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## Korean convergence

A rare exploration of arts and culture at the Art Museum runs concurrently with gallery shows across the city

By Samantha Melamed

Perhaps it's for the best that the Philadelphia Museum of Art's "Treasures from Korea" will open with prayer: a Yeongsanjae ritual led by Buddhist monks.

A little divine providence couldn't hurt, given the delicate nature of the works on display, dating from the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) and, for the most part, leaving Korea for the first time. They include works on paper so fragile they can be shown for only 12 weeks at a time, and a 40-foot-high Buddhist banner painting that's an official national treasure.

Despite its logistical challenges, the museum's first marquee Korean art exhibition is quite timely, said Hyunsoo Woo, the museum's curator of Korean art.

"Ten years ago, people didn't pay attention to Korea at all," she said. "These days, it's a whole different story because of the growth of the economy and the profile of the country. It sort of brings back the question: What is Korea? What is Korean culture?"



"Sakyamuni Assembly" (1653) from the Hwaeomsa temple in Gurye county. Designated National Treasure No. 301, the scroll is on loan to the Art Museum from the National Museum of Korea.



Porcelain jar from 17th century Korea, artist/maker unknown. The 16 1/8-inch-high vessel is designated Treasure No. 1437

Anyone interested in exploring those questions will be treated to a crash course in the coming weeks - both at the Art Museum and across the city, at several concurrent exhibitions of works by contemporary Korean and Korean American artists.

While this may be Philadelphia's season of Korea, the museum has been buying Korean art for nearly a century, amassing an unusually large collection of 450 works.

In the 1990s, with the region's Korean population growing (and growing in affluence), the museum began cultivating supporters to match. It convened a Korean Heritage Group and organized an annual heritage weekend. Then, in 2006, came Woo, the museum's first curator of Korean art and one of just a few in the nation.

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Finally, last year, the museum joined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in sending a survey of American art to the National Museum of Korea. The Korean art exhibition, which will travel to Houston and L.A., is reciprocation of sorts.

“This is the culmination of those previous efforts,” said Woo.

She designed the show to tell the story of Korea in the Joseon dynasty, when the aesthetic was guided by Confucian principles of simplicity, as seen in sparingly adorned white porcelain vessels. Through the art, visitors will learn about court life, social structures under Joseon rule, and the impact of encounters with the West. Interactive stations will decode the symbols found in the art and transliterate visitors’ names into Korean characters.

Woo designed the exhibition to be accessible, knowing that visitors have a lot of catching up to do.

“The attention to Korean art is relatively new, for many reasons,” she said. “Korea is a small country, and it was annexed by Japan. And there was the civil war between North and South. In that period, many cultural properties were lost.” Add the devastation of Chinese and Japanese invasions in the 16th and 17th centuries, and there just aren’t many older cultural works to go around.

There is, though, no shortage of modern works.

On that front, the museum will hold an array of programs, including a Korean film series (check out *A State of Mind*, a documentary about the North Korean mass games), a K-pop dance party, and a cooking demonstration by Marja Vongerichten of PBS’ *Kimchi Chronicles*.

But for contemporary Korean visual art, head to Locks Gallery to view the works of artist Yeesoonyung, whose art deals directly with the same artistic traditions on view at the Art Museum.

Yeesoonyung is best known for her “translated vases,” voluptuous forms made with gold leaf and porcelain shards discarded by Korean master potters who specialize in replicas - and destroy works for the most minor of flaws. Also on view are her intricate scroll paintings, which merge traditional imagery and painting techniques with modern references.

“We thought it would be a fantastic opportunity to have a dialogue with the older artifacts that are going to be on display” at the Art Museum, said Locks assistant curator Kelsey Halliday Johnson.

Yeesoonyung trained in both Western and Korean art, but has gravitated toward Korean techniques, sometimes working 18 hours a day on her drawings, kneeling on the floor.

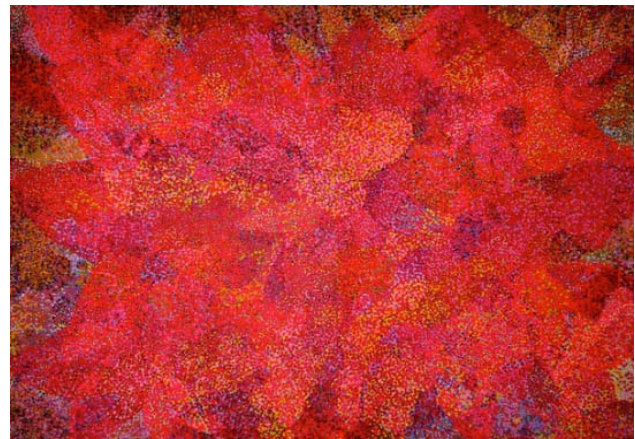


Sculpture and painting by Yeesoonyung, best known for her “translated vases.” Her work is at Locks Gallery.



“Now that I think back, the act of repetition greatly resembles the 3,000 bows in Buddhism, or the repetitions in mantras or prayers,” she said. It’s a form of meditation.

It’s remarkably similar to how Korean American artist Juri Kim - whose work is on view this month at LGTripp Gallery - describes her process. Kim trained in Seoul and New York and lives in Philadelphia. Her paintings, undulating color fields scattered with dots, speak to abstract expressionism and pointillism. But they are made kneeling on the floor, with monklike concentration.



“Symphony in Red” (2013) by Korean American artist Juri Kim whose work is on exhibit at LGTripp Gallery. She lives in Philadelphia.

“Putting the dot on the surface of the canvas is like a ritual or a ceremony, very painstaking,” she said. “Visually, it’s very Western. But deep inside my psyche, my painting is undeniably Korean.”

That the Locks Gallery show runs concurrently with the Art Museum’s was carefully planned by gallery owner Seuyun Locks, a museum board member. That Kim’s work is also on view - or, for that matter, that the work of 20 Asian artists is now on display at the Asian Arts Initiative - is perhaps just coincidence. But it’s also a reflection of the moment.



Hyunsoo Woo, the museum’s curator of Korean Art.

After all, the Initiative’s executive director Gayle Isa said, when her organization began 20 years ago as an initiative of the Painted Bride Arts Center, there was no clear Asian arts community. “There was no cultural organization in Philadelphia where Asian Americans could even figure out what sort of collective voice they had.”

Clearly, that has changed. The Chinatown North gallery is filled with works not only of Korean American artists (don’t miss Dave Kyu’s *Me and You, Keanu*, in which he reenacts a fight scene from *The Matrix*, sans special effects), but also of artists from an array of backgrounds.

These days, there appears to be lots of support for Asian art, and Korean art in particular. Woo said the Joseon exhibition has helped attract a new generation of backers.

“Individual support was very strong,” Woo said. “The Korean American community stood up and were very proud.”