

## <Korean Art 2>

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### 4. Koryŏ

The political and economic weakness of Silla from the ninth century onwards had parallel manifestations in the arts. Sculpting techniques deteriorated and the sincere attitude typical of eighth-century Silla degenerated into crude workmanship. The faces of Buddhist images changed into schematized, soulless depictions. Kyŏngju, political capital of the nation for six centuries, lost the inspiration, creativity, and driving power it had possessed for so long.

In politics and in art the time was ripe for change and revolution, and with the emergence of Koryŏ and the transfer of the capital to Kaesŏng, northern vitality provided a new impetus to the ailing art of the last days of Silla. Thus Kaesŏng replaced Kyŏngju and became the new centre for the promotion of the arts in the peninsula.

Despite political changes, Buddhism continued to be a central force in the promotion of art. However, the bureaucrat-literati group centred in the royal palace emerged as a new, equally important patron of art. They represented a new generation of aristocrats, skilled in literature and in the Neo-Confucian teachings of Zhu Xi, a politico-literati class, who replaced the aristocracy of Silla. They were influenced by the culture, thought, and life style of Song China and they sought to enjoy a sophisticated, elegant life style. King Uijong (1146-1174) who roofed one of his pavilions with celadon tiles was typical of the new taste of Koryŏ aristocrats.

These aristocratic monks and literati were the arbiters of beauty in Koryŏ. This accounts for the refinement of calligraphic style and the rather sophisticated quality of Koryŏ celadon. However, they were a

numerically limited group, forming only the tip of the pyramid of Koryŏ society, and their aesthetic sense and dictation of artistic taste could not change the basic, traditional aesthetic sense of the Korean people.

These upperclass patrons of the arts may have attempted to reproduce or imitate, in Koryŏ celadon, the perfection of Song pottery. However, the potters of Chŏlla Province in south-western Korea did not strive to emulate the technical perfection of Song ceramics. Thus in Koryŏ celadon, each piece was different in detail, their only common characteristic being a warm sense of humanity that seems to spring from the very individuality of each piece. This humane warmth is a revival of the spirit of Baekje. The straight lines of Song pottery became curves and the cold blue of Song celadon gave way to a soft greenish tone, and Koryŏ pottery came to have that warm humanity that pervades Paekche Kwanŏm images, or the Paekche smile that is seen on the rock carvings at Sŏsan. The warm impression of a Koryŏ celadon is exactly the impression we receive from the 'Baekje smile' on the faces of Baekje Bodhisattvas.

We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that Koryŏ celadon surpasses Chinese pottery in technical skill, but the Koryŏ product is very different from the refined, delicate perfection of Chinese or Japanese pottery in its total effect. In fact, as Gompertz has pointed out, Koryŏ does not have uniform standards of celadon glaze colour. This is due to the disinterest of Korean potters in a uniform, pre-measured quality. Nature is beauty, and nature never produced exactly similar pieces.

As for sculpture, between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, Koryŏ sculptors produced relatively fine Buddhist images. This was due to the infusion of northern vitality which invigorated the ailing Buddhist art tradition of the last days of Silla. Fresh, youthful, broadly smiling visages were provided for the rotund, full bodies of the iron and stone Buddhist images of the period. Serene faces were given a sense of spiritual vitality in an effort to reproduce the quality of the Sŏkkuram sculptures. Some Buddha figures cast in iron,

preserved in the National Museum, and the stone Bodhisattvas in Sinbok-sa Temple and Wŏlchŏng-sa Temple in Kangnŭng are good examples of early Buddhist art. However, the artists of Koryŏ gradually lost their skill in making such large images, and the type of image being made regressed to something superstitious and worldly. The transfer of power to the military establishment in the twelfth century had a debilitating effect on standards of Koryŏ pottery. This trend was accelerated by the Mongol Invasion, which exercised a two fold effect: it weakened the power of Koryŏ and it introduced vulgar Mongol tastes. At first, it seemed as if the tradition of Koryŏ celadon would collapse, as if the Koryŏ tradition was locked in an unequal battle with coarseness, lack of sincerity, and a loss of the sense of beauty . However, the fact that artistic tastes were no longer dictated by the upper class and that new artistic inspiration was no longer coming in from China stimulated and encouraged the aesthetic values of the masses. The way for the new art of the Chosŏn period was now open.

Some examples of Koryŏ wooden architecture survive to the present day and this in itself is noteworthy. The style of wooden architecture after Silla was imported directly from China, the so-called classical style. However, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a neo-classical style, called *tianzhu* or *chusimp'o* originating in Southern Song, actually in the provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian, south of the Yangzi, came into Japan and Koryŏ. Examples of this style are the Main Halls of Pusŏk-sa Temple and Sudŏk-sa Temple. The architectural detail is in the Chinese style, but in Koryŏ as in Chosŏn, sloping terrain is used dexterously to produce building sites of different elevations within a temple complex. Thus, Korean architecture becomes an element of the natural setting. The appeal of these buildings to the eye and the calming influence they exert on the heart comes from the gently curved roof lines, the curved pillars with a slight entasis, and the balanced floor plan—features reminiscent of the harmony of Silla stone pagodas. Almost simultaneously with this *tianzhu* style, a new, more decorative style, called *tap'o*

(multi-bracket), came in from northern China, and several examples of this style from late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn survive.

## 5. Chosŏn

Confucianism became the religion of Chosŏn, striking Buddhism a crushing blow. This is not to say that Buddhism disappeared from the religious consciousness of the people, or that support in the royal palace for Buddhism was completely cut off. However Buddhism as a religious organization supported by the government, constituting a formidable power structure in itself, and Buddhism barely managing to survive through the support of palace ladies were two different things; thus Buddhism in terms of attitude, goals, and activities changed greatly and naturally receded from its position as patron of the arts

The literati of Chosŏn, as men of strict personal discipline, who based their lives on the three fundamental principles and the five cardinal relationships, found little demand for the lyrical or the cultivation of the lyrical in their lives. In addition, being a numerically small group and lacking financial power, they had neither the strength nor the inclination to develop the arts, or indeed to cultivate any artistic consciousness. Leading barren lives in a barren environment there was not much room for the appreciation of art.

Of course, this does not mean that poetry, calligraphy, and painting were completely neglected, or that pottery and other handicrafts were made only for functional use. It does mean, however, that the *yangban* class could not act as influential patrons of art; they did not form an art circle, nor were they able to give inspiration to art institutions such as the Academy of Painting or the Office of Ceramics. Thus, Chosŏn artists or artisans were rather free to express their sense of beauty, that is, the aesthetic tradition of the Korean people. This explains the franker expression of personal emotion in Chosŏn art than in the art of other period. However, one must always bear in mind that the emotion of the Chosŏn-period

people was more or less influenced by the Confucian view of life. Thus Confucian stoicism, and Confucian devotion to the golden mean, in combination with a meagre living environment, worked as a control on all tendencies toward excess, and Korea's traditional naturalism operating here seems to have helped to produce a Spartan rejection of all decoration in Chosŏn art.

Representative Chosŏn architecture, such as Namdaemun Gate or Kwanghwamun Gate or Kŭnjŏngjŏn (Audience Hall) demonstrate the use of a large floor space; the solid, yet soft lines of roof ridges and eaves harmonize with the structure and with the natural setting. Compared to earlier architecture, materials, size, and functional considerations may differ greatly, yet as works of art, the artistic effect is the same. The new *tap'o* style introduced at the end of the Koryŏ dynasty became very popular in Chosŏn and from around the sixteenth century it became the dominant trend, displacing the *tianzhu*, *chusimp'o* style. The most striking feature of *tap'o* is the arrangement of the bracket-complex between pillars, creating a more decorative effect than the *tianzhu* style with only the column-head bracket.

A simple pavilion caned Ojukhŏn in Kangnŭng is the best extent example of a building reflecting the temperament of Chosŏn. Ojukhŏn is well known as the birth place of the celebrated Confucian scholar Yi Yul-gok (1536-1584). The house is completely lacking in decorative ornamentation. The *ondol* (heated floor), *maru* (an open quarter with a wooden floor) and kitchen, topped by a wooden roof, complete the structure. The yard is just bare cleanly swept earth. The impression one gets is of a woman neatly dressed in ramie with her hair nicely combed. This is the philosophy and attitude to life of the Chosŏn *yangban*; no trace of affectation, just the minimum necessary living space and function; humble yet revealing *yangban* pride; meagre, yet decent and dignified; nothing superfluous, in a word, spartan. What is lacking here is not art but artefacts. The harmony is perfect; something that gains in the savouring, like the taste of good rice.

Chosŏn gardens are the same. The Japanese will tell you that there were no gardens in Chosŏn. A Chosŏn building had absolutely nothing artificial. The area of the garden was marked by elongated granite blocks, a tree hugged the wall on the other side of the yard, and there might be one or two curiously shaped stones. What a Chosŏn garden looked like can be seen from the back garden of Ch'ilgung Palace at the foot of Pukak Mountain in Seoul. This back garden is not really a garden at all; it is just a section of the skirt of the mountain that has been walled in and included within the grounds of Ch'ilgung. The only thing artificial here is the wall that circumscribes the garden and some stones placed here and there for soil erosion control. And yet it is a splendid garden. Entering it, cries of admiration greet this uncreated creation. Not the sort of admiration for the skill of an architect or an expert in landscaping trained thoroughly in the modern sense. For the perfection of beauty and naturalness, explanations are superfluous; one feels such perfection intuitively.

Chosŏn Buddhist sculpture is almost non-existent. This followed from the decadence and regression of Buddhism itself. The stimulus and inspiration in sculpture were cut off from within and without. Thus Chosŏn sculpture is rather stiff and conventionalized in the tradition of indigenous, non-religious sculpture. The block-like tomb guardians and zodiac figures of palace buildings as well as the cold, frozen faces and bodies of Chosŏn-period Buddhist images well testify to the style.

Chosŏn painting began to take on its nationalistic character from around the middle of the period. In the early part of the dynasty the artists of the Academy had mainly imitated the styles of academic paintings of China, but from the seventeenth century literati painters, influenced by the Wu school of Ming, began to formulate a Chosŏn painting tradition.

In terms of subject matter, composition, and technique, Chosŏn painting may not have been able to keep up with the scale and sophistication of Chinese painting. However, Chosŏn painting, again

with its Korean naturalism, achieved a world of its own. The artists took up subjects from their daily life and the world immediately around them, unlike their predecessors who painted imaginary landscapes following Chinese manuals. The leader of the new Korean school was Chǒng Sǒn (1676-1759). He was followed by Kim Hong-do (1745-?), Sin Yun-bok (1758-?), and others.

The character of Chosŏn art is best seen in the pottery and woodcraft of the period. As household items in everyday use, these pieces reflect the emotion and sense of beauty of the masses more frankly, and their functional character emerges more strongly. Nothing quite equals Chosŏn pottery in terms of its Koreanness. Many have sought to define the quality and beauty of Chosŏn pottery, but perhaps the best formulation may be to say simply that it is completely "ordinary". "Ordinary" means what can be seen anywhere, the common, what does not particularly strike the eye. It means without artifice, fabrication, or special character. However this ordinariness should not be confused with shoddiness. "Simple and ordinary", were the words of the late Muneyoshi Yanagi, the famous art connoisseur, who fell in love with Korean art, when he was shown the best tea bowl in Japan, called Kizaemon-Ido, a 16th-century rice bowl of Chosŏn Korea. Yanagi defined the world of Chosŏn potters as the world before beauty and ugliness. Ko Yu-sŏp called it "planned planlessness". Toyotaro Tanaka declared: "Chosŏn pottery was born not made". This last remark may best express the nature of Chosŏn ceramics. Take, for example, the blue-and-white ware of the Chosŏn period in comparison to its Ming and Qing counterparts. Instead of crowded decorative effects, Chosŏn potters used a single tree, or a spring of autumn grass against a large white background. This again shows the Korean preference for non-artificial naturalness, the traditional attempt for an entity harmonized with nature.

## 6. The Beauty of Korean Art

We have tried to survey and summarize very briefly artistic expression and trends in each period of old Korea in order to delineate a common, basic character. Korean art is dominated by a naturalism based on the philosophy of the Korean people, the affection for a peaceful natural environment. Korean art is marked by artlessness and spontaneity in its basic approach or philosophy. The beauty of nature is accepted as it is and recreated. An art piece must unconsciously recreate the harmony and balance of nature. When this harmony becomes the "harmony of non-harmony", the "skill of no-skill", it is called *mōt*, the unique Korean term for "reinforcement" or "taste".

The selflessness of Korean art reflects an attitude of spiritual enlightenment and transcendence with regard to art and the self. Thus Korean art while on the one hand being "ordinary" at the same time possesses an inexhaustible flavour and depth. (by Kim Won-yong)

1. Discuss the characteristic of Goryeo art.
2. What was influenced to the art history by the political changes caused by the military establishment and the Mongol Invasion?
3. What is the dominant trend in the architecture of Goryeo period?
4. Select one among many works of art in the Goryeo period and appreciate it.
5. Discuss the characteristic of Joseon art.
6. What kind of changes appear in Joseon art after becoming Confucious country?
7. What is the characteristic of Korean art in the architecture of Joseon period?
8. Select one among many works of art in the Joseon period and appreciate it.
9. Discuss *meot* (the unique Korean term for "reinforcement" or "taste") of Korean art.
10. What are the works of Korean art which shows *meot*?