

<Korean Art 1>

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The arts of different ages express different emotions, emphasize different objectives. The social, economic and political background and the religious dimension in each age make this inevitable. Also, the character of the arts changes as the areas of political and cultural influence, the geographical and cultural boundaries fluctuate according to period. For example, taking the unification of Silla in the seventh century as a line of demarcation, the art of the Three Kingdoms and that of Unified Silla reveals expected differences. There are also differences between the art of Koryŏ, whose political and cultural dominance reached to most of North Korea, and the art of Unified Silla, whose power spread mostly south of the central part of the peninsula. Thus, stereotype-delineation of a general characteristic of Korean art ignoring the temporal and spatial factors is nonsense.

Accordingly, at the risk of being termed inadequate or superficial, the character and special features of the arts will be reviewed according to historical dynastic divisions, and on this basis, a summary of the general characteristics of Korean art transcending spatial and temporal divisions will be attempted.

1. The Prehistoric Age

During the Neolithic Age and the Bronze Age, stone, bone or clay miniature figurines, human and animal (mostly pig), were made. The

human figurines were obviously shamanistic deities that protected families, clans or communities. As art objects, they are rather primitive in execution, and hardly deserve to be described as sculpture. The V-shaped comb-patterned pottery of the neolithic age is marked by its clear-cut, simple, abstract character in shape and decoration. The entire surface of a vessel is covered by an overall geometric pattern. The decoration consists of three horizontal tiers; the mouth-rim, the main body, and the base. The uppermost zone around the mouth-rim features a series of horizontal rows of densely packed short parallel lines done by incision or pressing with the tip of a bone or wooden stick . Around the main zone below it are vertical or horizontal rows of slanting parallel lines alternating in direction so as to produce a herring-bone pattern. The space around the pointed or rounded base is covered with rows of the same parallel lines, without the alternation. The overall effect of the linear decoration is the tidy coldness of a geometric pattern. Toward the Middle Neolithic Age in the third millennium B.C., probably under the influence of Chinese painted pottery, the decorative motif of the comb-pattern pottery changed from the earliest patterns of straight lines to curvilinear lines such as concentric semi-circles, wavy or twined lines. The decorated area also tended to decrease. The tendency, however, toward traditional abstraction remained. As was already pointed out, the abstract style characterised the art of the northern peoples in general. The abstract tendency or style also marked the art of the Bronze Age as evidenced by the famous rock-cut painting at Bangudae in southeastern Korea. Apparently in the tradition of the rock painting of Siberia, the Bangudae drawings depict sea and land mammals in pecked silhouettes or outlines. Sometimes, the life-line from mouth to anus is depicted in the so-called X-ray style. In two other rock paintings in southeastern Korea also dating from the Bronze Age, only geometric patterns like lozenges, circles, and meanders, etc. are depicted. In one case, squares with hair-like lines radiating from the four sides are drawn. The schematization and geometric tendency in the rock art is also

echoed by purely geometric patterns consisting of lines and dots on ceremonial bronze objects of the period. Bronze mirrors are probably the best example of the abstract tendency of Bronze Age Korean art. The back of a mirror is covered with a mesh of tiny hatched triangles in thin, delicate lines. Hatched triangles were indeed widely used as a popular motif across the Siberian steppes in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

The prehistoric art of Korea as a whole thus points to the northern trend or style, in accordance with the ethnic background of the Korean people. This abstract tendency was later dominated by a naturalistic style, entering the historical period, but it remained as a sort of undercurrent in Korean art down to the end of the Chosŏn period. The change from the abstract to naturalism in art may be due, first, to the change in the Korean people from a nomadic northern people to an agricultural people, and, secondly, to the direct impact of Chinese art which coincided with the introduction of Buddhism.

2. The Three Kingdoms

Fun-scale activities in an extending into painting, sculpture and architecture started in Korea around A.D. 300, at the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period. Buddhism was introduced in 372 and soon was playing a focal role in artistic activities. This was the time when Korean art took up a new naturalistic style.

The arts of the Three Kingdoms were closely related to each other in style and technique, but they showed conspicuous regional characteristics.

1) Koguryŏ

Koguryŏ art was directly influenced by the art of northern China since the frontier posts of Koguryŏ reached as far as the Liaodong Peninsula. Accordingly, Koguryŏ, more than any other kingdom and

any other period, shows the strong influence of the arts of the northern dynasties, particularly the Toba Wei(A.D. 386-534). Koguryō art is marked by that dynamic force so typical of northern art. The Koguryō character is well exhibited in the sharp, angular treatment and in the isolation of flower petals in relief on roof end-tiles as well as in the dynamic, forceful lines of animal and cloud patterns in openwork on a set of gilt-bronze ornaments attached to the sides of a royal pillow from a tomb in P'yōngyang.

This northern dynamism remained as a regional feature long after the fall of Koguryō. This northern artistic tradition injected a fresh vitality and impetus to the arts of southern Korea whenever it came in contact with the latter.

Despite the direct influence of Chinese art, a departure from Chinese models in approach and execution is always apparent in Koguryō art. This trend toward Koreanization became more pronounced in the later part of the period, as is evident in tomb murals and Buddhist sculpture. Although Koguryō Buddhist images consistently show the strong influence of the contemporary sculpture of northern China, one can easily detect Koguryō features such as the more rounded, softly-modelled faces and less decorative drapery folds. Clay Buddhas from the temple sites at Wōno-ri near P'yōngyang and a gilt-bronze seated Maitreya from P'yōngch'on-ni are typical examples of the Koguryō sculptural trend. This trend toward softness in line and modelling, toward tranquillity, serenity, and inner harmony of emotion is clearly one of the characteristics of Korean art.

2) Baekje

The art of Baekje in its serenity, harmony and humane warmth is outstanding among the arts of the Three Kingdoms period. Baekje occupied the most fertile region of the Korean peninsula. The gentle climate and peaceful landscape with secure supplies of grain fostered a humane, elegant taste in art. Baekje also made contacts with southern China across the Yellow Sea, and her culture and art

naturally bore a sort of refined cosmopolitan nature. In China, too, the arts of the southern dynasties around the Yangzi River were more naturalistic in approach, more poetic and humane in spirit, compared to those of the northern dynasties.

As mentioned already, Baekje maintained relations with the southern dynasties of China and accordingly, Baekje art, for example, Buddhist sculpture, reflects the softer approach of its Chinese counterpart. In the latter half of the sixth century, Northern Qi(A.D. 550-577) developed a smooth, youthful, sensuous sculpture with an interest in human anatomy, and this new style soon was reflected in Baekje sculpture, providing a unique spiritual quality only to be found in Baekje art.

The best piece of Baekje sculpture in the unique Baekje style is the famous gilt-bronze seated Maitreya in the National Museum of Korea. The serene, round face with a hint of an archaic smile, elegant, feminine fingers that lightly touch the cheek, beautifully modelled arms, and the fluent, unbroken line of the slightly stooped body are a quality of art never seen before. The pine-wood Maitreya in the Kōryū-ji Temple in Kyoto is believed to be a Baekje piece sent to Japan in 623. The famous standing Guanyin, also of wood, in Hōryū-ji, Nara is traditionally called the Kudara(Baekje) Kannon. These pieces all show a common Baekje quality--humanity within elegance. The relaxed smile, the naturalness and human warmth that characterizes a Baekje Buddhist image is termed by the present writer, the "Baekje smile".

3) Silla

The art of Old Silla is marked by a basically abstract trend. This lingering prehistoric tradition may be due to Silla's geographic situation, secluded from the outside by mountain ranges.

The abstract quality of Old Silla art, however, was gradually superseded by a naturalistic trend through contacts with Baekje art, but the old tradition never died completely, remaining to the end of the Silla dynasty.

Silla pottery is a direct expression of the naive, rustic, almost earthy quality of the art of Old Silla. The special appeal of Silla pottery lies in the stark frankness and simplicity in the form, silhouette, execution of linear geometric patterns, in the colour and texture of the clay, and in the surface treatment, all blended to a special sort of harmony between non-functional, non-realistic ceremonial nature and functional, realistic, natural forms. The designs on the surface of the pottery are either geometrical patterns or extremely conventionalized human and animal figures in incised lines. This abstract tendency of Silla pottery is no doubt in the tradition of Korean prehistoric art.

Despite formal differences in details, Silla pottery shares a common Korean character with Chosŏn porcelain. That is, it shows a complete artlessness, a thoroughly random, spontaneous approach, and above all a lack of attention to detail. Lids never quite fit Silla pottery; vessels are often tilted, and surfaces may be smudged with the natural glaze of fallen ash. And yet such vessels are never considered failures; they are even used in the tombs of kings. Koreans see the man-made object—as the creation of nature, to be accepted as it is. Korean artisans in that sense created nature.

The tradition of an in Korea to the present day shows this deeply rooted preference for naturalness. There is not much concern for artificial perfection.

4) Common Character in the Arts of the Three Kingdoms

Through the above discussion, one may have come to realize a common, basic character in the arts of the Three Kingdoms: i.e. indifference toward artificial perfection, and devotion to and reliance on nature. There is never the perfection of Chinese or Japanese art. Korean naturalism emphasizes the natural rather than the artificial, human warmth rather than cold precision, the overall impression rather than minute details. This is not to say that the art of the Three Kingdoms is always inferior to Chinese art in terms of precision, delicacy, sophistication and skill. In fact, we have many

masterpieces from the Three Kingdoms that rank with the finest Chinese examples.

The basic spirit in the arts of the Three Kingdoms is the belief in the beauty of nature resulting in an unique artlessness of approach and achievement. This spirit is best expressed in Silla pottery. Through this common philosophy the artisans and the public became a special sort of entity unique to Korea. The artists produced what their customers really liked, and the customers accepted whatever the artists produced for them as long as the pieces performed their given function in daily life.

3. Unified Silla

The period of Unified Silla (A.D. 668-935) is significant in that it also unified the arts of the Three Kingdoms and extended the art style of Old Silla, or that of southern Korea, into the former territory of Koguryō. While it is true that the art of Silla was greatly influenced by Tang art with a considerable international flavour, Silla developed a truly Koreanized art encompassing all the Korean qualities and spirit. The stone pagodas and stone lanterns of Silla and the sculptures of Sokkuram clearly witness to this. We see in operation here the latent tradition of spiritual vitality and integrity that continued particularly in southeast Korea, the heartland of the kingdom of Silla.

Mention was made earlier of the new style of sculpting that began in Northern Qi (A.D. 550-577) in China and that Korean sculpture under this influence also changed to a softer, more naturalistic approach. This new style began to be felt in Silla in the seventh century.

Toward the mid-7th century, however, under a new impact from early Tang sculpture, Silla sculpture began to show some interest in cold realism, as is shown by the clay guardian figures from Kyōngju and the bronze guardians discovered inside the stone pagoda at the site of Kamūn-sa Temple. The stiff monumentality of the stone

tortoise-base at the Tomb of King Muyŏl (A.D. 661) and the Stone Triad in Kunwi is also derived from the early Tang style. The stiffness, however, soon gives way to a more relaxed naturalistic trend reflecting the sculpture of the middle Tang period.

The success of the Sŏkkuram sculptures marking the zenith of Korean art is due to the purity and integrity of Silla sculptors who remained Korean artists despite waves of strong influence from Tang art, accepting new ideas and techniques only with constant efforts for Koreanization. Thus, despite the same interest in human anatomy and physical beauty, Silla Bodhisattvas never exhibit the eroticism of Tang and Indian sculptures. The pure, naive beauty attained by Silla sculptors is a demonstration of the sense of beauty, the philosophy of life of the ancient Korean people. The people of Silla, like the people of ancient Greece, set great value on balanced proportions in the human form. Thus, they adopted the real, the regular, and the natural as the basis of their sense of beauty. The reason Silla's stone pagodas appear so harmonized to our eyes is that line, surface, volume, and proportions between parts are all in perfect accord. They are structures with a composition that had greater appeal to the eyes and hearts of the Silla people than the tall, imposing brick pagoda structures of China. Granite as a medium which corrodes, inevitably embraces a soft, natural quality, and that quality helped to add further naturalness to the beauty of Silla stone objects.

1. What is the dominant trend in the prehistoric Korean art?
2. What are the representative remains in the prehistoric Korean art?
3. Discuss the characteristic of Goguryeo art.
4. Discuss the characteristic of Baekje art.
5. Discuss the characteristic of Silla art.
6. Select one among many works of art in the Three Kingdoms period and appreciate it.