THE KOREAN GOVERNMENT EXHIBITION

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The land of Korea—the mountains and the waters—bears witness to the geological torment in which it was created. Where else in the world are these jagged tumultuous ranges extending into the very sea? From the air one can see, in flight from Seoul to Pusan, how every small valley, almost every crevice, has been cultivated, one can see the larger valleys and plains and rivers which seem to flow serene but can quickly rise to savage floods. The very air of this country seems to have kept its primordial purity—it is fresh and clear. Clouds and storms stay close to the earth and are activated by rain dragons. The human beings who through the centuries have made this country which we call Korea their own are in harmony with it. In this land they have built and created a culture which has continued for over two thousand years.

The Government of the Republic of Korea has sent to the United States an exhibition of great dignity and beauty.

The catalogue, with a sympathetic introduction by Gregory Henderson, has 187 items. The first item is a Chinese gold buckle from the Han dynasty, which serves to remind us not only that Korea was under Chinese influence from the fourth century B.C. until well into the fourth century A.D., when the Korean state of Koguryo conquered Lolang (313) but also that almost all the surviving relics of some six hundred years are in north Korea and not available for this exhibition.

The relics are wonderful, especially the early lacquers, and the tombs with their paintings, which even in the early centuries under Chinese influence were already colored by the personality of the Korean peoples—a personality which to this day has stubbornly maintained a character which survives centuries of outside influence. There is no doubt that the Koreans have their own special character. It persists. In the early days it was subjected to the Chinese. The Chinese went in 313, leaving a country divided into three states, which were not unified until 668. From 668 until 1910 Korea maintained its independence. Although unified it was harassed from time to time by outsiders, especially by the troops of Hideyoshi (1536-1598) in the sixteenth century. In 1910 it became a protectorate of the Japanese. In 1945 it became an independent country again.

Thus lightly does modern man review a history of more than two millenniums.

“IT is,” says John Walker, “a rare opportunity to be able to introduce to the American public a field of art with which
they have been too little familiar.” We do so with an exhibition, as I have said, of great dignity and beauty.

Mr. Walker also says, “So extensive has been the destruction of art in Korea’s past that if it were not for excavations in the twentieth century, little would be known of her great artistic history and no such exhibition as the present one would be possible.” That is so, but much has been saved. We can already make an outline of Korea’s history, and we can begin to illustrate it with works of art.

In this exhibition there are examples from all of the three kingdoms before the unification under the Silla kings in 668. Tiles from the end of the Paekche dynasty and black pottery vessels from the “Gold Bell Tomb” of the old Silla dynasty; Buddhist sculptures from all three. The most spectacular things are the three gold crowns and ornaments from the tombs of the early Silla Kings. There is a promise of more as a number of the royal tomb mounds are as yet undisturbed.

The traveler to Kyongju may see things which the exhibition could not include. The museum of Kyongju has gathered a number of Buddhist figures and the huge bronze bell beautifully decorated. These and the seated bronze Buddhas of Pul Guk Sa (near Kyongju) proved too difficult to move. Above all the Sokkulam, the great stone beehive temple on Mount Tohamsan, behind Pul Guk Sa, with its huge Buddha and tall panels in relief, remains. He who goes may see these and also, outlined in the meadows, the vestiges of magnificent temples.

The mighty waves of Chinese civilization were bound to overflow south and east, and one can see at once in Korea the successive effects of Wei and Sui and T’ang. But one would rarely mistake a Korean work of these periods for a Chinese work. The large sculptures and the small under the Unified Silla dynasty have the majestic serenity of T’ang sculpture, but they are not the same. The large Buddhas are a little more simple in delineation, a little more gentle in mien. Also the decorative detail in the tiles and in the relief has almost the delicacy of lace. There was in the Silla dynasty an independence of artistic language and expression.

The sculpture group includes two of the most famous and beautiful sculptures in all Korean art. These are the two seated Maitreya figures, one now belonging to the Duksoo Palace Museum and the other to the Korean National Museum. They are of good size, one almost three feet, the other about thirty-two inches. This is the representation of Maitreya in a state of quiet ecstasy, his head inclined slightly to the right. His right arm is bent at the elbow, which rests upon his right knee, the hand less supporting than gently touching his cheek. There is for the observer a kind of sermon in this and an irresistible invitation to share in this exalted state of triumphant placidity. The pose is well known, and the likeness of these sculptures to a number of early sculptures in Japan proclaims the source of inspiration for that country. While the background, the source, of Korean sculpture is China neither these Maitreya figures nor the rest of the group could be mistaken for Chinese. They are marked with a character we can only call Korean. One is tempted to suspect that in the day they were made the sculptors consciously insisted on their own native individuality.

In numbers the representation of the Koryo dynasty, which succeeded the Unified Silla dynasty in 918, predominates in this exhibition. With one or two exceptions it is entirely ceramic. There is a bronze vessel called a water-pourer and a shrine in low-relief gilt bronze assigned to this period. All the rest—some 87 numbers—are ceramics. These survived safely in tombs while devastation went on over their heads until the excavations of the twentieth century. We have seen in the museums of this country and in private collections examples of the Koryo period. We have never seen such an array of Korean celadons, such an astounding range of color and design, such a multitude of grays and greens culminating in the luminous soft green that has no counterpart unless it be in the sunlit woodland lichens.

The celadons vanished with the Yi dynasty, which was established in 1392 and lasted till 1910. Gone was the perfection of glaze and elegant variety of shape. In a way of speaking the Yi dynasty seems to have gone a bit on the loose, as new governments often do. Let us not compare but enjoy the freedom of the shapes and
designs of Yi pottery, of which a splendid few are represented in this exhibition.

Korean painting needs explaining. In the first place very little Korean painting of any period has survived. In the second place was there ever a very great deal of it? And in the third place as far as one can judge there were no great continuing collections. Collections of Korean painting which we can understand and deal with are a thing of the twentieth century. This fact is faced by honest scholars in Korea and must be considered as the exhibition travels in America.

It was a problem that had to be dealt with by the selection committee both American and Korean. Should we leave Korean painting out entirely? If the committee did so our American friends might well cavil and say let us judge for ourselves. If we chose we knew the knowledgeable would raise uproar about our choice. We took the latter course and meet the uproar.

The committee selected some thirty odd examples from the collections that exist.

Mr. Henderson points out that almost no painting earlier than the Yi dynasty (1392-1910) has survived in Korea. As in the case of sculpture, while the Yi painters observed the painting of the mighty empire next door they did not slavishly imitate it. Far from it. It is almost as if they said, this mode of painting is all very well but we will do it in our own way, thank you. And do so they did. This makes Korean painting difficult for Westerners, still at the beginning of their understanding of the painting of the Far East, to appraise. The standards we set for Chinese painting (and separately for Japanese painting) do not apply to the Korean painters. Deliberately the Koreans established a way of composition. They tend to focus on the vertical center of their paintings. They do not seem to be concerned with a super elegance of brush stroke but rather with forthright representation, which is often very refreshing. While it is true that certain beauty spots like the Yang-Tze gorges and the Hua Shan are often recognizable in Chinese painting, I can think of no such literal representation as Chong Son's Diamond Mountains or his Mount Inwang, which the casual traveler can see from the roof of the Bando Hotel in Seoul. Nor is it possible for me to believe that Yi In-mun's Mountains and Rivers without End is not a panorama of Pusan and vicinity as it still looked in the eighteenth century. Likewise the genre scenes are quite literal, and, as Mr. Paine remarked, "so Korean."

We must not forget that much of the greatest Korean sculpture and some painting went to Japan at a very early date and survives there. The best known Korean religious painting of all came out of Japan and into the Metropolitan Museum, the gift of Mrs. Edward S. Harkness in 1921 (see cover).

As Mr. Walker and Mr. Gregory Henderson have pointed out, poor Korea has suffered war and devastation again and again. What this exhibition offers us is a very splendid and noble exposition of what exists today.

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Dog, by an unknown artist of the late xviii or xix century. Ink and color on paper. Late Yi dynasty. Height, 17 3/4 inches. Duksoo Palace Museum of Fine Arts
Gold crown with two ear pendants, from the "Lucky Phoenix Tomb," Kyongju. Old Silla dynasty, v or vi century. Height of crown, 12\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. National Museum of Korea, Seoul
ABOVE: Buddhist shrine in gilt-bronze. It is constructed in the form of a temple and was meant to hold Buddhist images, but the original figures no longer exist. Koryo dynasty, XIII or XIV century. Height, 11 3/4 inches. Duksoo Palace Museum of Fine Arts, Seoul. BELOW: Two gray earthenware tiles with relief decoration, one showing a conventionalized landscape and the other a feng huang in a roundel. Both were excavated at the site of a temple in Puyo. Paekche dynasty, VII century. Heights, 11 3/8 and 11 3/8 inches. National Museum of Korea, Seoul
Gilt-bronze statue of Maitreya; this figure and the one opposite are the largest bronze images of the deity surviving from their time. Old Silla dynasty, early 11 century. Height, 35 3/4 inches. Duksoo Palace Museum
Gilt-bronze statue of Maitreya, said to be from the Andong area. The figure sits in the customary posture of contemplation. Old Silla dynasty, VI or VII century. Height, 31\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. National Museum of Korea
Two gray stoneware bowls, one with cover. Unified Silla dynasty, VIII or IX century. Diameter of the covered bowl, 7 3/4 inches; of the other, 7 1/2 inches. Duksoo Palace Museum.
Ceramics of the Yi dynasty. LEFT: Two Punch’ong ware wine bottles, one with celadon glaze, XV or XVI century. Heights, 11⅜ and 10⅝ inches. RIGHT: Porcelain food jar and wine bottle with painted decoration, XVII or XVIII century. Heights, 12⅜ and 7¾ inches. From the Duksoo Palace Museum
The Diamond Mountains, by Chong Son (1676-1759), who was one of the leading landscape artists of his time. Ink and color on paper. Middle Yi dynasty. Height, 51 1/2 inches. From the collection of Sohn Jai-hyung.
Portrait of Song Si-yol, by an unknown artist of the xviii century, and portrait of a girl, by Sin Yun-hok (born 1758). Ink and colors on silk. Middle and Late Yi dynasty. Heights, 35½ and 45 inches. Duksoo Palace Museum and collection of Chun Hyung-pil