THE ARTS OF KOREA
Centuries of artistic endeavor in the Korean peninsula have resulted in a vast legacy of rich symbolism and diverse expression. Korea’s location in northeast Asia has played a pivotal role in shaping Korea’s unique cultural heritage as well as in the transmission of East Asian art and culture. Acting as a conduit between China and Japan in religion, philosophy, technology and art, Korea provided significant cultural links in the larger region. The nation’s artistic tradition can be traced back to the Neolithic period (c. 6,000 – 1,000 BCE); Pacific Asia Museum’s collection covers over two thousand years of Korean artistic production from the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE – 676 CE) until today. These objects attest to the broad and rich history of art and culture in Korea.

Religion has exerted a profound influence on the lives and arts of Koreans. The indigenous belief system, now referred to as shamanism, has facilitated the production of ritual and burial-related objects since the prehistoric period. Confucianism and Buddhism, introduced from China in the Three Kingdoms period, were instrumental in the development of extraordinary ceramics, sculptures, textiles and paintings among other materials. Such artistic heritage continues to inform and inspire Korean artists today. The Arts of Korea looks at how Korean artistic traditions remain pertinent by highlighting contemporary work that directly references traditional forms and materials. In addition, the exhibition illustrates how the three religions, shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism, are embodied in the objects and explores their aesthetic, stylistic and functional aspects, providing insights into the culture of Korea.

SHAMANISM
Shamanism, moosok or mookyo [무속/무교] in Korean, is the oldest and only indigenous belief system in the Korean peninsula. Numerous deities and spirits are worshipped in this tradition, but no written body of scripture codified this ancient religion. According to this tradition, the world is inhabited by spirits, and shamans (or moodang) are essential as mediators between spirits and humans. They are usually women and perform the role of guiding people in rites (or gut, pronounced ‘goot’) in accordance with practices transmitted through oral tradition. Most shamanistic rituals are

Stem Cup
Silla Dynasty (57 BCE – 676 CE), 5th – 6th century
Stoneware
Gift of Winton and Forsyth Boyd
1999.13.15
performed to appease various deities or the spirits of the dead in order to avoid undesirable outcomes such as illness or sudden deaths of family members. Therefore, rituals for the deceased have been given a great importance, and often times elaborate rituals were prepared for funerary services. Various tomb goods such as pottery, jewelry and clothing were buried with the deceased, depending on their status. Animal sacrifices were also made for the propitiation and sending off of the spirit to the next world, as well as for the prosperity of the remaining family members. Based on archeological findings of pottery from the Three Kingdoms period bearing traces of food, stem cups are thought to have been buried in tombs after they were used in shamanistic burial rites to hold wine or food for the deceased.

In Korean shamanism it is understood that life is cyclical—a continuous sequence of past, present and future—which is echoed in later Buddhist teachings as well. When Buddhism was first introduced to Korea, it intermingled with this indigenous religion based on common beliefs. When Confucianism was declared the state religion of the Joseon dynasty (1392 – 1910 CE), shamanism was disparaged. It was continuously suppressed, viewed as an obstacle to the nation’s modernization until very recently. However, even those who regard shamanism as outmoded acknowledge that shamanistic rituals are a valuable repository of Korean folk art, carrying forward centuries of traditional costumes, dance, music and chanting. One of the most prominent of the rituals preserved today is masked drama. *Mask of the Depraved Monk* was worn for *Hahoe Ritual Masked Dance Drama* (Important Intangible Cultural Property of Korea*) which is performed after an annual ritual to a village goddess for the health and longevity of the villagers. The repression of shamanism did not end this tradition but had the effect of driving it underground at certain points. It became a subconscious basis of Korean religious and cultural experience, finding its followers among the general public as well as the elite class. During periods of uncertainty in social, economic and political spheres, people have relied on this native religion and on shamans to find immediate answers and spiritual security. The idea that a religion would protect the state or individuals against enemies and conflicts often helped

*In 1962 the Korean government enacted the Cultural Property Protection Law to safeguard the integrity of the cultural traditions of Korea. Under this law, certain components of cultural heritage, such as drama, music, dance and craftsmanship carrying great historic, artistic or academic values, were declared “Important Intangible Cultural Properties of Korea,” and the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea provides resources for research, conservation and preservation of such cultural assets.
Mask of the Depraved Monk
20th century
Alder wood, lacquer, mulberry paper, cotton
Gift of Richard and Adoree Suran
2003.47.1
Koreans accept and engage with shamanism. This Korean attitude towards religion and its societal role also facilitated the acceptance of Buddhism when it was first introduced at a time of great uncertainty and political unrest in the Three Kingdoms period.

**BUDDHISM**

Buddhism, or *bulgyo* (불교), reached the Korean peninsula via China in 372, after originating in India. Korean monks and artisans soon made major contributions to the transmission of Buddhism further east, especially to the development of Buddhist art and culture in Japan. The sixth century was an early period in the development of Korean Buddhism, as the Goguryeo (37 BCE – 668 CE), Baekje (18 BCE – 660 CE) and Silla (57 BCE – 676 CE) kingdoms officially adopted the religion. From this period onward Buddhism triggered the production of much Korean art, which greatly impacted the culture. Koreans adapted this foreign religion to their own spiritual milieu, synthesizing various Buddhist doctrines with the extant shamanistic tradition. This is still felt in many aspects of Korean Buddhism. For instance, one can find temples dedicated to shamanistic deities within many Korean Buddhist temple complexes. When it first arrived from China, Buddhism carried with it advanced systems in theology, architectural engineering and artistic craftsmanship. These advancements helped it gain acceptance from the royal court in the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla (676 – 918 CE) periods. Royal patronage was finally solidified in the Goryeo dynasty (918 – 1392 CE) when its founder, King Taejo (r. 918 – 943 CE), stated on his deathbed that Buddhism and Buddhist temples were to be maintained and protected as the first of the Ten Decrees (*hunyo shipjo*). This exemplifies one of the distinct characteristics of Korean Buddhism known as *hogook bulgyo* meaning ‘Buddhism as the guardian of the nation,’ an idea which developed in the latter part of the Three Kingdoms period. With the encouragement of the founding monarch, Buddhism marked a golden age during the Goryeo period as the official religion, resulting in the flourishing of Buddhist temples and arts including painting, sculpture, ceramics and printing. Reflecting its royal patronage, Buddhist art at this time often featured sophisticated craftsmanship and refined elegance.
Celadon or green-glazed stoneware from the period embodies these qualities. Goryeo potters absorbed Chinese techniques and surpassed their example by further refining the technique of slip inlay known as sanggam. Such Goryeo celadon with sanggam was produced in the service of Buddhist rituals, including the tea ceremony for use in temples, the royal court and the households of the aristocracy.

After overthrowing the Goryeo dynasty in a military coup in 1392, the kings of the Joseon dynasty repressed Buddhism, declaring Confucianism the state religion. This approach served to keep the previous ruling class, the major patrons of Buddhism, under rigid control. Royal consorts and ladies in waiting in the Joseon period remained steady in their support of Buddhism even as it entered a period of decline. Buddhism eventually regained popular support after monks played a crucial role in defeating the Japanese invasions of 1592 – 1598. In contrast to the Goryeo period’s royal and aristocratic patronage, Buddhism became the religion of the masses in the late Joseon period, and this shift resulted in stylistic changes in the arts, especially paintings. They began to be executed with extensive use of red and green without the gold or lapis lazuli of the previous era; monk painters often chose more affordable materials such as paper, cotton or hemp over silk; and depicted robes show simpler linear treatment with little decoration on the textiles. These changes in visual art can also be linked to the influence of Confucian ideology which put great importance on austerity and humility. As can be seen in the art, the supplanting of Buddhism by Confucianism echoed beyond the religious and governmental arenas and made impacts on culture as well.

**CONFUCIANISM**

It is unclear when Confucianism, or yugyo, was first introduced to the Korean peninsula, but there is consensus that it probably arrived with the transmission of the Chinese writing system around the second century BCE. Written records indicate that King Sosurim (r. 371 – 384 CE) of Goguryeo established the taehak (‘Great School’ or Imperial Academy) for the education of his and other upper class children in 372. Private institutions called kyungdang (literally ‘light house’) for the instruction of commoners...
in Confucian philosophy and archery soon followed. Confucianism then emerged as a foundation for ideals in governance and education. King Gwangjong (r. 925 – 975 CE) of the Goryeo period formed the imperial examination system, based on the Chinese model, to select the best candidates for the nation’s bureaucracy. However, it wasn’t until the Joseon dynasty that Confucianist ideals were firmly established as the guiding principles behind codes of personal conduct and social order as well as governmental and educational systems. The Joseon monarch enforced this complete shift of national ideology to Confucianism in order to contain the primarily Buddhist ruling class of the Goryeo dynasty.

The upper class literati (or *yangban*), who were educated through Confucianist philosophies, constituted the bureaucracy of Joseon government and became new patrons of the arts. This elite class enjoyed landscape painting, illustrating Chinese scenery with literary associations, in order to connect themselves with the Chinese Confucian elite. The Joseon literati were also fervent practitioners of calligraphy and ink painting as a way to achieve self-discipline and deepen their knowledge; many became accomplished artists. They mostly painted subjects such as birds-and-flowers, in particular plum, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo known as the ‘Four Gentlemen’ (or *sagunja*). These four subjects, symbolizing tenacity, integrity, perseverance and longevity, were regarded as the qualities that a Confucian scholar should embody, making them appropriate subjects for the Confucian literati’s artistic practice. A unique phenomenon in painting during the Joseon era is the birth of the genre known as ‘books and things’ (or *chekkeori*), inspired by the Confucian value of education. *Chekkeori* were popular in the late Joseon period as symbols of scholarly achievement for the literati and as inspirational examples towards higher education for the general public.

A school of Confucianism that prospered in Joseon society was Neo-Confucianism, known as *seongrihak* in Korean. Its ideas were mainly compiled by the Chinese philosopher Zhu Xi (known as Joo Hui in Korea, 1130 – 1200 CE) who attempted to provide a more systematic philosophy explaining the origins of the universe by employing metaphysics. This insertion of metaphysics eventually endowed a religious aspect to the ethical system of Confucianism.
A prolific writer, Zhu systematically laid out his thinking in books, and one of his most prominent writings, *Book of Rites* (or *Yegi*), provided detailed and strict rules on how to conduct family ceremonies such as weddings, funerals and ancestor worship. Conducting a proper ritual to honor ancestors was a primary duty, and such ceremonial worship was performed with great devotion, guided by the rules set forth by the *Book of Rites*. Central to this ancestral worship were appropriate ritual dress and objects such as vessels and tablets. Instead of luxurious celadons with elaborate *sanggam* decoration that had been produced in the previous era, the Joseon literati preferred plain white porcelain that reflected the purist aesthetics and the pragmatism associated with Neo-Confucian ideology. To meet this new demand, Bunwon, a group of official kilns in Gwangju near Seoul, produced white porcelains for ancestral rituals carried out by the royal court, the elite classes and the general public in varying qualities. Gwangju is still the epicenter of Korean ceramic production, and this long-standing tradition, along with those of painting, sculpture and textiles, has become an undercurrent that continues to shape and influence much of the dialogue in contemporary Korean art.
KOREAN ART TODAY

The artistic heritage of Korea exerts an unparalleled influence on contemporary Korean artists. They have the advantage of a centuries-long tradition which serves as a valued resource to refer back to. At the same time, they face a multitude of unique challenges. The artistic legacy is both a rich reservoir and a burden that they have to surpass. Political turmoil in the twentieth century often restricted artists’ freedom of expression which taxed both their creativity and productivity. Finally, the influx of Western art practices and theories, which often contradict traditional Korean practices and art education, opened up a new discourse not only about their art but also about their identities and ethnicity in this increasingly connected world. In working to resolve these issues through their art, some artists focus on defining their identity as uniquely Korean while others take positions as global citizens across cultures and generations. Whether their artistic practice centers on their ‘Koreanness’ or ‘globalness,’ their relentless effort to explore, re-interpret, embrace and challenge the distinctive Korean tradition and disparate Western art theories has yielded meaningful and exciting art for decades. Some of their works clearly demonstrate how contemporary artists connect to traditional forms and materials, which provides a historic continuity with previous generations of Korean artists.

By looking at these contemporary works alongside earlier objects created in various religious contexts, The Arts of Korea aims to shed new light on the intellectual and artistic endeavors of Korean artists as well as to offer wider perspective on the great diversity of Korean art and culture.
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(cover) CHOI Seok-hwan (1808 – ?)
Grapevine (detail)
Joseon Dynasty (1392 – 1910), late 19th century
Ink on paper
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