastered the difficult techniques involved and produces beautiful pieces of art. Kim works on wooden surfaces, but he also experiments with painting on materials like fabric and paper as well as painting lacquer onto bisque-fired ceramic pieces before firing them a second time. He regularly collaborates with other artists in expanding his repertoire. A firm believer in the importance of combining contemporary and ancient techniques (despite the fact that this attitude delayed his acceptance as a legitimate artist in traditional circles), Kim says that modernizing traditions increases their appeal, creates wider audiences for them, and helps assure their acceptance and survival.



It's an exciting time for anyone who loves traditional Korean handicrafts. Today they are readily available in museums, the studios of Living National Treasures, galleries, and markets. Fifty years of extreme hardship followed by fifty years of difficult rebuilding resulted in a modern nation whose people understand that, without the past, the present and the future are both diminished. Many aspects of traditional culture have been painstakingly recovered and preserved, including numerous handicrafts that might have been lost forever without those efforts. Modern artists and craftsmen continually call upon those traditional themes to inspire their creativity, producing exciting and innovative contemporary art that will help assure that Korea's cultural legacy lives on. Thus, happily, the spirit of the past is palpably present in Korea today. An array of 100 thimbles in a box, popular with collectors, still symbolically signifies blessed longevity, just as lovingly hand-embroidered thimbles did when presented to her new family by a young Joseon bride.

Lee Joo-man, holder of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 109 (ox horn inlaying). Devoted to his craft, Lee has been practicing for over 40 years in spite of the limited use of one of his hands. His skill and dedication to his art truly qualify him, and the many others like him, to wear the title of "Living National Treasure."