

# Korean Art at the Spencer Museum of Art

## Introduction

Korean art has been a part of the Spencer Museum of Art (SMA) since its founding in 1917 when Kansas City philanthropist Sallie Casey Thayer (1856–1925) donated over 7,500 artworks to the University of Kansas (KU). Thayer’s gift arrived in Lawrence, Kansas in two large freight rail cars and from the outset was intended as a tribute to her late husband William Bridges Thayer (1852–1907), who had amassed his fortune as a partner of the Emery, Bird, Thayer Dry Goods Company in Kansas City, Missouri. Among the artwork in the Thayer donation were seventy-one objects from Korea that included artifacts from the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668 CE), celadon and bronze mirrors dating to the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), and Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) textiles, ceramics, and painting. The centennial of this legacy gift to KU was celebrated in the 2017 exhibition *Civic Leader and Art Collector: Sallie Casey Thayer and an Art Museum for KU*. Exhibition curator Celka Straughn (2020, 14)<sup>1</sup> explains Thayer’s underlying motivation for creating her collection: “Thayer sought to create a public institution that would serve as a source for civic identity, industry and learning for many generations to come.”

The first section of this essay, “A Beginning: The Thayer Collection of Korean Art,” will introduce key objects from the Thayer bequest and examine how early twentieth-century collecting practices in the United States informed and shaped the development of Thayer’s collecting practices. By investigating Thayer’s engagement with newly emerging global circuits of trade that benefited from illegal archaeology and looting, this analysis will demonstrate the colonial

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1 In 1976, Mrs. Helen Foresman Spencer, a Kansas City collector and patron of the arts, made a gift of \$4.6 million to fund the construction of a new museum. The resulting building, which opened in 1978, houses the Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art, the Kress Foundation Department of Art History, and the Murphy Library of Art and Architecture. Kansas City architect Robert E. Jenks, a 1926 KU graduate designed the neo-classical structure, built from Indiana limestone.

origins of the Spencer's founding collection of Korean art. Throughout this discussion of the Thayer collection, the essay will also highlight how additions to the collection have built upon and expanded the Thayer collection of historical Korean art. The second part of the essay "New Directions" considers how new collecting priorities have shifted to embrace priorities in more recent Korean art and culture. This section examines how the confluence of *minhwa* or Korean folk art traditions, Colonial-period artwork created during the Japanese Imperial occupation of Korea (1910–1945), and Korean contemporary art made during the 21<sup>st</sup> century reveal largely untold aspects of Korea's recent history and its relationship with the past.

### A Beginning: The Thayer Collection of Korean Art

In 1917, after several decades devoted to collecting, Sallie Casey Thayer donated her personal collection to the University of Kansas (Shankel 1976). Following the death of her husband in 1907, "Thayer redoubled her efforts to build an art collection for the purpose of donating it to a new museum of fine arts she planned to help establish in the Midwest" (Hansen 2020, 50). As part of Thayer's ambitious plan, she relocated to Chicago, Illinois in 1908. At the time, Chicago was a progressive, forward thinking metropolis with a thriving art scene and Thayer concentrated her efforts on collecting Asian art, an interest reflected in other contemporaries like Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924) and Mary A. Ainsworth (1867–1950). Initially, Thayer modeled her collection on prominent gifts to the Art Institute of Chicago like that of Samuel M. (1830–1914) and Mathilda Pinkham Crosby Nickerson (1837–1912), who donated 1,300 Chinese and Japanese "curios" as well as an assortment of watercolors and oil paintings by American and European artists to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1900 (Hansen 2020). From 1908 to 1911 Thayer was an active participant in the lively art scene of Chicago, immersing herself in museums, galleries, and antique stores and frequently attending lectures and gatherings. "Through her participation in these art-related activities in one of the most vibrant cultural centers in the Midwest," explains art historian Kristan Hansen (2020, 50), "Thayer forged a social network of curators, dealers, educators, and collectors whose expertise shaped the formation of her collection." While Thayer made her initial bequest in 1917, it was not until 1929, one year after her death, that

her dream of an art museum was realized (Moodie 1929).

Thayer acquired the majority of her Korean art collection primarily from two prominent commercial galleries in Chicago: H. Deakin Gallery and the New Gallery of the Chicago Academy of Fine Art. The H. Deakin gallery was billed as a "Collection of Japanese Curios, etc." and operated on the second floor of the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue, which was touted as a center of artistic and literary interest in Chicago at the time. Henry Deakin and his son Earl had been art dealers in Yokohama, Japan and, as reported in the *American Art News*, had an extensive collection of Chinese and Japanese porcelains, bronzes, carvings, prints, enamels, and brocades ("Obituary" 1908, 5). Judson Metzgar, a prominent collector of Japanese Edo-period prints recalls the Deakin gallery:

One of these shops was Deakin's on the street floor of the Fine Arts Building, where many of the Chicago collectors had been buying for some time. There, and later at the Ito shop, I frequently met all of them, Mr. Gookin, Dr. Webster, and Clarence Buckingham, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mrs. Chauncey Blair, and Mrs. W. B. Thayer of Kansas City, all of whom were important in early American print collecting. (Metzgar 1941, 30)

During a period of eighteen months, Thayer visited Deakin an estimated fifty times and purchased hundreds of art works. Historian Carol Shankel (1976, 30) observes that "[Thayer] periodically wrote checks to the shop [Deakin] for five thousand or two thousand or perhaps a few hundred dollars, but her bill was not paid in full until Earl Deakin closed the account on July 1, 1910. By then, it appeared that Mrs. Thayer had bought not a small portion of the extensive collection." On January 2, 1909, Thayer purchased her first Korean artworks, which were three "Corean bowl[s]." Her last purchase of Korea ceramics from Deakins was for "13 pieces of Corean pottery" on January 22, 1910 (SMA archive, AR 02.01.05). A survey of receipts in the SMA archive reveals that Thayer focused her efforts and resources during her frequent buying trips to Deakin developing to what she had as a collection of East Asian art that encompasses a wide range of materials and periods, of which Korean art and artifacts were essential.

The second gallery that was central to the development of Thayer's Korean collection was the New Gallery of the Chicago Academy of Fine Art. Founded

by Carl N. Werntz (1874–1944) in 1902, New Gallery was located on the eighth floor of the Willoughby Building. Thayer often visited the New Gallery and developed an amenable relationship with its curator, Adelaide S. Hall (b. 1857). Hall was a bold curator, who often made compelling juxtapositions. In one display she exhibited “old Japanese prints, brocades, stencils and bronzes brought from the Flowery Kingdom [China]” together with Korean porcelains, a choice that art historian Kristan Hansen (2020, 61) explains as a “wide-ranging approach to displaying art that likely informed Thayer’s aesthetic preference for eclecticism.” While receipts in the SMA archives document Thayer’s numerous purchases, unfortunately, they lack specifics details about each object purchased, therefore making identification of objects difficult. For example, an undated receipt from the New Gallery merely records that Thayer bought “a large collection of Korean pottery” (SMA archive, AR 02.10.07). Thayer often bought art in large quantities and was consequently offered substantial discounts by galleries. While availability in Chicago’s commercial art market directed much of Thayer’s approach to collecting Korean art, as part of her ambition to establish an art museum, she intentionally acquired representative objects that would convey the historical development of Korean art from antiquity to the more recent historical times.

### *Early Korea*

The earliest material associated with Korea acquired by Thayer while in Chicago are three small comma-shaped beads made from light brown quartz (1928.2473, 1928.3061, and 1928.3068). When people from the Korean peninsula began to arrive in the Japanese archipelago, they brought new metal technologies like bronze casting as well as cultural features that included new symbols of political authority such as these comma-shaped jewels (Rhee, Aikens, and Barnes 2021). Referred to as *gogok* in Korean but also known as *magatama* in Japanese, these symbols of prestige appear in tombs as early as the Mumun period (1500–300 BCE) and remained in use through the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC–668 CE). These three small adornments raise more questions than answers. It is unclear how Thayer acquired these objects, or if they were sold to her as examples from Korea or Japan. The lack of provenance and archaeological context make it difficult to assign an exact geographic or temporal origin of these three comma-shaped quartz jewels, or even to ascertain

their authenticity.

Thayer also actively acquired examples of Three Kingdoms-period mortuary vessels as seen in three examples of pedestal dishes introduced below. A fully intact *Pedestal Dish with Cover* (Figure 1, 1928.0440.a,b) decorated with eight square perforation on a flared pedestal was created on a potter’s lathe during the Silla kingdom (roughly 400–500 CE).<sup>2</sup> Adorned with traces of incidental ash glaze, the uniform circular markings on this stoneware vessel are consistent with the fast-spinning wheel technology used throughout the Korean peninsula at this time. Another pedestal dish dating to the Silla period is slightly larger and has signs of breakage and repair on the foot (1928.0446.a,b). With two tiers of rectangular perforation on the elongated stem, the light ochre color of the body and etched diamond shaped motifs on the lid are distinguishing characteristics of this mounted dish that are similar to vessels excavated in 1938 at the so-called “tomb of husband and wife” (Bubuchong) in Yangsan (Tokyo National Museum 2004, 51). A small shallow *Pedestal Bowl* (1928.0441.a,b) that sags slightly to one side is similar to excavated vessels associated with the Gaya Federation.<sup>3</sup> Early museum inventories from the 1930s listed these objects as “tomb pottery,” a classification that imparted antiquity and importance to these objects (Griffing 1968).

### *Goryeo Dynasty Celadons*

Thayer was not only interested in Korean artifacts of the Three Kingdoms. The majority of her collecting efforts were devoted to celadons of the Goryeo dynasty. As early as 1909, in a newspaper article Thayer claimed that her growing collection of Korean celadons originated from the “imperial palace



**Figure 1.** *Pedestal Bowl with Cover*, 400–500, Silla dynasty (57 BCE–CE 935), stoneware, ash, glaze, 19.1 x 16.1 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 1928.0440.a,b

<sup>2</sup> For comparison, see National Museum of Korea, accession number, Jeung 10.

<sup>3</sup> For comparison, see National Museum of Korea, accession number, Jeung 127.

Sang Do [Songdo],” the capital city of Goryeo (present day Gaeseong in North Korea) (*Kansas City Star*, April 18, 1909). In 1909, a year after her arrival in Chicago, the Art Institute mounted an exhibition of her collection (Hanson 2020, 62). Her “Collection of Oriental Art” was displayed in room 46 near the Nickerson collection at the Art Institute of Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago, 1909, 37). Although many of the stories regarding Thayer’s collection are questionable, her attribution to the Goryeo capital Songdo appears credible. As early as the 1880s, celadons illegally excavated from tombs in and around Songdo had begun to appear on the open market (Carles 1888). By the 1890s, interest in Goryeo celadons had begun to grow among European and American collectors, becoming what art historian Charlotte Horlyck describes as “desirable commodities” (Horlyck 2013, 467). The isolation of Korea and its designation as the so-called “Hermit Kingdom” imparted a degree of mystery and desirability to its cultural artifacts, as if they had emerged from a land where “time stood still and where past customs and ways of life had been preserved for centuries” (Horlyck 2013, 475). Korea artifacts provided a glimpse into the deep recesses of antiquity, a view that was accentuated by the allure of Goryeo celadons. Horlyck (2013, 480) goes on to explain that “celadon came to represent a lost art that could not be revived...The antiquarian merits of the ware were reinforced through a romanticized image of a once-glorious kingdom that perished along with its art, much like Atlantis.”

Many of the Thayer celadon wares at the Spencer are mended shards, discolored from old glue and extended exposure to soil, or reworked with painted plaster. A large vase dating to the late thirteenth century (Figure 2, 1928.0411, H: 29.8 cm, D: 21.2 cm) demonstrates the archaeological origin of the Thayer celadon collection. The neck and base are encircled with bands of overlapping lotus petals, while the two flat sides of this sizeable vase are decorated with symmetrically arranged lotuses complemented by sprays of blossoming reeds made from *sanggam* inlay. While Chinese potters developed this inlay technique, Korean



**Figure 2.** *Vase with Lotus Flowers*, late 1200s–1300s, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), stoneware, celadon glaze, *sanggam* inlay, 29.9 x 21 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 1928.0411

potters drew on metalworking and lacquer-ware skills to further develop it. Inlay became a prominent decorating technique for celadon wares only after a glaze of sufficient clarity was developed in the first half of the eleventh century. The time-consuming process begins with incising the chosen motif into the leather-hard clay body. The incision is then filled with white and black slip. The decorated piece is fired first at a low temperature, covered with a celadon glaze, and fired a second time at high temperature (Gompertz 1968). This SMA vase is a good example of clearly visible designs under a thin, transparent glaze. The design and size of the *vase with lotus flowers* is comparable to a vessel from the collection of Japanese diplomat Hayashi Gonsuke (1860–1939).<sup>4</sup> The rim of the Spencer vase has been restored with plaster painted to match the color of the body. Museum records indicate that the vase entered the SMA collection already restored, thus Thayer most likely purchased it already fully restored. A further indication that the vase had once been buried and may have come from a mortuary site is the grayish, frosted quality of the glaze (Griffing 1968).

In a 1910 *Kansas City Times* (published from 1867 to 1990) article about Thayer’s plans for a proposed museum in Kansas City, the article mentions her “fine collection of Korean pottery” on loan to Art Institute of Chicago which had received high praise from the Metropolitan Museum’s second director Caspar Purdon Clarke (1846–1911) (*Kansas City Times*, April 2, 1910). Among the many pieces in Thayer’s collection that may have caught Clarke’s eye are a cup (Figure 3, 1928.0623) and stand (Figure 4, 1928.0622). These rare surviving examples of Goryeo white ware are the most important Asian ceramic works in the Spencer collection. The cup and stand were most likely purchased at the New Gallery in Chicago as noted on a receipt that records the acquisition of “White Korean Pottery” (SMA archive, AR 02.10.07). Goryeo white ware was produced in Korea at the same time as celadon, but only about one hundred examples survive (Choi-Bae 1984). The interior of the cup is decorated with delicately incised designs of chrysanthemum flowers while the rim is adorned with an ornamental patterns of winding S-forms known in China as “cloud and thunder patterns” (*yunwen* and *leiwen*), which is similar to the “key fret” pattern also found in ancient Greece. Unlike celadon, Goryeo white ware was never made in large quantities (Itō 2000, 79). Its rarity has prevented wide

<sup>4</sup> See vol. 8 of *Chōsen koseki zūfu*, object number 3628.



**Figure 3.** *Cup*, early 1100s, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), stoneware, glaze, 4.4 x 8/2 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 1928.0623



**Figure 4.** *Cup Stand*, early 1100s, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), stoneware, glaze, 3.2 x 12.2 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 1928.0622

recognition of its beauty and individuality. The beautifully rounded shape of the cup and extremely thin body show the prowess of Goryeo potters. Such a thin body is only possible in porcelain ware, which is made of fine-grain white clay (Kang 1986, 171). The Spencer cup is similar to a white porcelain cup in the Ewha Womans University Museum collection (Zauhō Kankōkai 1978, 151). However, the associated stand of the Ewha cup differs significantly. *Celadon Cup and Stand Covered in Underglaze Copper-Red Slip* (accession number Tok 1064) in the National Museum of Korea collection is very similar in shape as the SMA cup and stand. Former director of the National Museum of Korea, Chōng Sun'u remarks that stand with hollowed openings in the center is a characteristic of Korean ceramics prior to the twelfth century (Choe 1983, 219). A celadon cup in the National Museum of Korea (accession number Dongwon 1185) is similar in shape and design as the white ware cups, which attests to the use of shared motifs and common techniques in the production of both celadon and white ware.

After leaving Chicago, Thayer shifted her collecting of Korean art away from ceramics, which may have been due to a decline in affordable objects on the market as evidenced in 1915 letter written from the Miyako Hotel in Kyoto, Japan. In the letter by Edward Newell (d. 1958), a buyer for the Oriental Antiques Department of Gump's San Francisco (Wilson 1965), he reports that he "has just had the good fortune to procure from a Japanese collector a most remarkable collection of old Korean tomb pottery. This gentleman has been a resident of Korea for twenty years and having been a lifelong student of primitive potteries has formed his collection with rare discrimination" (SMA

archive, AR 02.02.05, 1915). The letter goes on to state that "for the last two years the Japanese government has prohibited the despoiling of the old tombs so nothing further can be procured in Korea. This collection shows a great variety of shapes and glazes and is as nearly representative of the old ceramic art of Korea as is possible to find" (SMA archive, AR 02.02.05, 1915). While it is uncertain if Thayer acted on this opportunity, little evidence suggests that she continued to actively collect Korean celadon or Three Kingdoms period pottery with as much interest as when she lived in Chicago in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The letter also provides insight into the regulation of Korean archaeology by the occupying forces of Japan, who, rather than allowing Korean objects to filter onto the international antiquities trade, began using Korean archaeological material to further legitimize their colonial subjugation.

### *Joseon Dynasty Art*

In addition to Goryeo celadons, Thayer also collected Korean art from Joseon dynasty. Her attention to Joseon ceramics was largely limited to *buncheong*, a variety of wares made during the early Joseon dynasty in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Though mainly mass-produced for commoners as seen in these unadorned examples from the SMA collection (1928.0432 and 1928.0434), *buncheong* was also appreciated by the ruling class (Gompertz 1968). In the late fifteenth century, Japanese tea connoisseurs began to admire the simple and coarse qualities of this ware, as evidenced by the *kintsugi* repair on a *conical bowl* (Figure 5, 1928.0400), which was once in a Japanese collection (Lee 2014). A large bowl with stamped decoration (1928.0436) was also broken and mended but with glue rather than gold and lacquer, suggesting that it may have come from an archaeological



**Figure 5.** *Conical Bowl*, 1500s, Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), stoneware, slip, glaze, gold lacquer, 5.1 x 17.2 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 1928.0400

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Goryeo celadon, Thayer also collected Goryeo bronze mirrors (see 1928.024, 1928.0426, 1928.0427).

context. Building on these historical examples of *buncheong*, the SMA acquired a large contemporary *Square Vase* (2008.0038) by Choi Sung-jae (b. 1962).<sup>6</sup> Choi uses an assortment of instruments, from reeds to his fingers, to create powerfully brushed imagery of reeds and ducks on the vase. With a dearth in Joseon ceramics, in the past decade, the SMA has added examples of *baekja* white ware and blue-and-white (see *Water Dropper*, 2017.0112, and *Dragon Jar*, PG2017.004) ceramics to the collection. A *Lidded Bowl on Stand with Cintāmani Handle* (Figure 6, 2014.0053.a,b) embodies the frugal pragmatism and simple beauty of *baekja*



**Figure 6.** *Lidded Bowl on Stand with Cintāmani Handle*, 1500s, Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), stoneware, white glaze, 20 x 17.5 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Art Acquisition Fund, 2014.0053.a,b

white ware. Although used in ancestor worship, the vessel incorporates aspects from Buddhism as seen in the *cintāmani* or “wish-fulfilling jewel” that forms the handle on the lidded bowl. A nineteenth-century moon jar (PG2017.002), which was collected in twentieth-century Korea by a missionary family, is a late but iconic example of this highly-prized form in Korean ceramic history.

In addition to sparse holdings in Joseon period ceramics, examples of Korean Buddhist art are also lacking in the Thayer collection.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, the SMA acquired a Joseon-era sculpture of a *nahan* (Figure 7, 2012.0092) or holy man of Buddhism who has attained freedom from ignorance and suffering. First purchased in Korea in 1968, the sculpture was exported to Omaha, Nebraska, United States in 1969. In 2015, an MRI scan was conducted on the sculpture at the University of Kansas Hospital in order to learn more about the remnants of paper that were still intact in a small head cavity. While the scans revealed

a general outline of the papers, we can only speculate that they may be sutra fragments placed inside the sculpture when it was made.

Originally, this *nahan* would have been part of a large sculptural assemblage consisting of sixteen *nahans*. This group would have been enshrined in a Nahanjeon or “Hall of Arhats,” as part of a larger temple complex. Together, the statues would have flanked a central triad composed of the historic Buddha Śākyamuni, the future Buddha Maitreya, and the past Buddha Dīpankara. An inscription on the base of this sculpture, 右一 *woo li* (right one), indicates that it was positioned as the first sculpture to the immediate left of the central triad. The *hanja* number “two” carved on the base of the sculpture indicates that the sculpture depicts the *nahan* known as Ganakgabeolcha 迦諾迦伐蹉, called Kanakavatsa in Sanskrit. Believed to dwell in Kashmir on the Saffron Hill, Kanakavatsa or “Kanaka the Vasta” is often referred to as the “Happy Arhat,” demonstrated by the smiling face. The SMA sculpture is similar in style to a *nahan* in the Dongguk University Museum collection that bears the number five on the base and most likely belonged to the same set of sculptures. The Dongguk University *nahan* is heavily colored with red and navy blue pigments and may represent Nakula 諾距羅尊者 (Ōtani Daigaku Hakubutsukan 2000, 53; 73). Both sculptures are wearing *kasa* monk robes that date to the sixteenth century.

The beautifully rendered robes on the *nahan* would have intrigued Sallie Casey Thayer, who was an avid collector of textiles as demonstrated by a colorful *Ten Thousand Men’s Canopy* (Figure 8, 0000.1026). Decorated with the hand embroidered names of commoners, this particular canopy was dedicated to Kim Seon-pil (1807–1883), who served as the head magistrate of Uiwon county in Pyeong-an province from the seventh lunar month of 1862 to the last month of 1864. Following the breakout of Hong Gyeong-rae’s rebellion (1811–1812)

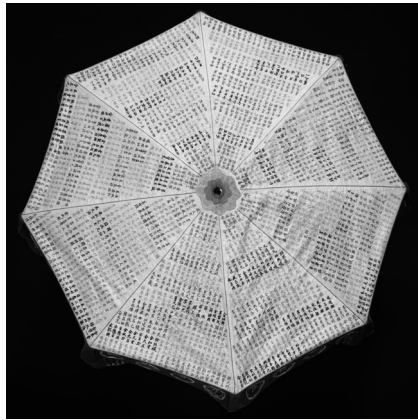


**Figure 7.** *Seated Nahan Ganakgabeolcha*, late 1600s–early 1700s, Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), wood, polychrome, H: 52.07 x W: 32.7 x D: 24.13 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, Museum purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, 2012.0092

<sup>6</sup> The SMA has actively acquired contemporary works of ceramics, e.g., Kim Yik-yung, *covered vessel*, 2004 (2008.0251) and Roe Kyung Jo, *Yeollimun bottle*, 1992 (2015.0043).

<sup>7</sup> In the collection of the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas is fourteenth century *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Korean: Hwaom-gyong; Chinese: Huayan jing; Japanese: Kegon kyō) fascicle 45 hand painted in gold on blue indigo paper.

in Pyeong-an province, in order to prevent future rebellions, only military officials like Kim Seon-pil were appointed to this northwestern border province. This *Ten Thousand Men's Canopy* may represent an effort by the villagers, stigmatized as potential rebels because of Hong's rebellion, to demonstrate their loyalty to the central government (Im-McCormick 2020).



**Figure 8.** *Ten Thousand Men's Canopy*, 1885, Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), silk, embroidery, D: 197 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 0000.1026

Among the most impressive Joseon-period artworks in the SMA collection is an eight-panel *Guo Ziyi's Enjoyment-of-Life Screen* (*Gwakbunyang hyangrakdo*) from the early nineteenth century (Figure 9, 2015.0061). In 2015, this previously unaccessioned artwork from the Thayer collection was discovered in storage (Ercums 2020). Despite the frayed condition of the screen and broken hinges, the quality of the painting was undiminished. At the center of the screen in the fourth panel from the left, the bearded Guo Ziyi sits on a daybed surrounded by his numerous sons and daughters and frolicking grandchildren, all of whom have gathered to watch a dancer with long sleeves perform. Guo Ziyi (697–781) was a famed Chinese general who had loyally served four emperors of the Tang dynasty (618–907).



**Figure 9.** *Guo Ziyi's Enjoyment-of-Life Banquet Screen*, early 1800s, Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), ink, color, silk, 167.6 x 421.6 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 2015.0061

During Guo's eminent military career, he retook the Tang capital of Chang'an from the rebel commander Shi Siming (703–761) and proved to be the military might behind the Tang imperial throne during the ensuing An-Shi Rebellion (755–763). In later times, the noted Chinese historian Sima Guang (1019–1086) lauded Guo Ziyi remarking, "His contributions to the preservation of the Tang Empire were enormous" (Sima 2004, 7303). For his unwavering loyalty and heroic military accomplishments, Emperor Xuanzong (685–762) awarded Guo with the honorary title Fenyang jun Wang or "Prince of Fenyang," which is why Guo Ziyi is interchangeably referred to as Guo Fenyang and why he is more commonly referred to as "Gwakbunyang" in Korea (Kim 2011).

The spatial organization of the Korean screen is discernably organized into well-defined gendered spaces. The right side of the screen operates as a female space in which women sit inside pavilions reading and playing games or dance outside among throngs of children playing in an open courtyard. A male space is depicted on the left side of the screen, in which men converse and play *baduk*. Further accentuating the propitious event, the surrounding landscape is rendered in the blue-green style known as *cheongloksansuhwa*, an archaic style of landscape painting that was specifically deployed as a means for illustrating all manner of auspicious themes from Daoist paradise and mountain retreats to the golden ages of antiquity (McNair 1997, 70). The propitiousness of the gathering is further accentuated by the presence of auspicious conjugal animals, such as peacocks, cranes, and deer, which serve as potent symbols of longevity and prosperity.

In Joseon Korea, the visual depiction of the birthday banquet of Guo Ziyi became extremely popular because Guo's life encapsulated the very Confucian virtues and principles upon which Joseon-era society was built. Guo Ziyi was seen as a faithful and loyal protector of the state. It was common for wealthy merchants to commission Guo Ziyi screens during the late Joseon period. The use of Guo Ziyi screens by the Korean merchant class in birthday celebrations was similar to how screens and paintings of Guo Ziyi were used in China. However, at the Joseon royal court, Guo Ziyi screens were primarily seen at wedding ceremonies. The earliest textual reference mentioning Guo Ziyi screens in a Joseon royal wedding ceremony appears in *Protocols of the Superintendency for Royal Wedding Ceremonies* (*Garye dogam uigwe*), an *uigwe* dated to 1802. The text describes how a Guo Ziyi screen was installed at the bridal pavilion of the detached palace for the royal wedding of King Sunjo (1790–1834, r.

1800–1834) and Queen Sunwon (1789–1857). The pictorial theme of Guo Ziyi appeared in Korea at approximately the same time when the novel about the Chinese general was published in *hangeul* in the late eighteenth century (Yi 2008). Art historian Seo Yoonjung (2014, 219) observes that “unlike their Chinese counterparts, Korean versions of Guo Ziyi’s banquet are consistent in terms of iconography, style, and format. Few variations [in the composition of Guo Ziyi screens] in Choson [Joseon] paintings suggest that the extant works were done within a relatively short period of time, spanning from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries and that the archetype was firmly established enough to inform pivotal aspects of the representation of the theme.” What is perhaps most interesting about the use of the Guo Ziyi screens in the royal wedding ceremonies is that they were principally displayed in the bridal palace, a space that Seo (2014, 233–34) characterizes as “a female space, in which the queen-to-be or crown princesses stayed until the wedding day. In other words, the primary intended viewer of the screen of *The Banquet of Guo Ziyi* was a woman.”

Another important factor linking the Thayer screen to the Joseon royal court was the way in which it was mounted. Because the screen had never been conserved, it provided an unparalleled glimpse into late Joseon mounting. In 2016, a grant from the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation allowed the Museum to contract conservator Park Chin-sun to mount a complete restoration of the screen. When dismantled, tax documents that had been recycled as backing paper for the screen were uncovered (Park 2017, 29). Furthermore, the description of the mounting of the Guo Ziyi screen described in the 1802 *Protocols of the Superintendency for Royal Wedding Ceremonies* precisely corresponds to the mounting of the Thayer screen. The entry describes a wide painting adornment known as *hoejang*. The court document also describes two colored support strips, a red one known as *honghyeop* and a white strip known as *baekhyeop* that exactly correspond to the mounting on the Spencer screen. Thus, given the quality of the painting, the government tax documents used as backing, and how closely the mounting corresponds to ritual court documents, it is possible to speculate that the Spencer’s *Guo Ziyi* screen was most likely created at the Joseon royal palace for a wedding ceremony (Park 2017).

From Neolithic comma-shaped jewels to a Joseon dynasty screen depicting the birthday celebration of Chinese general Guo Ziyi, Sallie Casey Thayer

assembled a rich collection of Korean art that has provided generations of scholars and students at the University of Kansas and beyond opportunities to study and learn about the history of Korean art and culture. As demonstrated above, Thayer drew upon new market trends and commercial avenues that had appeared in early twentieth century Chicago because of the illegal looting of Korean tombs, thereby assembling her collection. Just as the Spencer Museum moves forward in its efforts to come to terms with its colonial legacy of exploitation and looting, it remains incumbent upon museums around the world to face and reconcile with the exploitative histories upon which they have been built. Only through decolonizing efforts and transparency about exploitative pasts, can museums foster an expansive sense of justice.

## New Directions

While Korean objects continued to be added to the collection in the decades following the Thayer bequest in 1917, in 2010 the Spencer embarked on an intentional effort to actively expand the Korean collection by identifying several new direction that both built upon but also significantly departed from the founding Thayer gift of 1917. In 2007, the Spencer Museum of Art assumed stewardship of approximately 8,500 ethnographic objects from the former University of Kansas Museum of Anthropology. The addition of this collection stimulated new collecting priorities in *minhwa* or Korean folk art, which will be introduced in this section. Also, with the addition of new curatorial expertise in modern Asian art, the Museum placed greater emphasis on global contemporary art that engages across disciplines and would foster and support international research and learning across multiple communities. This collecting priority in contemporary Korean art was further bolstered by an endowed International Artist-in-Residency program that encouraged the generation of new work. From *minhwa* to artist-in-residence projects, the acquisition of contemporary work that resonated and addressed the relationship between Korean history and contemporary issues will be examined in this section.

### Folk Art

One example of *minhwa* in the Spencer collection is a *sansin* or “mountain spirit” painting (Figure 10, 2014.0052). Seated beneath a pine tree, coaxed by a tiger, and attended by a *dongja* (boy attendant) bearing a platter of peaches, the *sansin* takes the form of an old man. Some sources describe the *sansin* as the embodiment of the mythological ancestor of the Korean people, the hero named Dangun. The SMA painting reveals the fascinating blend of beliefs and visual elements at work in this image which combined Korean animistic and shamanic beliefs with appropriated visual forms from Confucianism and Daoism in China. Believed to possess the ability to bestow children, *sansin* has been widely venerated throughout Korean history and many Buddhist temples in Korea have an adjacent *sansin-gak* or “Shrine to the Mountain Spirit.”

The donation of a group of masks made in Korea during the 1970s from the collection of KU Professor of Theatre and Dance, Andrew T. Tsubaki (1931–2009) further expanded the Museum’s ability to incorporate Korean theatrical and performance-based art forms as part of its teaching mission. A



**Figure 10.** *Sansin (Mountain Spirit)*, 1800s, Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), ink, mineral color, silk, 125 x 86.3 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Art Acquisition Fund, 2014.0052

*chwibari tal (old bachelor mask)* (Figure 11, 2010.0074) is a traditional *tal* paper mask used to represent a whole cast of characters in Korean folk drama. The SMA *chwibari* mask was made by Yu Gyeong-seong (1918–1989), who was an expert in playing the role of *waejangnyeo*, the mother of the concubine *aesadang*. In many plays, the “old bachelor” or *chwibari* seduces the concubine called *aesadang* (2010.0076). The *asesadang tal* mask was made by Kim Seong-dae (1907–1970), who is recognized for his role in restoring the original form of Yangju beolsandae. The Yangju beolsandae mask play, which had been largely forgotten after the Korean War, is one of the most representative mask plays in Gyeonggi province and usually consists of eight independent stories that satirize the socio-economic situation of the late Joseon period in humorous, yet critical ways. Main characters in these plays are typically social outcasts such as a female shaman, entertainers, servants, a renounced monk, and a fallen aristocrat.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 11.** Yu Gyeong-seong (1918–1989), *Chwibari tal (Old Bachelor Mask)*, 1971, paper, rice glue, ink, color pigments, cloth, human hair, H: 22.5 x W: 18.5 x D: 16.5 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, gift of Lilly T. Tsubaki, 2010.0074

### Korean Art during Colonial Period

The tumultuous period of transition at the end of the Joseon dynasty in 1897 is captured in the life and art of Ji Unyeong (1852–1935) (Kwon 2019). In 1886, Ji orchestrated one of many failed assassination attempts of the court official Kim Okgyun (1851–1894), who, despite being an advocate of Western-based reforms and advancements in science, also sought closer ties with Japan. In 1895, imperial opposition to Japanese involvement in Korea was silenced with the assassination of Empress Myeongseong (called Queen Min, 1851–1895). For his support of the Queen, Ji was exiled and forced to live out his life as a hermit. In the painting *Scholar under Pine Tree* dated to 1922, Ji depicts himself

<sup>8</sup> Other Korean masks in this collection include *pagyeseung tal* (depraved monk mask) and a *haboe tal* (ritual mask) made by Kim Ki-su (1917–1986).

as Tao Yuanming, a famous fifth-century Chinese poet and court official who dropped out of society in protest (Figure 12, 2013.0020). The finely brushed inscription that quotes Tao's poetry envelops Ji, who pensively stares into the distance.

Another example of colonial period art currently on view at the Spencer is an *untitled* portrait of a woman by Kim In-seung (1910–2001) that is currently on loan from Charles Downing and John E. Downing (EL2022.013) and displayed in the exhibition *Shifting Terrain: Korean Painting from the Spencer Museum of Art Collection, 1800–2010*. Like many aspiring artists in Japanese-occupied Korea, Kim In-seung studied art at the Tokyo School of Fine Art (present-day Tokyo University of the Arts) in the 1930s under Tanabe Itaru (1886–1968) and Kobayashi Mango (1870–1974), where he was introduced to academic traditions that emphasized modeling, meticulous observation, and realistic depictions. The *untitled* portrait of girl dressed in a *hanbok* pensively staring into the distance is dated to 2041, the *kōki* or Japanese imperial year corresponding to the year 1942 in the Gregorian calendar system, which was shortly after Kim returned to his native Gaeseong. The back of the painting is covered with an intriguing list of names that are currently being researched. Following the end of Japanese imperial rule and Korean independence in 1945, Kim suffered harsh criticism for participating in pro-Japanese art exhibitions and organizations like Dangwanghoe. After a teaching career at Ewha Womans University, Kim moved to New York in 1974, where he earned a reputation as “the rose painter.”

### Contemporary

An alternative to conventional oil painting is a thirteen-meter, eight-panel *Steel Powder Painting* by Kim Jongku (Figure 13, 2011.0003.a-h). In 2010, as part of



**Figure 12.** Ji Unyeong (1852–1935), *Scholar under Pine Tree*, 1922, ink, paper, 133 x 66 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, Museum purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, 2013.0020

a new international artist-in-residence initiative, the Spencer invited Seoul-based artist Kim Jongku to create a new work on site.<sup>9</sup> Originally trained as a sculptor, since the late 1990s Kim's work has been more about the remainder of the sculptural process—namely, steel powder. A recent monograph goes so far as to describe Kim as an “exsculptor [*sic*],” —a moniker that penetrates the multivalent process at the heart of his work (Kim 2013). For Kim, the act of grinding steel is “the main hub from which the spokes of different types of interconnected works protrude” (Kim 2008, 242). Kim goes on to explain: “I grind steel, which makes powder, but this powder is used to create calligraphy works, which then make a landscape...” (2008, 242). Once Kim completed *Steel Powder Painting*, it was installed in the same museum gallery where it had been created. As part of the installation, Kim installed his ongoing work *Mobile Landscape* in a rare live performance. Kim's alchemical approach to steel enables him to transform the hard and unyielding character of this building block of the industrialized world into a delicate material capable of crafting inverted kingdoms of mountains and valleys. By conjuring the power of elemental forces of time, gravity, oxidation, and weather, like a wizard Kim transmutes the solidity of steel into a medium of such subtle delicateness that he bends it to create images of an idealized natural world and melancholic streams of verse (Ercums 2017).

Moving image is also an important medium in contemporary Korean art. In 2009, *Handmade Memories* (2010.0029.01), a six-part moving image work by Seoul-based artist Jung Yeondoo, was included in the SMA exhibition *Extra/Ordinary: Video Art from Asia* (2009.10.24–2010.02.14). This exhibition

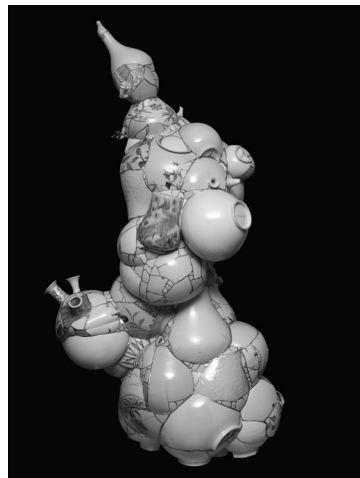


**Figure 13.** Kim Jongku (born 1963), *Steel Powder Painting* (panel one), 2010, oxidized steel powder, glue, salt, canvas, board, overall dimension of work 230 x 1300 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, Museum purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, 2011.0003.a

<sup>9</sup> Another Korean artist who has been an International Artist-in-Residence is Park Jaeyoung (b. 1981) who staged his *Bokaisen Project* as part of the exhibition *Temporal Turn: Art and Speculation in Contemporary Asia* (2016) at the SMA.

investigated new ways of transforming familiar experience and daily routines into moments of expanded meaning, contemplation, and humorous reflection. For this work, Jung collected six anonymous memories from elderly Koreans whom he approached and interviewed in parks around Seoul. Each narrative begins with the same question: “What was the most memorable event in your life?” As each memory unfolds, on the adjacent screen a crew wearing orange jumpsuits reconstructs the setting of the memory on a soundstage: A mountain hut in *Legends and Poverty*, a flower-filled memorial in *TV Star*, a resort in *Jeju Island Camel*, a traditional *hanok* (Korean courtyard house) in *6x6 Manor*, a golden path in *Barley Field*, and a railroad track in *On the Dividing Line between Body and Soul*. Through cinematic magic, the artist revives the past, animating these powerful memories for a final fleeting moment before our eyes. For Koreans, the twentieth century will always be remembered as a time of national turmoil, marked by the end of the long-lived Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), the nation’s annexation as a colony by the Empire of Japan (1910–1945), and the division of the country into two nation-states by a violent civil war (1950–1953). The subterfuge of this history runs deep in the stories that Jung restages in *Handmade Memories*. Through his own brand of cinematic magic Jung revives the past, repairing the disparate shards of remembrance into an imagined singularity that is animated again for a final fleeting moment before our eyes.

The artistic practice of Yeesookyung also delves deep into Korean collective consciousness, uncovering fragments of historical memory that she turns into new manifestations of contemporary life. Her ceramic sculpture series known as *Translated Vase* is comprised of broken ceramic pieces that have been reimagined into biomorphic “mutant” sculptures (Figure 14, 2012.0033). Collecting discarded shards of ceramics from waste piles of present-day Korean ceramicists, each organically shaped form emerges from a painstaking jigsaw-puzzle process



**Figure 14.** Yeesookyung (born 1963), *Translated Vase*, 2009, ceramic shards, epoxy, twenty-four carat gold leaf, twenty-four carat gold powder, H: 170 x W: 80 x D: 85 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, Museum purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, 2012.0033

in which the artist instigates new connections between disparate shards (Ercums 2016).

The first *Translated Vase* emerged in 2001 when Yeesookyung was invited to submit artwork for *Biennale di Ceramica nell'Arte Contemporanea* held in Albisola, Italy. Collaborating with a local potter, she based the work on a translation of a *sijo*-style poem “Ode to White Porcelain” (Baekja bu) by Korean poet and antique dealer Kim Sang-ok (1920–2004).<sup>10</sup> The resulting twelve ceramic wares comprise *Joseon Dynasty White Porcelain Has Been Translated* (2001). The project encapsulated the rich history of cultural appropriation that fueled the development of blue-and-white porcelain in Europe in which motifs, styles, and technology from Asia became a driving force in shaping European ceramic production.<sup>11</sup> In his study on the “social life of things” anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1988, 41) observes: “commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge.” It is this multivalence of significance embedded in the ceramic commodity as both a utilitarian object and as a representation of historical tradition that emerges in *Translated Vase*.

By the advent of the twentieth century, much of the tacit knowledge associated with traditional Korean ceramic production was gone or quickly vanishing.<sup>12</sup> During the Japanese occupation, ceramic production was industrialized. However, archeological expedition also carried out during the colonial occupation brought to light long-forgotten celadon wares of the Goryeo dynasty as well as Joseon white-ware and *buncheon*.<sup>13</sup> By the 1950s, research into historical ceramic techniques sparked a widespread revival of centuries-old technologies and with this ceramic renaissance came a thriving industry in historical reproductions. With strict laws regarding illicit looting and excavations of the Korean material past, the historical reproduction industry

10 The poem was originally published in a compilation called *Chojeok (The Insurgent)*. A posthumous collection of poems by Kim Sang-ok was published as *Kim Sang-ok si jeonjip (The Collected Poems of Kim Sang-ok)*. For an example of Kim Sang-ok’s poetry in English, see Yi et al. 2011, 214–15.

11 This in turn relates to the 2004 project *Parental Plates* in which Yeesookyung worked with a local community once again in Abisola, Italy. Twelve people were invited to record their impression of important ceramics in their family collections. Copies of the selected ceramic dishes introduced in the video were reproduced locally and the participants were invited to a dinner at which Yeesookyung made and served Korean food on the reproductions.

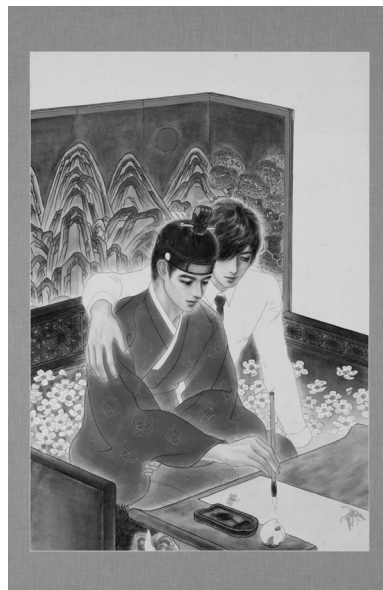
12 The Bunwon Royal Ceramic Kiln located in Gyeonggi province had already been privatized by 1884, which engendered a steady decline in the quantity and quality of white-ware production.

13 For introduction to Japanese archeology during the colonial period, see Pai 2010, 93–112.

has had a vitalizing effect on Korean national identity, allowing most people the ability to possess high quality, often times hand-made examples of Korea's vibrant ceramic past. By utilizing the residue of the reproduction process, the discarded, imperfect wasters are reprocessed and transformed in Yeesoookyung's sculptures. Yeesoookyung has remarked that her interest in ceramic shards arouse precisely because of this "state of transformation from three dimensions to two, and from the whole to the part." She goes on to observe "by transmuting the broken ceramic pieces into a complete artwork, I would like to reverse these transformations" (Yoo 2011).

Reversals—such as making "trash" into "art"—and the playful manipulation of linguistic meaning is also central to the translation process explored in the work. While the use of gold lacquer is seemingly related to Japanese traditions of mending ceramics known as *kintsugi*, for Yeesoookyung her choice of gold is based on the Korean homophone of "gold" (*geum*) and "crack" (*geum*). She observes, "I wanted to add a sense of humor to my work by filling *geums* (cracks), which are considered as defects, with a valuable material, such as real *geum* (gold)" (Yoo 2011).

The painting *Poetry* (Figure 15, 2020.0001) by Kim Hwahyun depicts a young Joseon dynasty prince who is identified by the *Irwolobongdo* folding screen (depicting five peaks, sun, and moon) in the background. As the young prince is about to brush a poem, a shimmering lissome young man dressed in a white suit embraces him, hovering like an apparition from a future time. This painting captures the deep relationship between Korea's past and its present-day aspirations. Working in traditional ink-based media, still problematically sometimes referred to as "oriental painting" in Korea, Kim's practice utilizes the visual language of *yaoi*, a genre of fictional media originating in Japan that features



**Figure 15.** Kim Hwahyun (born 1978), *Poetry*, 2012, watercolor, ink, Korean paper, 106.5 x 70 cm, Spencer Museum of Art, Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Art Acquisition Fund, 2020.0001

homoerotic relationships between male characters. Also known as boy's love or simply as "BL," *yaoi* is typically created by women for women and spans a wide range of media from *manga* to *anime*. By creating artwork that purposely rejects hyper-masculine images of men and instead focuses on male figures that are svelte, affectionate, and emotionally approachable, Kim Hwahyun purposely advances her own idealized perspectives about desire and eroticism divorced from patriarchal, heteronormative society. Kim Hwahyun's artistic practice both embodies a queer sensibility that purposefully subverts dominant social constructs and is transnational in its combination of traditional Korean media and contemporary visual culture from Japan.

## Conclusion

From its beginnings in 1917 with the donation of Sallie Casey Thayer, the Korean art collection at the Spencer Museum of Art has been *central* to teaching and research at the University of Kansas and beyond. By openly discussing the origins and possible provenance of many artifacts in the Thayer collection and how Thayer utilized emerging commercial networks in Chicago that had been developed as a direct result of illegal excavations of Korean archaeological sites, this brief introduction aims to foster transparency and open dialogue about the colonial systems used to acquire Korean antiquities. Like many museums in the United States, the Spencer is built upon a legacy of colonialism. The research into the origins of the Thayer collection and its assessment has only just begun. How is decolonization possible without first coming to terms with the power structures inherent in museum collections? Admittedly, the Spencer has continued to collect Korea artifacts, either through donation or purchase. However, as a matter of policy, the Spencer Museum will no longer knowingly acquire objects that have been illegally exported or otherwise transferred in violation of the 1970 UNESCO Convention of the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. In recognition of past practices and deliberate efforts to avoid unclear and problematic provenance, recent curatorial initiatives have focused on aspects of Korean art history under-represented in many museum collections such as folk traditions and modern/contemporary art. By acknowledging the colonial legacy of the founding Thayer collection of Korea art, the SMA hopes

to address past injustices. Also, by actively choosing to collect art that deals with current day issues like gender and sexuality, we continue to expand our mission to encourage “interdisciplinary exploration at the intersection of art, ideas, and experience” as well as demonstrating the continuity and vitality of Korean art and culture.

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