

## Cultural diplomacy, national identity and national museum: South Korea's first overseas exhibition in the US, 1957 to 1959

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### Abstract

The exhibition *Masterpieces of Korean Art*, which toured 8 cities in the US from December 1957 to June 1959, was the first large-scale overseas exhibition of Korean cultural objects that the South Korean government organized. This overseas exhibition in the US was designed to secure a cultural identity for South Korea on the world stage by explaining to US citizens that Korean culture has peculiar characteristics and independence from Chinese or Japanese culture. It was in the same context that the South Korean government was trying to secure a place within the world order controlled by the US. This touring exhibition shows that, through this exhibition, the National Museum of Korea was engaged in a dual mission to both gain cultural citizenship on the world stage and, reflexively, to internalize this for internal consumption so as to consolidate a sense of Korean cultural identity at home.

**Keywords:** Overseas exhibition, material culture, national identity, national museum

### Introduction

In August 1945, Korea was liberated from 35 years of Japanese colonial rule. Only now did it secure the political, social and cultural space within which to establish its identity. Only now did it, and particularly the National Museum of Korea (NMK), find a role for material culture in acts of identity making which sought to extract Korean identity from Japanese colonial imposition. In December 1945, before the establishment of the government of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the 'national' museum of Korea was opened in the very building which had been occupied by the Japanese Government-General Museum (1915-1945) in Seoul by the US military government that occupied South Korea following the defeat of the Japanese empire. NMK, which inherited the material basis of the Government-General Museum, placed its focus on the key word 'independence'. This word was essential to Korean elites disempowered by colonisation. One of the most urgent issues for a fledgling country was to discover the nation's cultural identity and internalize it domestically and give publicity to it on the international stage.

The new NMK tried to reinvent the meanings of artefacts displayed in the Government-General Museum, but Koreans did not have their own concrete narratives for this translation of material culture, even if they attempted to adopt ethnic nationalism as their narrative. As Korea became an arena for the struggle for the world powers, the US and the USSR, a civil war between South and North Korea broke out (1950-1953), resulting in unprecedented damage in human and material resources and leaving behind a deep hostility between both sides. Anti-communism in South Korea overwhelmed nationalism in the 1950s after this civil war, although nationalism did maintain a degree of political potency. Nevertheless, the severe damage resulting from the war did not leave enough room for interests in material culture.

The chance to draw the attention of South Korean leaders to Korean material culture came from diplomatic need in the latter part of the 1950s. The United States' assistance to the South Korean government was essential for national security and reconstruction following the damage resulting from the Korean War. Furthermore, South Korea, which stood at the forefront of the Cold War on behalf of the US, attempted to attract as much aid as it could from the

US, causing occasional diplomatic tensions between South Korea and the US. It was in this context that the National Museum of Korea's first large-scale overseas exhibition of Korean culture toured eight cities in the US between 1957 and 1959.<sup>1</sup> This exhibition showed how material culture could play a practical role in securing the political and diplomatic position of a country impoverished by colonial rule and war on the world stage. The political leaders and government officials of South Korea were shown through this exhibition the usefulness and value of Korean cultural identity via the means of material culture.

By focusing on this overseas exhibition project, *Masterpieces of Korean Art*, between 1957 and 1959, this article aims to consider how a national cultural identity in a post-colonial country started to be formed through material culture under the Cold War world system. This article reveals that through this exhibition the NMK was engaged in a dual mission to both gain cultural citizenship on the world stage and, reflexively, to internalize this for internal consumption so as to consolidate a sense of Korean cultural identity at home.

### The South Korea and US relationship at front lines of the Cold War

The United States considered East Asia as an outpost of the Cold War and intervened in that area very actively (Cha 2006: 258-61). In 1950, the US intervened in Korea to push back a North Korean invasion. After this, the US signed a mutual defence treaty with South Korea in 1953, and 'maintained tens of thousands of American troops and even tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, while pouring vast sums of money into the development of South Korea's own military forces' (Eckert 1990: 395). In the first half of the 1950s, the US constructed an international order in opposition to the USSR (Heo 2008: 326). In order to maintain a stable, pro-American regime in South Korea, the US started to change direction from purely military aid to political and economic assistance, which resulted in the necessity of the internal health of this pro-American and anti-communist regime (Lee 2006: 551).

The US ambition was for South Korea to be not only a bastion of military security in East Asia, but also a symbol of the superiority of the American system. But, as far as an American diplomat in Seoul thought in the 1950s, South Korea was 'a nation adrift whose people are disillusioned and uninspired.' He continued as follows in his report to the US Department of State: 'The Communist danger, it is pointed out, remains as a potential danger which increases day by day as President Rhee and his Government fail to offer believable national goals.'<sup>2</sup> Even though these national goals the US diplomats bore in mind were focused on economic and political aspects, such as meaningful economic development and the growth of the democratic process,<sup>3</sup> their consideration for constructing a stable regime in South Korea included cultural aspects such as helping it to affirm its national identity through material culture. As Heo pointed out, the US was willing to characterize itself as the nation that supported other nations' aspirations for national freedom in the course of its competition with the USSR, even if it thought that extreme nationalism should be excluded for the reason of hindering the alliance of the Free World in the Asian region (Heo 2008: 326-8).<sup>4</sup> It was in this context that the US pushed forward with a series of cultural projects towards South Korea under the name of cultural exchange.

Even though the US government tried to glamorize their projects with the term 'cultural exchange', the projects basically constituted a one-sided transmission towards South Korea of American values, institutions, and knowledge; nothing short of an indoctrination in American civilisation. During the 1950s, the United States Information Service in South Korea was eager to publicize the superiority of American civilization through several activities, such as showing films to local Koreans, managing libraries, and radio broadcasting.<sup>5</sup> The US government also strove to invite South Korean leaders to the US to familiarize them with American values, as well as permitting Korean students a chance to study at US universities. Moreover, the US government dispatched American scholars to South Korea to deliver lectures to Koreans under the United States Information and Educational Exchange Act in 1950 (Heo 2008: 30).

Under these circumstances, the exhibition of Korean culture in the US can be seen as a reasonable cultural item that had the potential to equalize the one-sided trend of cultural exchange between South Korea and the US. Not surprisingly, the American side also took the initiative in that discussion. It was the American side rather than the Korean which raised

the necessity of the exhibition; this exhibition was possible because the American side, rather than the Korean, wanted it.

### Progress of the Korean overseas exhibition and the American side's intentions

In 1948, Professor Langdon Warner (1881-1955) of Harvard University explained the need for a Korean art exhibition in the US to Kim Chewon (1909-1990), Director of NMK, who visited the US by invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation (Kim 1991: 56-9). Warner introduced Kim to the Oriental ceramic research group in Boston, which was a chance to gauge the interest of American academics about a possible Korean art exhibition. Also, the Rockefeller Foundation arranged a meeting to discuss a planned exhibition with Robert P. Griffing, Jr (1947-1963 in office), Director of the Hawaiian Academy of Art in Hawaii, on Director Kim's return to Korea (Kim 1991: 56-9). They agreed to hold the exhibition in the US as soon as possible. But it could not be carried out because of the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. The following letter forwarded to GHQ/SCAP in Tokyo by Griffing shows how the exhibition was proposed and prepared.

Our concern with the Korean museums is a matter of several years' standing, dating back to 1947 when we made tentative plans for an international circulating exhibition of Korean arts. In 1948 the Rockefeller Foundation sent Dr. Kim to Honolulu to discuss this matter with us here, and as a result of these and other factors, the United States Department of State sent one of America's leading authorities in the field of oriental art, Dr. Alfred Salmony, to Korea in 1950 to lecture there and to begin the process of selection for such an exhibition. Meanwhile, we had gained the support and interest of a number of American museums to make wide circulation of the exhibition possible.<sup>6</sup>

Remarkably, the United States Department of State had already embarked on the exhibition project in 1950, by sending Professor Alfred Salmony (1890-1958) to Korea for the selection of artefacts.<sup>7</sup> This implies that the US administration had placed the exhibition under its farsighted foreign policy, and it was, at the same time, meeting the expectations of the American public and academics. After the Second World War, the US government began making efforts to secure pro-American regimes all over the world by positioning the US as a friendly country that was accepting of the national cultural sovereignties of each country (Heo 2008: 123). In the same context 'defeated Germany, Japan, and Italy had to be transformed into viable democratic systems and had to be integrated into the emergent anti-Soviet coalition,' as Berghahn suggests (Berghahn 2001: xiii).

Several overseas exhibitions hosted by the National Gallery of Art under the US government after the Second World War clearly show this direction of US foreign policy. For example, the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC held a series of exhibitions, such as *Paintings from the Berlin Museums* (March to April 1948), *Art Treasures from the Vienna Collections* (November 1940 to January 1950) and *Japanese Painting and Sculpture Sponsored by the Government of Japan* (January to February 1953).<sup>8</sup> One exhibition in particular, *Art Treasures from Japan*, a special loan exhibition in commemoration of the signing of the Peace Treaty in San Francisco in 1951, was also a cultural event for showing off the new friendly relations between the US and Japan.<sup>9</sup>

Although America did not publicly state that the purpose of these exhibitions was anything more than generating mutual understanding, these cultural events were definitely assisting in the building of nation states in which pro-American regimes could survive. Promoting a national identity for South Korea was a means of helping South Korea build its nation state, which ultimately accorded with the national interest of the US, politically as well as culturally.

In spring 1954, Griffing paid a courtesy visit to President Rhee Syngman (1875-1965) to request cooperation in establishing a touring exhibition of Korean art in America (Kim 1991: 110-1). Actually, he had the full support of the US government. He could meet President Rhee thanks to arrangements made by Ellis O. Briggs (1899-1976), the US ambassador in Seoul, and he was able to utilize a US military flight when he travelled to Korea (Kim 1991: 110). Thus, it can be said that he was acting on behalf of the US government. It seems that President Rhee

also considered Griffing's proposal as coming from the US government. It should be understood that it was because of President Rhee's political calculation that an American museum's director could confirm the cooperation of the South Korean president in a touring exhibition of Korean treasures in the US. In this approach, the US government differed markedly from South Korea and Japan, who wanted to push forward with those events at the government level.

An American public foundation also contributed to the effort so as to emphasize the non-political character of the exhibition project. The Rockefeller Foundation invited two key figures of NMK, including its director, Kim Chewon, from 1948 to 1949 and had arranged a direct possibility for discussing the touring exhibition of Korean art in the US. As shown in the compliments in the exhibition catalogue by John Walker (1906-1995), the director of the National Gallery of Art (1956-1969 in office), the foundation granted \$10,000 for the preparation of an exhibition of Korean national treasures in cooperation with other museums (*The New York Times*, 23 November 1956)

### The South Korean government's strategy of cultural diplomacy

Although the US took the initiative from the beginning of the project, the South Korean government was by far the more active in expressing its expectations through this touring exhibition. South Korean officials and politicians expected to accrue both practical and cultural profits from the event. In terms of the cultural aspect, South Korea aspired to improve its image through cultural objects, and, by doing so, to maximise aid from the US in practical aspects. Both aspects were expected to contribute to securing a national identity. In other words, South Korean leaders thought that showing off the essence of Korean material culture in the US could be a soft and useful tactic in securing a cultural and political citizenship in a world order presided over by the US. A further outcome expected from the US exhibition was to recover national dignity following the disgrace experienced during Japanese colonial rule. The US, which had control of the contemporary world order, was the right country to guarantee Korea's national dignity and respect its national identity. South Korean leaders thought that appealing to the US would be recognised as an appeal to the world.

In September 1952, during the Korean War, the Ministry of Education of the South Korean government submitted to the National Assembly a motion for the evacuation of NMK collections to the US for their safety, including a plan for an exhibition of some masterpieces. It finally gained consent from the National Assembly on 25 April, 1955 after a fierce debate. Kim Beob-Lin (1899-1864), the then president of the Committee of Education, the National Assembly and the former Minister of Education, explained the necessity of the touring exhibition in the US before the full membership of the Assembly as follows.

Foreigners have a very low level of understanding of Korea. To our surprise, they never know that Korea, as an independent nation for thousands of years, has created *its* own unique culture and has *an indigenous language and culture*. Very surprising is this reality that we can recognise once we go abroad.... After liberation, the name of Korea was noticed all over the world only by the Korean War, but Korea as a cultural nation is never known. This is because the Japanese publicised only negative aspects of Korea during colonial rule, and did not show foreigners our magnificent culture when they visited Korea. Hundreds of thousands of US and foreign soldiers who fought in the Korean War remember only destroyed land and wandering Koreans. That is why they cannot have a good impression of our Koreans, nor a sound understanding of our culture. As soon as possible, we should push forward with this overseas project of publicising our culture so that foreigners can understand us. And at this time, we should let the free allied nations know the historical status of our culture, so that we can expect both material and spiritual guidance from them for our national unification and economic revival. We should show them what South Korea can do for the free world through this opportunity (National Assembly, 21 April 1955: 3-6).

Members of the Liberal Party, which had a majority as the governing party, gave consent to the motion for the first overseas exhibition, insisting that the exhibition was indispensable in order

to give publicity to Korean culture which was rarely known on the world stage, and arguing that it would contribute to securing a national identity and dignity, as well as maximising aid from the US.

On the contrary, members of the opposition parties objected to the plan because, they argued, of its inappropriate timing, carelessness, and humiliating capitulation to the powerful. They also pointed out that the NMK had not even opened its permanent gallery at the very time of the discussion, even though the government returned to Seoul after the start of armistice in July 1953. Even Park Young-Jong, a member of the ruling party, lamented that no powerful nation would send out its national treasures, considering the exhibition project as a flattering action to the US government. He also added that this project had only a diplomatic cause. His comment shows that not a few Koreans felt that this cultural exchange had strong implications for practical profits as well as cultural expectations, as shown in Kim Beob-Lin's explanation. It was in this context that on 25 April 1955, the National Assembly finally passed the motion with absolute consent of the Liberal Party, which agreed to the government's plan.<sup>10</sup>

### **The exhibition committee and selection of artefacts to be displayed**

Taking into consideration the critical opinions on the exhibition in the National Assembly, the South Korean government, in 1954, organized the Overseas Exhibition Committee which consisted of 16 members, whose mission was to advise on general affairs, including the selection of artefacts for the exhibition. Before the assent of the National Assembly, NMK had begun to select cultural objects to be sent to the US. Although the majority of the major collections were yet in Busan, a port city on the south eastern coast, because of the continued threat to national security, NMK was very determined to prepare a good exhibition that showed Korean culture to the US. Director Kim made efforts to select as many masterpieces as possible to represent Korean culture. In short, the total capability of NMK, even if limited, was being invested in the success of the exhibition. In September 1954 the committee finished the preliminary selection of 306 items before the American members of the selection committee (Ministry of Education 1960: 1). Two members of the American committee, Alan Priest (1898-1969) of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Robert T. Paine, Jr. (1900-1965) of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, finally selected 193 items for the first overseas exhibition.

They arrived in Korea for the final selection in September 1956. They met with a cordial reception from the South Korean government, which did its utmost to make their stay more convenient. President Rhee even ordered the provision of a special electric service to a local hotel where they were staying during their visit to Busan, when it was general practice only to supply the service in a specific time band, and dispatched a cook to Busan for them from a deluxe hotel in Seoul. As Director Kim recollected in his memoir, the Korean government officials, who accompanied the Americans during their local visit might have had difficulty in providing them with decent dinners every evening (Kim 1991: 112-5). This hospitality can be said to reflect what the Korean government aspired to in order to gain some practical diplomatic profit from the US through the overseas exhibition, and show that the Korean side did not hold the initiative in organising this cultural exchange project.

The more important points here are what artefacts the two American curators considered as suitable for the exhibition, and what the Korean committee members thought about their preference. The American curators' selection sometimes not only surprised Korean members, but also disappointed them, especially in terms of paintings. Director Kim recollected the then situation as follows.

Selection committee could not help considering how American audiences would accept Korean artefacts, so to speak, and how they would respond to ours, when being compared to Chinese and Japanese ones which American museums had in large number. However, many Korean members of the committee did not have any knowledge in that field. As a result, Priest's and Paine's opinions were unilaterally adopted, while the Korean side's opinions were never accepted (Kim 1992: 139).

The two American curators can be said to have had some preoccupation with what Korean art should be. It is natural to think that Priest and Paine, who were curators of prominent American



museums, wanted to find something different in Korean art compared to Chinese and Japanese art. They presumably would have liked to have shown their audiences something new and magnificent. As Director Kim said, they who were specialized in Chinese and Japanese art did not always have the same opinion as their Korean counterparts, even on Korean painters such as Shin Yun-Bok (1758-?) and Kim Hong-Do (1745-?), whom Koreans considered great masters in that field (Kim 1991: 112).

For example, *Gunseondo* or *Taoist hermits* by Kim Hong-Do, which is a magnificent, large-scale painting, was unanimously recommended by the Korean committee, but their American counterparts disagreed.<sup>11</sup> They argued that this painting could give American audiences the wrong impression of Korean painting when it was introduced as a work of the country's most famous painter (Kim 1992: 139). Their concern was that this painting exactly followed the Chinese style, and that figures in the painting looked Chinese. As shown in this example, they preferred artefacts which could show differences from other Asian cultures, namely Chinese culture, and therefore demonstrate the independence of Korean culture. Members of the American selection committee placed priority on the response of American audiences, and are thought to have preferred artefacts which could effectively explain the independence of Korean culture from the universality of East Asian culture. The following comment by Director Kim at that time clearly shows their preference.

Because of the limited number of paintings and a desire to choose Korean works free from Chinese influence, the Selection Committee was restricted to paintings of the Yi dynasty (Kim 1957: 296).

An interesting point here is that the American curators were more active and determined to find things genuinely Korean than the Korean committee members were. However, they were overlooking the fact that the Koreans had considered Chinese civilisation as their important standard, even if they had transformed it and created things in Korean ways. In this context, the American curators were actually losing some objective perspective on East Asian art in terms of the influence and exchange of culture in East Asia. Their preoccupation that Korean culture should have only Korean things can be argued to have been influenced partly by the political situation. The US government wanted to build a healthy nation state in South Korea. And this state also needed to be a culturally independent country in terms of its political independence. The existence of China in the Communist bloc must also have been a considerable factor in this political and cultural context, even if the thinking of the two curators was not directly related to the then concrete political situation.

Noticeably, the curators from the US museums played a considerable role in deciding what the presented Korean culture should look like. As shown above, what to be displayed in the overseas exhibition was up to the American side. Go Hee-Dong, one of the committee members, was sufficiently angry at their 'self-righteousness' and 'arrogation', and complained about this to Director Kim. But Director Kim recollected that 'I myself had no way and nowhere to convey those complaints' (Kim 1992: 140). This process of selection has a quite an important implication. Irrespective of whether they intended to or not, America can be said to have intervened in the formation of the cultural identity of a fledgling nation state, South Korea, because it influenced the process in which Korean identity was being formed through material culture in the early stage of the South Korean nation-state.<sup>12</sup> This influence was significant in that Koreans would get to recognise their own cultural identity filtered through American intellectuals, while the US itself was yet in the course of making an image of national identity for South Korea that the US considered as adequate in the new order.

Thus, the Korean public as well as American audiences got to approach Korean material culture through the filtering of the American curators. Before those items that the American curators finally selected were sent to the US, NMK provided South Koreans with a chance to view the American-selected Korean national treasures by holding a special exhibition entitled *National Treasures Which Will Be Exhibited in the US* in May 1957.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, the Korean public as well as intellectuals got to see them through the filter of the US intellectuals.<sup>14</sup>



*Image 1. President Rhee Syngman at the special exhibition Korean National Treasures Which Will Be Exhibited in the US in May 1957. From NMK Archive.*

### **Masterpieces of Korean Art at the National Gallery of Art**

The first venue of the touring exhibition, *Masterpieces from Korean Art: An Exhibition under the Auspices of the Government of the Republic of Korea*, was the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. The opening ceremony of the exhibition was held on 14 December, 1957 and attracted 1,845 guests, including Walter S. Robertson (1953-1959 in office), Assistant Secretary of the State for Far Eastern Affairs, Earl Warren (1891-1974), Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Garrison Norton, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Yang Yu-Chan (1897-1975), the South Korean Ambassador to the US, and diplomatic delegates in Washington DC (Kim 1991: 124). The presidents and their wives of the two countries gave their names as the honorary patrons of the exhibition,<sup>15</sup> with ambassadors to each country as honorary officers. The speaker of the Korean National Assembly and ministers of education, foreign affairs and finance became patrons of the exhibition from the Korean side, while high officials related to Korean affairs on the American side, such as the Secretary of State, Secretary of the Army, Secretary of the Navy and Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, became patrons of the US side.<sup>16</sup> This perfunctory designation of high ranking government officials as honorary patrons shows that this exhibition had deep diplomatic and political implications for the two countries' governments.

In the preface to the catalogue of the overseas exhibition in the US, Choi Kyu-nam (1898-1992), Minister of Education of the South Korean government, clearly expressed the political and diplomatic intention and meaning behind the exhibition.

By sending this exhibition the Korean people express their gratitude to the American nation, especially to all those known and unknown American friends who fought

with us against the communist invasion in our common cause: the dignity and freedom of mankind... In the present struggle for the peace of the world, no nations are working together more closely than Korea and the United States. It is our hope that this exhibition may contribute to further understanding and lasting friendship between our two nations (National Gallery of Art et al 1957: 11-2).

As he asserted in this preface, the South Korean government wanted to tell the American government that this exhibition was in return for US assistance in the Korean War. The Korean government was also eager to emphasize that South Korea was the most co-operative country with the US in confronting the Communist bloc. In other words, this exhibition can be said to have been intended as an extension of *realpolitik* between South Korea and the US.

It is also noticeable that the United States Information Agency (USIA) filmed the exhibition at the National Gallery of Art so that it could show this film to the South Korean public (Ministry of Education 1960: 22). The USIA functioned as an essential institution in the transmission of American values and knowledge to South Korea; showing films was a very useful means to that end. It was actually a very effective way to let the Korean public know that the American public appreciated and respected Korean traditional culture.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of this film was not only to instil pride in their culture into the Korean public, but also to raise respect for the US, which was willing to respect the culture of Korea, a war-torn country.



*Image 2. Masterpieces of Korean Art at the National Gallery of Art in December 1957. From NMK Archive*

It seems that many Koreans who attended the banquet related to the opening ceremony of the touring exhibition in New York on 18 January 1958 shared this emotion. Seeing Korean costumes, music and dancing by Korean students at the banquet, Director Kim felt that it seemed like a Korean evening (Kim 1992: 169). Korean participants who were or would become leaders in



Korean society, not only got to take pride in their cultural heritage, but also felt grateful to the US for allowing them to realize that pride (Nye 1990: 31-5). At this overwhelming moment, they were really beginning to recognise that cultural objects could be symbols of national identity. At the same time, the US was being imprinted on the minds of Koreans as a protector of the national identity of a pro-American nation state through this touring exhibition.

In this vein, Yang Yu-Chan, the ambassador to the US, reported the result of the opening of the exhibition to the President Rhee, saying 'I can frankly say that it seems there is a great deal of interest and publicity in this country. They have never seen or realised that such beautiful things existed in Korea.'<sup>18</sup> Yang's comment shows that he was satisfied with the exhibition's diplomatic effect of publicizing Korean culture and Korea itself. In this way, Korea was achieving recognition of its national identity through material culture in the centre of the new world order presided over by the US. Korean satisfaction with this recognition would lead to the US's firm position in the Korean peninsula, culturally and politically.

Venue	Period	Audiences		
		Charged	Free	Total
National Gallery of Art, Washington	14 December 1957 to 12 January 1958 (30 days)	-	43,843	43,843
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	6 February to 3 April 1958 (57 days)	23,840	15,000	38,840
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston	6 May to 15 June 1958 (41 days)	7,250	3,750	11,000
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle	16 July to 17 August 1958 (30 days)	7,891	2,645	10,536
The Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis	19 September to 19 October 1958 (30 days)	2,200	1,100	3,300
California Palace of the Legion of Honour, San Francisco	20 November 1958 to 4 January 1959 (47 days)	-	41,552	41,551
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles	27 January to 1 March 1959 (33 days)	6,960	2,100	9,096
Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu	15 April to 7 June, 1959 (54 days)	8,300	1,300	9,600
Total		56,441	111,290	167,731

*Fig 1. Masterpieces of Korean Art in the US, 1957 to 1959 Source: Ministry of Education, A Report on Exhibitions of Cultural Objects in the U.S.A., Republic of Korea Government, June 1960, pp.21-31.*

### **Narrative of the exhibition: its meaning and limits**

Unlike both governments, which were pursuing the diplomatic meanings of the exhibition, the American museums and press tended to focus on the exhibition itself. Walker emphasized that 'it was a rare opportunity to introduce to the American public the art of Korea with which they have been too little familiar' (National Gallery of Art et al 1957: 13). He added his impression on Korean culture which was being introduced at the National Gallery of Art, as follows,

The art of Korea, although that of one of the oldest and finest cultures of the world, has rarely been seen in the West... Through this important exhibition the American public will be able to discover the diversity and originality that have marked the arts of Korea (National Gallery of Art et al 1957: 13).

His remarks about the exhibition were reflected in almost all the reports of the American newspapers during the 18-month tour of the exhibition. Not surprisingly, the American press focused on individual and distinctive characteristics that distinguished Korean material culture from that of neighbouring cultures, especially Chinese culture. The clear thing is that American

intellectuals and journalists were eager to find unique and distinctive characteristics of Korean culture, even if they were able to point out Chinese influences in Korean culture as much as they could. But the more important thing was that, in the contemporary political and cultural context, they did not want to. The following report by *The New York Times* shows this tendency.

What remains is sufficient to reveal that the art stubbornly maintained individual characteristics. These characteristics distinguish it from the more familiar Chinese and Japanese work with which the Occident has become increasingly acquainted since the end of World War Two. ...The paintings, while relating to Chinese art in the bird and animal themes and such calligraphic examples as the traditional bamboo spray, nevertheless depart in organization and in various characteristics of drawing from any slavish eclecticism (Devree 1958).

Actually, this tone of the press on a culture of the Far East was not unfamiliar to Americans, because they had already experienced the same tone when they had seen the exhibition from Japan in 1953.<sup>19</sup> The same art critic reported on the Japanese exhibition for *The New York Times* as follows: 'While debts to the art of China and to Buddhism are acknowledged, the art of Japan was nevertheless very much its own long before the later wood block prints captured the fancies of the Impressionists and their successors. This art has an amazing personality of its own' (Devree 1953). Thus, the American press was seeking new perspectives on cultures of the Far East.<sup>20</sup> It seems that this trend had to do with the then international situation. It was clear that the US was trying to cultivate friendly countries in the Far East. In this scheme, the US's recognition of each country's national identity through material culture can be said to have been essential and effective.

In the same context, this touring exhibition became a chance to reassure the South Korean government as to the 'national treasure' status of several characteristic artefacts, as so-called international evaluation was thought to have been made of them in the US. Those artefacts included the golden crowns made in the fifth century, two bronze seated Maitreya statues made in the sixth to seventh centuries,<sup>21</sup> and several porcelains made between the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. These items were considered to show the originality and distinctiveness of Korean culture by the US press. This situation gave Korean curators and Koreans considerable pride in their artefacts.<sup>22</sup> Thus those artefacts were truly emerging as part of the distinctive and dignified heritage of an independent nation state, not the local artefacts of a colony of the empire of Japan, as they were considered to be when they were found for the first time. This drastic change occurred just over a decade under the new world order.

On the other hand, this change did not mean that both Korean and American scholars accumulated specified knowledge on Korean material culture. It is the exhibition catalogue of this exhibition, *Masterpieces of Korean Art*, which clearly shows the fundamental limits of both sides' intellectuals. Both sides lacked professional curators and researchers who were trained in specific fields of Korean material culture. This was why Geoffrey St. George Montague Gompertz (1904-1992), a British collector of celadon of the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) delivered a lecture on Korean culture in commemoration of the opening of the exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. Gregory Henderson, who wrote the historical introduction to the catalogue, was a diplomat of the Department of the State, even if director Kim cooperated with him. The catalogue notes were written by Harold P. Stern, who specialised in Japanese painting as curator of the Freer Gallery of Art, with the cooperation of Choi Sunu (1916-1984), a curator of NMK.

The initiative for the writing was taken by the Americans and they did not take the option of translating into English what the Korean side wrote.<sup>23</sup> This means that the US side wanted to reflect their perspective onto the understanding of Korean art, even if they did not have enough knowledge of it. Political relations between the two countries encouraged this situation, and Korean intellectuals themselves did not have systematic knowledge of their own material culture.

For example, even if the members of the National Assembly uniformly appreciated Korean culture, their evaluation of their cultural objects cannot be said to have been based on systematic understanding. Instead, this evaluation was no more than an emotional shout for the recovery of national dignity. Most Korean people, as well as members of the National

Assembly, were hardly educated in their material culture, and so did not have a deep understanding of it. During Japanese colonial rule, all research and teaching of the material culture of Korea was controlled and done by the Japanese. Few were specialised in art history or archaeology.<sup>24</sup> It was just at the very beginning stage of independent research into Korean art history and archaeology that the first overseas exhibition in the US was being prepared. Now this exhibition became a concrete opportunity to recover national dignity by seeking a national identity through material culture.

## Conclusion

*Masterpieces of Korean Art*, the first large scale exhibition of Korean cultural objects, attracted 167,731 visitors in eight American cities over 18 months. Choi Sunu, the future director of NMK from 1974 to 1983, who was a courier for this exhibition, defined it as 'the most grand overseas "sacred festival" executed under the name of our nation', and that it tried to 'demonstrate our continuous achievements in art history that couldn't be second to any other nation and explain the unusual characteristics of our fine art.' He further asserted that the 'outcome of this project couldn't be achieved even by 200 diplomats and has a very important meaning both domestically and internationally' (Choi 1957).

This overseas exhibition in the US was designed to secure a cultural identity for Korea on the world stage, represented by the US, by explaining to US citizens that Korean culture has a particular characteristic and independence from Chinese or Japanese culture. It was in the same context that the South Korean government was trying to secure a place within the world order controlled by the US. The US government knew very well the strategic value of Korea, and needed to maintain a pro-American regime in South Korea. So, it was also very important that the Republic of Korea learnt the cultural norms of the US-led world order and became settled in that. It was in this context that the US helped Korea establish its cultural identity.

This overseas exhibition project was a significant success for the South Korean government, as well as for NMK. This was because they both believed they had a great opportunity to teach Americans about the existence of a nation, the Republic of Korea. Another important aspect was that politicians and museum curators in Korea got to know that the overseas exhibitions could be a very useful means to give publicity to the identity of Korea. Specifically, it was through this overseas exhibition in the US that they realised that cultural objects could be utilized for national interests if they could give some 'national' meanings and values to them.

Nevertheless, there were few American experts on Korean art or on Korean history at that time. In most cases, curators for Japanese art took charge of the overseas tour exhibition. Director Kim even complained about them using Japanese terms regarding Korean ceramics (Kim 1957: 302). Likewise, Korea had only a few academics in art history and archaeology. During Japanese colonial rule, the Japanese almost entirely monopolised those fields, and museums did not employ Koreans with only a few exceptions. NMK pushed forward several research projects, but it was not possible to construct a systematic understanding of material culture of Korea with such a short academic experience of it. South Korean curators thus just sought the interpretation of cultural objects only in terms of a nationalist perspective. However, those efforts were a part of the process of searching for a cultural identity of a nation. It was at this beginning stage that overseas exhibitions in the US were organized.

The first overseas exhibition from 1957 to 1959 was organized in a period in which Korean society sought a direction for its nationalism. At this time, experts on Korean art history and archaeology were rare, and therefore more time and effort were needed for the active creation and translation of cultural objects, based on an ethnic nationalist perspective. At that time, efforts were made to secure an independent foundation for recovering national dignity and seeking a new national identity through material culture. This overseas exhibition project contributed to achieving recognition of the national identity of Korea from the US. It was in this way that Koreans began to learn a modern way of understanding and securing their cultural identity through material culture.

## Notes

\* In this article, the Romanisation system established in 2000 by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Korea has been used for transliterating Korean.

- <sup>1</sup> This overseas exhibition, which opened on 14 December, 1957 at the National Gallery of Art, toured seven more cities, New York (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Boston (Museum of Fine Arts), Seattle (Seattle Art Museum), Minneapolis (The Minneapolis Institute of Art), San Francisco (California Palace of the Legion of Honor), Los Angeles (Los Angeles County Museum) and Honolulu (Honolulu Academy of Arts), until 7 June, 1959, attracting 167,731 people in total. The exhibition contained 193 objects including 18 metalcrafts, 24 sculptures, 35 paintings, 109 porcelains and 7 bricks. Hahn's recent research focuses on the first overseas Korean exhibition in America in 1957. She tries to illuminate the exhibition's role in asserting the Korean national identity through Korean artefacts. However, she does not analyze the exhibition in the context of South Korean-US relations. Also, she does not point out the limits of this exhibition. See Hahn Christine Y., 'Unearthing Origins: The Use of Art, Archaeology, and Exhibitions in Creating Korean National Identity, 1945-1962.' *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 28:2 (2012): 138-70.
- <sup>2</sup> Memorandum from the officer in charge of Korean affairs (Nes) to the Deputy Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs (Parsons), Washington, 12 July, 1956 (The Department of State, *Foreign Relation of the United States 1955-57*, vol.23 Part 2, p.291).
- <sup>3</sup> In the first half of the 1950s, the US constructed an international order in the course of its strong confrontation with the USSR, and had to absorb its aspirations for change and development of East Asian nations in the course of this competition with the USSR (Heo 2008: 326).
- <sup>4</sup> Memo, From P-Walter K. Schwinn, 14 August, 1951, Subject: U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Programs in the Present Situation, p.2 (Heo 2008: 328).
- <sup>5</sup> In the 1950s the United States actively utilized the dissemination of American culture as well as military alliances and economic aid. In this context, the US government strove to spread American institutions and values throughout South Korea in the long term. American public information officers dispatched to South Korea in the 1950s considered themselves as those who were embodying the frontier spirit for civilization and pioneers of a new world order controlled by an American hegemony (Heo 2008: 19-29).
- <sup>6</sup> Offer by Honolulu Academy of Arts to accept the Korean national museums' collections for safekeeping (16 March, 1951), 1950-1954, RG59 (Records of the U.S. Department of State).
- <sup>7</sup> Professor Alfred Salmony, who had worked for Asian Art Museum of Cologne, Germany, gave lectures on Asian art history in New York University after he fled to the US to avoid Nazi persecution. He published the first issue of *Artibus Asiae* with Professor Carl Hentze at University of Gent, Belgium, for whom Kim Chewon had worked as an assistant from 1933 to 1940 (Kim 1992: 54-7).
- <sup>8</sup> Out of these exhibitions, Japan's overseas tour exhibition in America in 1953 was enough to draw special attention from Korean political leaders. The South Korean government utilized this exhibition to persuade the National Assembly into consenting to the first overseas Korean exhibition in America.
- <sup>9</sup> 'This exhibition, held jointly by the Cultural Properties Protection Commission of Japan and the M.H.de Young Memorial Museum of San Francisco, was brought over at very short notice by the renowned Dr Harada Jiro and a staff of experts from the National Museum in Tokyo. In spite of its hasty assembly it contains objects on loan from 22 Buddhist temples, ten museums, five Shinto shrines, and 43 private collectors, in all some 178 objects covering



a wide range of Japanese art.' See 'Japanese Art, Peace Exhibition at San Francisco,' *The Manchester Guardian* (24 October, 1951).

- <sup>10</sup> All members of the ruling party, who spoke before the vote, consented to the motion. 79 out of the 144 members who were present voted for this motion; 33 members against it (National Assembly, 25 April 1955: 11).
- <sup>11</sup> This painting was newly designated as national treasure no. 139 by the government on 21 December, 1971.
- <sup>12</sup> In 1960, many artefacts displayed in this exhibition were designated as 'national treasures' by the government after returning from the touring exhibition.
- <sup>13</sup> This exhibition, which attracted an audience of 51,092 from 10 May to 21 May, was demanded by members of the National Assembly in the course of the examination of the motion by the government in May 1955. They contended that South Koreans should view the exhibition before it went overseas, criticizing the fact that NMK had not yet opened permanent galleries before that time. The tone of a popular newspaper regarding this exhibition project shows that public opinion was being influenced by the exhibition in Seoul. *Donga ilbo*, which fiercely objected to the government's exhibition plan ('Do not carry out the national treasures', *Dong-a ilbo*, 4 December, 1954). Interestingly, this newspaper changed its position as the exhibition was held. It even expressed a sense of frustration, saying this exhibition should have had more artefacts to display ('National essences to be displayed in foreign country,' *Dong-a ilbo*, 20 May, 1957).
- <sup>14</sup> In terms of this overseas exhibition, NMK published its first catalogue, titled *An Illustrated Guide to National Treasures*, to include those 193 items in the US in December 1957.
- <sup>15</sup> The Honourable Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States of America, and Mrs. Eisenhower, His Excellency Syngman Rhee, President of the Republic of Korea, and Mrs. Rhee (National Gallery of Art, *Masterpieces of Korean Art*, 1957, p.7).
- <sup>16</sup> In the beginning of the exhibition catalogue was a long list of names of the patrons.
- <sup>17</sup> In a similar context, the exhibition *Asian Artists in Crystal from Steuben Glass* was also filmed by USIA and shown to the Korean public.
- <sup>18</sup> A letter by the ambassador Yang to the president Rhee, 19 December, 1957 (MOFAS Diplomatic Archives 773.1US, O-0010, 59)
- <sup>19</sup> In 1953, five US museums including the National Gallery of Art held the touring exhibition, *Japanese Painting and Sculpture*.
- <sup>20</sup> A report by a British newspaper summarized this point very clearly as follows, 'Time is now ripe for a more comprehensive view of the whole range of Japanese art – to fit it into the complicated pattern of Far Eastern culture, to accept its borrowings as influences rather than slavish imitation, and to recognise its individual contribution.' *The Manchester Guardian*, 24 October, 1951.
- <sup>21</sup> The two statues were designated as National treasure no. 78 and no. 83 each on 20 December, 1962, which was immediately after their return from the touring exhibition in Western Europe (1961-1962).
- <sup>22</sup> The American press reported, 'The early gold work in the elaborate three crowns is unique' (*The New York Times*, 7 February, 1958), 'Probably the most spectacular among the exhibition is the display of three jewelled gold crowns of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.' (*The Evening Star*, 15 December, 1957).

- <sup>23</sup> Director Kim explained why the Korean side did not write the exhibition notes, saying that there was no Korean curator who could do that in English (Kim 1991: 118).
- <sup>24</sup> After Japan's defeat in 1945, a member of the Japanese staff of the Government-General museum, Arimitsu Kyoichi, stayed in South Korea in order to turn over his duties to the new Korean staff members of NMK by an order from the US Army Military Government in Korea. An archaeologist, he even participated in an excavation of an ancient tomb and actually directed the excavation as there was no Korean expert in the field.

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