“**Treasures from Korea: Arts and Culture of the Joseon Dynasty**”

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, USA (March 2 – May 26, 2014); LACMA, Los Angeles, CA, USA (June 29 – September 28, 2014).

Curator: Hyunsoo Woo, PMA Curator of Korean Art

Reviewed by Gabrielle Gaulin, 4-5-14

The Treasures from Korea exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art showcases a variety of artifacts, both cultural masterpieces and the art of everyday life, to provide perspective on Korea’s last dynasty. The exhibition opens with a dynamic animation of one of the scroll “books” of the monarchy, featuring a parade arranged for a royal marriage. The opulence of the court was clear and well documented, with many royal accoutrements on display. After passage through a room of painted screens, one entered the portion of the exhibit dedicated to Joseon society. The civil servants of the period and their families were represented through clothing, portraits, furniture, and texts. Rituals from ancient customs were then followed by Buddhism’s influence in Korea. Finally, the show capped off the later years of the dynasty by showing the transition to more Western ideals with a variety of objects whose design contrasted strongly with the earlier displays.

A theme that ran throughout the show was the Korean use of nature symbolism. Labels next to most objects described the importance of the symbol to its host and provided a more comprehensive idea of its use in Joseon Korea. These objects ranged from a royal seal (with the turtle of longevity) all the way to highly abstracted grave ornaments, indicating an elephant and ox as signs of strength and long life. The heavy symbolic undertones of the earlier pieces were erased in the transition to Western culture. What had previously been seriously constructed messages became delicate ornamentation on the face of new concepts and materials. Interestingly, this idea was paralleled in the representation of “kingship” in Korea. At the beginning of the dynasty, the ruler was considered too powerful to capture in image, and is noticeably missing from all of the procession scrolls and the galleries of portraits. However, by the end of the exhibit, we are able to see the face of the last Emperor of Korea, rendered lovingly in a Western perspectival style instead of the traditional flattened appearance. The importance of symbols to the Korean people was well represented and explained in the show, so that those with little knowledge of Korean culture were also able to follow along.

Besides symbolism, another interesting common thread united all of the exhibit’s galleries: the importance of pottery. From the beauty of highly decorative vases owned by the king to the arcane power attributed to burial wares, ceramics were everywhere. The abundance of pieces, some even demarcated as national treasures by the Korean government, strongly emphasized the importance of pottery as an art form in Joseon Korea. However, by the end of the exhibit, the effects of Western influence led to replacement of ceramic s with metals and other materials.

It is clear that the government valued the documentation of events and scholarship. Scroll books were produced depicting entire processions for bridal parties and a screen depicted a high ranking civil servant’s major life events in panels. A hand drawn map of the country was also displayed; the fully assembled map measured was taller than a man. The value of written communication was underscored by the emphasis on the Hangeul 한 글 alphabet and its application to society. Although only men were to be educated in classical Chinese characters, women and young children were still able to read Hangeul and thus texts were often available to many.

However, although the alphabet innovation in the 1400s benefited all of Korea, its effects on the lower or common class were less carefully described. This dearth of exploration of the commoner’s lifestyle was noticeable in the majority of the show. It would have served as a strong foil for the lifestyles of royalty and high society depicted, even if its description was limited to explanations. I found myself wondering just how great the differences between the civil servants and the commoners were and was unable to reconcile these thoughts with the exhibition’s provided information. Especially as Western ideals enveloped the nation and society changed, it was difficult to see how the everyday people were affected by the times.

The show also professes to describe the gender roles present in the Joseon society, but I believe it could have been detailed to a greater level. The civil servant portion of the exhibit represented the differences in men and women’s quarters through their possessions. Men’s objects were much simpler and streamlined, whereas women’s items tended to be heavily inlaid and enameled. It was thus clear how the men were expected to fit the Confucian ideal of the ascetic scholar; women and children were expected to be more frivolous. However, it seems unlikely that all men of society would have fit the monk-like quarters displayed at the exhibition. A little more detail on the roles women were expected and able to fill and the responsibilities and expectations of children might have advanced the idea of gender roles more strongly.

All in all, the show served as a strong showing of Korean culture, especially for those who have had little contact with it. It was very interesting to watch the transition of the dynasty from insular to Westward facing, and the overall collection of objects provided a good overview of the period. I think it will serve to spark more interest in Korean arts and culture among the Philadelphia community.