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ARH2000

Fall 2017

Harn Diversity Project

The Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida displays an expansive collection of Asian art from various countries throughout the region. The online exhibit *Korean Art: Collecting Treasures* showcases pieces that span a multitude of media and that can trace their origins to Korea. Many of the pieces were donated to the museum by General James Van Fleet in 1988. Fleet served in the U.S. Army as an officer during the Korean War and influenced the founding of the Korea Society in New York in 1957. The Korea Society worked to promote positive relations between American and Korean communities by encouraging a “mutual understanding” between the two cultures (“Korean Art: Collecting Treasures”). The effect of *Korean Art: Collecting Treasures* is very similar; it creates a window into the world that is Korean culture thus sparking conversation and recognizing and validating the strong Korean community in Gainesville.

Gainesville, as a whole, is a widely diverse community which is largely due to the influence of the University of Florida. Educational and research opportunities draw people from across the globe to this central Floridian town. The Institute of International Education Open Doors Report of 2016 states that there is a total of 7,107 international students enrolled here at UF with 267 of these students being from South Korea. The total of South Korean international students is the third largest group behind only China and India. In addition to international students, there are, also, eighty-one exchange students from South Korea. The Korean

Undergraduate Student Association (KUSA) provides a way for this community of Korean students, international, exchange, and American, to engage with each other and find support. KUSA enhances the social lives of its members by establishing “big” and “little” families, hosting a spring formal dance, and organizing an annual trip to Atlanta (“KUSA at UF”). Beyond the social aspects of the club, the Korean Undergraduate Student Association states that their goal is to “unite” the Korean and Korean-American communities and to “promote the visibility” of these communities “on campus as well as in the greater society” (KUSA-GatorConnect). This stated purpose is extremely similar to the purpose of the aforementioned Korea Society and mirrors the effect *Korean Art: Collecting Treasures* has on viewers, particularly the aspect of “visibility.” The Korean Undergraduate Student Association with this Korean art exhibit, together prevent Korean culture from being ignored or neglected on campus by giving it a place to come together and shine brightly to the public.

Korean Art: Collecting Treasures features pieces whose themes, styles, and media are iconic to Korean artwork as a whole. Ceramic works are particularly characteristic of Asia



“Small Blue-Glazed Molded Fish-Form Water Dropper,” Joseon Dynasty, 19th Century, Artist unknown

(Frank, 318). Almost all of the ceramic pottery seen in the Harn museum’s Asian wing are blue porcelain with intricate designs. The striking and recognizable blue color was chosen by artists because it was the only color that could handle the high temperature at which the porcelain is fired (Frank, 318). An example of this ceramic

tradition is the “Small Blue-Glazed Molded Fish-Form Water Dropper” produced during the

nineteenth century Joseon Dynasty. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, water droppers were originally made for use in the process of diluting ink. Water would be dripped from this vessel onto an inkstone where an ink stick would be grinded. Water droppers were often formed into “whimsical” shapes like the fish shown here, and they were very fashionable during the nineteenth century (The Met).

Another type of artwork that is very characteristic of the Korean genre is ink on paper paintings. Traditional paintings typically feature landscape scenes and calligraphy (Frank, 315).



*“Mountain Landscape,” 19th Century,
Artist unknown*

The addition of calligraphy to the paintings displays the artists’ efforts to bring painting to the already highly respected level of calligraphy and poetry (Frank, 315). By including the revered artforms of calligraphy and poetry, artists made their paintings more valuable. Both landscape and calligraphy are seen in “Mountain Landscape” from the nineteenth century. It features a mountain scene from a bird’s eye view that appears to fade away into a faint mist which is characteristic of later styles of ink on paper paintings (Frank, 316). Despite this, it maintains many elements and appearances of similar paintings produced hundreds of years prior. This “copying” of old styles is reflective of the importance of Confucianism’s ideology on respecting the past, as

Confucianism was impactful in Korean culture’s development (Frank, 317). The artist of this work and other similar pieces are mimicking much older paintings in an effort to honor them.

Another example of ink on paper is “Seok Mo Ro-In, Tiger” which was produced in the late nineteenth century. According to Hae Yeun Kim’s article “East Asian Cultural Exchange in Tiger and Dragon Paintings,” tigers have symbolic meanings in Korean culture. In East Asian



“Seok Mo Ro-In, Tiger,” Late 19th Century, Artist unknown

art, images of tigers are often paired with those of dragons (Kim).

They can be linked to Daoism with the tiger representing “yin”

and the dragon representing “yang” (Kim). Tigers can be

connected to Buddhism through the Jataka tales (Kim). The tiger

and the dragon are part of the Four Divine Animals with the tiger

representing the west and the dragon representing the east (Kim).

Tigers and dragons together can be considered a well-balanced

pair because they are opposites. This quality of balance is a

fundamental ideal in Korean culture as Koreans believe in striving

for harmony and balance in all things (PBS, “Hidden Korea”).

While tiger imagery also appears in Chinese and Japanese art, the

style of this piece gives away its Korean origins. Korean tiger

paintings feature very little background making the tiger itself the

main focus of the piece. If Korean tigers are placed in a landscape,

it is typically mountainous or rocky (Kim). Both of these backdrop

characteristics are seen in this painting. The tigers in Korean depictions are often more two-

dimensional than those produced by other cultures as flatness is a popular style of Korean art

(Kim). Korean painters were often less detailed when painting tigers, particularly the stripes

which are shown as simple, solid lines (Kim). Tigers were well-respected animals in Korean

culture, and the danger of one and its power was well understood (Kim). This is reflected in the

facial expression and posture of the tiger shown here. This tiger is shown as fierce and cunning. The highly symbolic status of the tiger makes it an important and popular subject of Korean art.

Upon its arrival to Korea, Confucianism played a large role in shaping Korean culture and government practices (New World Encyclopedia, “Korean Confucianism”). While often



“Carved Lacquered Wood 'Pavilion'-Form Confucian Altar,” Joseon Dynasty, 19th Century, Artist unknown

thought of as a religion, Confucianism is actually better defined as an ideology about political and social structure that places heavy importance on subordination, customs and rituals, and high standards of proper decorum (PBS, “Hidden Korea”). Confucianism, along with Buddhism, was brought to Korea from China. It was studied and developed by scholars during the Koryô dynasty, and immediately after, Neo-Confucianism came to full fruition during the Yi dynasty (New World Encyclopedia, “Korean Confucianism”). Confucianism became the official state cult during the Chosun dynasty of the fourteenth century (PBS, “Hidden Korea”). After suffering from lower class poverty, the corruption among Buddhist monks, and Chinese invasions, Neo-Confucianism’s ideas about reform and ethics were welcomed by the Korean people (New World

Encyclopedia, “Korean Confucianism”). Family structure and values are integral to Confucian teachings making it logical for a family to possess a Confucian altar that was kept in the home – the center of family life. The altar is elegant and proud but not extravagant or loud in its decoration which reflects the Confucian ideas about decorum and correct behavior. The piece

conveys the Korean ideal of balance through its symmetry and elongated rectangular shape. By placing this altar in the family home, it likely provided a daily reminder of the Confucian ideals that were integral to Korean life during the time of the altar's creation.

In addition to Confucianism, Buddhism and its teachings were extremely influential in the development of Korean culture. Buddhism originated in India and spread across Southeast



"Stupa," Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), Artist unknown

Asia to China and Korea (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Buddhism"). Buddhism focuses on the personal lives of those who practice it with its ideology about achieving enlightenment by letting go of worldly attachments (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Buddhism"). While Buddhism is an extremely widespread religion, Buddhist art is different for every culture that produces it (Frank, 304). In fact, it differs over time, as well. One characteristic of early Buddhist art is that it is non-figural or nonrepresentational (Frank, 304). An example of this non-figural Buddhist art, is the stupa. Buddhist stupas evolved from earlier Indian burial mounds, and Indian stupas reflect this by containing a dome-like shape (Frank, 304). However, the shape seen

here in this Korean stupa from the Joseon dynasty more closely resembles that of a Chinese Buddhist pagoda. Pagodas developed from the merging of the Indian stupa and the traditional Chinese watchtower which resulted in a stepped tower structure (Frank, 305). Again, balance is shown in the symmetry of each step and in the symmetrically sloping sides of the tower.

Upon viewing the online exhibit, it becomes apparent that religious traditions are integral to Korean culture. The Gainesville community and the UF community, especially, offer many opportunities for engagement in the Korean religious community. For example, on campus students have the opportunity to become involved in the World Peace Buddhist-Soka Gakkai International-USA club. This club states their purpose as “propagating the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism” which they achieve “through daily Buddhist practice of spreading peace, exchanging culture and sharing closely knit bonds with people around us by undergoing a self-transformation within ourselves.” Outside of the UF campus, the Gainesville Buddhist community features Tu Viện A Nan which is a Buddhist temple where people from different backgrounds can come together. In addition, there is a Buddhist statue park on-site containing large stone representations of important Buddhist figures. These statues are closely tied to the pieces found in the Harn museum in their shared purpose. Together, they introduce Buddhism to the wider Gainesville community by educating viewers and giving them a concrete rather than abstract definition of Buddhism. Apart from the Buddhist community, Gainesville offers a niche for Christian Koreans, too. Located on the southwest side of town, the Korean Baptist Church of Gainesville serves the community by offering worship services, bible studies, prayer meetings, and fellowship opportunities for those seeking to become involved. The variety of opportunities for Buddhist and Christian Koreans reflects the diversity within the Korean community and of the Gainesville community as a whole.

At a surface level, it is difficult to relate my personal experience to the experiences of UF’s Korean community. I am not of Korean descent and neither are my close friends. My insight into their struggles and overall experience is admittedly limited. However, we are inherently tied by our shared status as a student of the University of Florida. We drive the same

roads and walk the same sidewalks. We take classes together and struggle through them together. We are more united than we seem. This collection of Korean art at the Harn has opened my eyes to the diversity and expanse of the Korean community here in Gainesville, and through my research on the various art pieces, I have learned a vast amount about Korean culture.

This online exhibit, *Korean Art: Collecting Treasures*, and the far broader collection of Asian art featured at the Harn Museum of Art provides an educational experience, similar to my own, for all viewers and visitors. Education is the first step in the journey towards understanding and compassion between differing groups. Understanding between peoples reflects the goals of the Korea Society thus leading to the conclusion that this understanding was, also, the motivation in General James Van Fleet's, decision to donate many of the pieces shown in this exhibit. The exhibit gets people talking about Korean culture in a positive, intelligent, and informed way. It takes people who otherwise would have very little interaction with the Korean community and exposes them to traditional Korean culture and customs. This exhibit is likely a source of pride for the Korean community as it puts beautiful and valuable artifacts of their culture in the spotlight. By doing so, it validates the influence of Korean culture in American society and recognizes the presence of the Korean community in America. The ceramic water dropper, the ink on paper paintings, the Confucian altar, and the Buddhist stupa, together, exemplify aspects of Korean heritage and the origins of Korean culture. *Korean Art: Collecting Treasures* reflects the Korean community of Gainesville and influences the Gainesville community through education about the diversity that can be found within the Gainesville community itself.

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