"The Aesthetic" in Traditional Korean Art and Its Influence on Modern Life

Kwon Young-pil

Abstract

It was during the 1920s that the study of "the Korean aesthetic" found in traditional art began. This research has continued to the present day, and the discovery of Korean aesthetic characteristics identified from this study contributes to understanding the identity of Korean culture.

"Classic beauty" in architecture and sculpture is defined by Eckardt as having symmetrical structure, balance, and impartiality, and a sense of serenity, while revealing a distinct artless naivety accompanied by moderation without excessive decoration. Yanagi Muneyoshi's concept of the "aesthetics of sorrow" and "folk art" has been positively evaluated, and Ko Yu-seop's "planless planning" illustrated by the use of natural timber can be called a pursuit of naturalness. Choe Sun-u argues that the Korean aesthetic is marked by plain colors and clothing and restrained expression. Cho Yo-han emphasizes the shamanic features represented by nonghyeonseong ("freely vibrating without adherence to formality"). Humor in Korean art as an aesthetic category has also gained wide recognition from many scholars.

It would be unfair to say that one alone among these defines the Korean aesthetic. The Korean aesthetic is characterized by the classical concept of "unification in diversity," as found in the works of Lee Ufan, Kim Hwan-gi, and Kim Chang-ryeol. In contemporary craft and industrial production, traditional Korean colors can easily be applied to modern clothing, works of art, daily necessities, and household electronics.

Keywords: classic beauty, simplicity, aesthetics of sorrow, folk art, humor, shamanism, nonghyeonseong, naturalness, Lee Ufan

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Introduction

As well known, it was during the Japanese colonial period that the study of "the Korean aesthetic" found in traditional art began. This continued for twenty to thirty years after liberation, well into the 1960s and 1970s. Then, it began to receive critical assessment in the fourth quarter of the last century, and in the present century attempts have been made to examine the Korean aesthetic from a new perspective. This deserves a positive evaluation, but a comprehensive, true Korean aesthetic has not yet been found that encompasses the aesthetic sensibilities of modern times extending from tradition.

This paper discusses the various views expressed on the Korean aesthetic over the past century from a new angle, examines how modern Korean art is based on traditional (aesthetic) principles, and finally offers a tentative outlook regarding how those aesthetic principles operate in our lives today. I try to delve into these issues in this paper.

Beginning and Progress of the Quest for the Korean Aesthetic

The quest for the Korean aesthetic was most active in the field of Korean arts. This trend, which began in the 1920s, developed on a full scale from the 1930s, thanks to some outstanding scholars such as Ko Yu-seop. A crucial factor that made this possible was the availability of rich historical materials on art, unlike literature and music, which provided very favorable conditions from which to investigate the Korean aesthetic.

An interesting thing is that among the various peoples in East Asia, Koreans have had a deep interest in this subject. Addressing the topic of the Korean aesthetic expressed in Korean art is not very different from discussing what the characteristics of Korean art are, or stressing how Korean art is distinct from the art of other countries.

Then, what is at issue is the question of what defines the distinctiveness of Korean art. First of all, it is distinct from Chinese art. Of course, its difference from Japanese art may be discussed depending on the situation. In terms of recent views, however, some are critical of its origination during the Japanese colonial period and association with Western-centrism. Others see it as an attempt to restore national pride through art. In my view, interest in the Korean aesthetic

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5. This is due to the early start of research in the field of art and its strong achievements. To compare it with other genres, the aesthetic achievement of Korean musicology is discussed very well in Song Bang-song’s paper (1994, 180-181). According to Song, discussion of the characteristics of Korean music began in the second half of the 1970s, while the study of the characteristics of Japanese music started with Yi Hye-gu in 1973.

Meanwhile, it was writers who had a deep interest in meot (beauty), which is the most important concept in the categories of the Korean aesthetic. Their research focused on the conceptual definition of meot and its linguistic origin rather than finding specific examples in literary works. Some early studies along this line include, in chronological order, Sin Seok-cho’s “Meotseol” (Discourse on Beauty) (1941), Yi Hui-seung’s “Meot” (Beauty) (1956), Jo Yun-je’s “Meot-ui yeongu” (A Study on "Beauty") (1958), and Jo Ji-hun’s “Meot-ui yeongu” (A Study on "Beauty") (1964). Choi Won-shik (2005, 10-19).

6. Such criticism is based on modernity discourse. References on this view include Yun (2005, 443-460).

7. In his critique of O Se-chang’s Geunyeok seohwajing (A Biographical Dictionary of Korean Western Painters), Hong Seon-pyo makes the following remark on the study of the art of Japanese colonial rule: “Trying to examine the lineage of literature and art in his country at a time when it had fallen into a colony and his peo-
latter tradition made a switch to folk art with Yanagi Muneyoshi.

The trend of investigating the Japanese aesthetic based on the study of aesthetics is connected with the early pursuit of the Korean aesthetic by Korean scholars. Yet it was not the only source of influence on the Korean aesthetic, which originated during Japanese rule: Ueno Naoteru (1882-1973), Ko Yu-seop’s teacher, heard lectures by H. Wölfflin while studying in Germany. Moreover, Andre Eckardt, a German scholar active in Korea, who was doing research ahead of Ko, had a direct and indirect relationship to German aesthetics.

Now, let us examine the categories of the Korean aesthetic in the context of early studies of Korean art history and aesthetics.

Categories of the Korean Aesthetic

Classic Beauty and Simplicity

Andre Eckardt, a German humanities scholar, said that classicism is intrinsic to Korean traditional art. He came to Korea at the age of twenty and stayed for about twenty years, engaging in religious activities and the study of Korean culture. Although he spent an important part of his life in Korea, his scholarship exhibits fundamentally German traits, which permeate many of his papers and books. This is also confirmed in the references cited in his works. To buttress his theory, he employed Otto Kümmel (1874-1952), a disciple of Alois Riegl, who was a great master of “style” theory, and Curt Glaser and William Cohn, who were leading German scholars in the study of Eastern art history.

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Eckardt’s approach that was revealed in his major work, Hanguk misulsa (History of Korean Art) (Geschichte der koreanischen Kunst, 1929), draws our attention for its reflection of the international scholarly trend of his era. The reports were written by European archaeologists and historians who conducted excavations in Central Asia in the early twentieth century, and made a great contribution to broadening European ideas of the scope of world art. Eckardt, by citing such reports, viewed Korean art in a wider spectrum and studied it from the standpoint of world art history.

Once we understand his academic background, it does not seem strange at all that Eckardt notes classic beauty (go jeon mi) as a characteristic of Korean art. He stresses that a classic quality is inherent in most genres of Korean art, including architecture, sculpture, painting (particularly murals), and pottery. Then, the question remains, to what classic qualities does he refer?

Foremost is symmetrical structure, balance and impartiality, and serenity. According to him, those qualities are consistent with the concept of simplicity (dansunseong). In addition, Korean art comes with a distinct artless naiveté (sobakseong) (Schlichtheit) accompanied by moderation without excessive decoration. It rejects the complex, disorderly, or flamboyant. Eckardt’s conceptual framework and interpretation may find more effective communication when they are supported by the theory of E. H. Gombrich (1911-2001). Gombrich asserted that the “aesthetic ideal of moderation in Western art as opposed to savage ornamentation was due to the influence of classicism.” He interpreted simplicity as a classic principle and traced its origin to ancient rhetoric.

Eckardt finds a simple but classic balance of control in traditional Korean architecture through careful observations of exterior forms and structural details. He appears to define structural simplicity as the model of the Korean aesthetic as found in palace architecture such as Gyeongbokgung palace and Geunjeongjeon hall. The stone pagoda in Bunhwangsa temple is grouped in the same category as other examples of architecture. In sculpture, the Buddha statue in the Seokguram Grotto is described as expressing moderation and order.

Toward the end of his book, he concludes that “decisive vigor, the movements of classic lines, simple and humble formal language, and modesty and orderliness as found in Greek art” comprise the characteristics of Korean art.

While he expresses deep affection for Korean art, sharp criticism is dispersed throughout the book. He remarks upon the dreamy quality (Verträumtheit) found in the Korean aesthetic, but he bluntly states that “the creativity of form has not developed beyond imitation.”

Meanwhile, some criticize Eckardt for his Western-centered conception of history, saying that his aesthetic view assumes that the Korean aesthetic takes the Greek aesthetic as its ideal. But this is only a small part of Eckardt’s view of the Korean aesthetic. In actuality, its association with the Greek aesthetic is confined to the context of the “classic,” while the characteristics of “naiveté,” “moderation” and “serenity,” which he strongly emphasizes, are authentic categories of the Korean aesthetic without any alleged association with Greek.

Aesthetics of “Sorrow” and “Folk Art”

Sorrow is a universal human feeling. But if someone says that s/he is born with the feeling of sorrow, the speaker and the listener will surely experience a greater emotional strain. Under the forced Japanese occupation, Koreans would probably have objected to the characterization of Korean art as manifesting an “aesthetic of sorrow” (biaemi).

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13. In particular, German explorers such as A. Grünwedel and A. von Le Coq played a great role in the early 20th century.
First enticed by Korean pottery, Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889-1961) became interested in Korean art in 1914. After his first trip to Korea in 1916, he developed a keen interest in Korean art and defined the nature of the Korean aesthetic as an “aesthetics of sorrow” in 1920. Another Japanese scholar has written about Yanagi: “Regarding the Korean aesthetic, he defines it as an ‘aesthetics of sorrow,’ or ‘beauty of familiarity,’ and notes the ‘painful history’ behind it. He calls it an ‘aesthetics of autonomy’ in comparison to the Chinese aesthetic and notes that the ‘beautiful, subtle lines of Goryo porcelain cannot be found in that of China.’”

As a result of this statement on the “aesthetics of sorrow,” the Korean intellectual community began to show great interest in Yanagi at the same time that the need was felt for a new critical perspective on him. Some argued that acceptance and criticism of his notion of Korean art required a proper, holistic understanding of his theory overall. Others asserted that it was the first time that his aesthetic theory of inartificiality (mujagwi) and folk art (minye) were connected to Ko Yu-seop’s aesthetic views. After some Korean scholars came to specialize in Yanagi’s theory, his theory gained international recognition.

Yanagi’s view of the aesthetics of sorrow can be examined in two aspects. First, it is based on the assumption that “sorrow” is a categorical concept of aesthetics. The Japanese appear to be tolerant of this concept, as it is represented by the so-called aware (pathos) in their traditional art. It should also be taken into account that Yanagi himself attached his highest acclaim to the aesthetics of tragedy or sorrow after experiencing the diverse art of his day. Secondly, the fact that “tragedy,” a similar concept, holds an active aesthetic value in Western art provides a context for understanding his ideas.

In fact, as far as his notion of art is concerned, he deserves credit for his interpretation of traditional art from the perspective of folk art. He coined the term minggei (folk art) and played a leading role in the folk art movement in Japan. Yanagi’s folk art movement was inspired by the white, blue-patterned Joseon dynasty porcelain, through which his aesthetic view made a great shift “from the West to the East, from pure art to handicrafts.”

As for the conceptual framework of Yanagi’s view of art, we are reminded of the association between Okakura Tensin and William Morris, which I mentioned above. I think that Yanagi constructed his conception of art based on Morris. At any rate, it is really ironic that his aesthetic conception, which was touched off by Korean art, in turn had an influence on Korean aestheticians, both directly and indirectly.

**Artless Art and Planless Planning**

While Yanagi Muneyoshi and Andreas Eckardt were dillettante...
could not have been employed without refined skills and engineering techniques. This means that the ancestors of modern Koreans invested a lot of time and resources to create a sense of naiveté, or the product of disinterestedness.33

Ko’s concept of disinterestedness is a valid one, but his interpretation needs to be augmented. In my view, naiveté is not something lacking in comparison to classic beauty, which is at the height of artfulness. Naïve beauty has the same value and standing as classic beauty. What is incomplete cannot be put into the category of naiveté from the outset.

Choe Sun-u is a Korean aesthetician belonging to the Ko School. In his writings, he defined the characteristics of Korean pottery and woodcraft as “simplicity and naiveté.”34 He might have inherited this view from his teacher, but he used his own sense of intuition to identify three characteristics of the Korean aesthetic. First, as reflected in the genre paintings of the Joseon dynasty, the Korean aesthetic is marked by plain, mild, and “unflattering” colors and clothing. Sec-

31. Ko (1963a, 6).
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This disinterestedness transforms into the “attitude of conforming to nature.” “When we build a house on a hill and put up walls, we do it in layers to follow the terrain. We never force anything on nature and instead conform to it.” Thus, this seeming indifference is a proactive step toward an aesthetical principle of emphasizing unity with nature. For Ko, naturalness (jayeonmi) is a comprehensive concept. This is quite similar to Kim Won-yong as well. His understanding of the Korean aesthetic as a form of “naturalism” for the Korean aesthetic, based on Koreans’ attachment to the natural environment, makes him sound like a naturalist. But his notion of naturalism aims to “understand and represent objects as they are and to thoroughly exclude the self.” Thus, it seems that nature is a channel or an instrument to reach the essence of things. One comes to believe it is a nature defined as an “attitude of creating beauty.” Here, nature means what we call a form of “naturalness” without artificiality.

There have been some critical views put forth on naturalism in Korean art. Pointing out that naturalism is all-embracing and therefore meaningless, Dietrich Seckel presented a new systematic methodology and approached the Korean aesthetic based on it. Kim’s “naturalism” is often attacked for not being very systematic. Despite all this, however, it is true that trying to remove artificiality is a characteristic of Korean art.

Shamanism

Korean shamanism is displayed well in the art of the Bronze Age. As mentioned in the Samguk yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), the fact that Namhae, the second king of the Silla kingdom, was a shaman allows us a glimpse into what that ancient society was distinguished by simple, direct expression rather than power, and it is calm and artless rather than fussy.

Regarding buncheong ware bowl with arabesque patterns using iron pigment (figure 1). Choe noted its “beauty of broad-minded, fresh wildness,” while Dietrich Seckel, a German art historian, described it as “spontaneous, fresh, energetic and vigorous.” Anyone looking at buncheong ware would surely agree.

Naturalness

Most aestheticians view naturalness as a universal feature of Korean art. When they say “natural,” they mean two things. One is a natural approach to creating beauty and the other is harmony with nature. As mentioned previously, in 1941, Ko Yu-seop noted disinterestedness as a feature of the Korean aesthetic. Taking the example of architecture, he said the “natural curve of the wood was used without alteration.” Here, the term natural has some reference to the naturalness of the material, but it seems to have a stronger meaning of the former, i.e., the “natural approach to creating beauty.”

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like.\textsuperscript{45} I believe that despite China’s long influence on Korean culture, Koreans exhibit different emotional traits from the Chinese because of their shamanic traditions, which originated north of China.

Shamanism is artistic in nature. In ancient society, the shaman also served as a blacksmith\textsuperscript{46} and presided over a ceremony that was always accompanied by music and dance. Also, an aesthetic interpretation, which states that “our aesthetic and artistic interest in gut is maintained as the ethos of gut is released through the celebration of pathos and field play,” is acceptable.\textsuperscript{47} Further, when a gut is performed with “scattered songs” called sanjo, people experience something mystical and reach a very “excited” state.\textsuperscript{48} This makes sense, as the ordinary sense of “excitement” in daily life is very similar to the artistic experience of ecstasy.

Cho Yo-han emphasizes the shamanic features of traditional Korean art. This quality is represented by nonghyeonseong (“freely vibrating without adherence to formality”) in traditional Korean music, which refers to the artist’s freedom of expression, i.e., allowing the musician’s creativity to be released within a boundary.\textsuperscript{49} This freedom of expression is also found in painting. According to Cho, viewers of the painting immediately sense that Kim Hong-do painted Chongseokjeong pavillion in the style of a realistic landscape painting, but he was completely unrestrained in creating it. Further, Cho argues that the aesthetic characteristics of freely expressed vibratos runs through Chusa Kim Jeong-hui’s calligraphy, Dae-wongun’s ink paintings of orchids, and even in modern art.\textsuperscript{50}

I do not know exactly what Cho had in mind for good examples of modern art, but I agree with his estimation of the Chusa style of calligraphy. “I see hints of deviation in the fresh and lively patterns of buncheong ware and free expressions in folk paintings. These deviations reveal a fresh force of life.”\textsuperscript{51} To me, that is another character of shamanism.

Humor

Humor (haehak) occupies an important place in aesthetic categorization. The definition of humor is “words or actions that are comic and satiric”; thus, humor, comicality, and satire seem to be similar concepts. To differentiate them further, “humor is more flexible than sarcasm and has an open-minded grace. Unlike satire or sarcasm, it does not prescribe the ‘panacea of negation’ and is imbued with a style of seeking something higher.”\textsuperscript{52}

But since it is not easy to pinpoint specific examples within the conceptual definition, I feel the need to rely on those found in modern Western aesthetics, which offer another angle. The following is a very practical definition offered up by a nineteenth-century German school. Comicality (golgye, das Komische) refers to unanticipated pettiness (das uberraschend Kleine) turning up suddenly. It is a pleasant feeling that arises when tense psychological energy expectant of something scatters abruptly, and it is also an opposing feeling that arises from this contradiction. Humor, which is of the highest value among comicalities, emerges in revealing the greatness within pettiness, healthy-looking infirmity, or self-deceptive heroism.\textsuperscript{53}

I have been very interested in this topic and made presentations on how it is manifested in art at international meetings, as well as in formal papers on the subject.\textsuperscript{54} Let me cite here some important passages from one of my papers:\textsuperscript{55}

To denote comicality and humor as prominent features of Korean art is not unusual. Art historians such as Ko Yu-seop and Choe Sun-u,
The Korean Aesthetic in Daily Life

We have reviewed so far some major aesthetic conceptions in the study of the Korean aesthetic. One thing that must be first and foremost kept in mind is that we should not assume that only one aesthetic characteristic can explain everything there is to know about the Korean aesthetic. It should therefore be recognized that Korean artistic works considered to have a classic beauty can also have other aesthetic qualities, such as simplicity and humor.

Why is it necessary to ascertain the historical trajectory of the Korean aesthetic? It goes without saying that this undertaking is a large part of the study of art history and aesthetics. Such an undertaking is not just a compilation of history, but a key to the cultural identity formation of Koreans. We need to realize that the aesthetic characteristics manifested in Korean art history are important guides for the direction of modern art and may have a great influence on modern life.

Now, let me summarize the characteristics of the Korean aesthetic by focusing on simplicity and naiveté from an aesthetic standpoint and see how they can be applied to modern times. Regarding simplicity, I have already stated that it is associated with classic beauty, in keeping with Gombrich’s notion. Many people think that naiveté means less than perfection and tend to underrate it. But it is complete unto itself, and should not be interpreted as a middle- or lower-level category in the aesthetic hierarchy. Naiveté is a concept parallel to classic beauty and may be regarded as one of the two pillars buttressing the world of aesthetics. Indeed, naiveté is designated at times as “another model of civilization.”

The concept of naiveté is best applied to the type of artistic work

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58. Kwon (1997, 71 and note 8); Kwon Young-pil et al., ocit., pp.94-95, pl.2.
61. Here we need to lend an ear to what an architect said: “Reading architecture is complex; it requires intuition, analysis, bodily experience and knowledge at the same time. Classic perfection and articulation coexist with a serene world expressed in a simple unconcerned manner.” Kim G. (2001, 102).
wherein the final finishing is done by hand, such as handicrafts. Can this term then be applied to today’s machine-made industrial products? For industrial products, design comes before production. In the stage of design, naiveté can be expressed without compromising function. A good example is that of type printing, which leaves room for manual work, so one can show off one’s “manual touches.” Unlike electronic printing, the rugged surface texture of type prints allows us to feel simplicity to some extent.

Interestingly, in this digital era, we occasionally experience an analog sense of beauty. For instance, some books made in France come in a “half-open cut” that are opened fully by cutting the corners with a knife. This may be seen as an extreme form of naivety, mixing sophisticated machine work and rough manual cutting.

Next, there is the issue of the colors used in traditional art. It seems fair to say that color-wise, half tints—such as jade, dark blue and pink—used in the folk paintings of Joseon, are typical of the Korean aesthetic. These colors can easily be applied to modern clothing, works of art, daily necessities, and household electronics such as cars, refrigerators, and so on. The interior decoration of airplanes, for example, has proven to be an effective area for boosting modern interest in the Korean aesthetic, as it is an area where cultural identity can be best represented through art and design in particular.

It would be meaningful to examine the development of traditional categories of the Korean aesthetic in modern art, such as naturalness, humor, and naivety (sometimes, simplicity). Kim Won-yong’s literati paintings provide good examples of naturalness. As mentioned previously, he attempted an academic analysis of naturalness in traditional art and portrayed it in his paintings. Kim’s “representation as is” is shown nicely in his paintings. His works, which are often called “literati paintings,” vividly express his temperament. This has nothing to do with whether or not nature was the subject of the painting. A critic remarked that his paintings are “artless and simple without artificiality.” Here, “without artificiality” seems to mean natural. Also, the critique that “with Sambul (his artist name), what he says, what he writes, and what he paints, all have the same foundation, that of human values” implies that it is governed by an aesthetic principle without exaggeration.

Meanwhile, the paintings by Director Heo Dong-hwa of the Museum of Korean Embroidery reveal a sense of humor. The unique features of humorous art manifested even in modern Korean sensibility, reaffirms humor (golgye) as a significant, intrinsic aspect of the Korean aesthetic. In the 1990s, Heo held an exhibition of his collection of Korean farming tools and equipment. The idea of exhibiting these objects as artworks was very original. What drew our attention was his use of materials that were not previously considered works of art. A creative title, inspired by the shape of the tool, was attached to each piece, giving it a new meaning. A pendulum used in weaving Korean mattresses, for example, was entitled A Human Being. A Korean ink case became a chicken’s body. The tools used for digging out mushrooms became the Dancing Cranes. From this unexpected process of challenging fixed ideas about tools and equipment, humor naturally emerges.

Above all, the works of Lee Ufan, a world-renowned artist, gives off a powerful impression of nature. In a series of works produced from the late 1960s, Lee Ufan incorporated nature into his canvases, for example, by placing rocks in the painting. His paintings properly

63. Among traditional artworks, buncheong ware reflects an aesthetic of simplicity. Pottery production in the early Joseon period may be compared to modern-day science as it required a high-level of precision. In industrial pottery production, the exterior form, patterns on surface decorations, design, and surface texture express naivety. Taking this stance, one can find naivety in numerous modern industrial products such as automobiles.

64. The wide use of black and white, which are the two opposite ends in the spectrum of color, for mechanical goods such as cars is only a matter of habit. The range of colors in the spectrum is broad. Thus, Korean traditional colors such as pink, green and dark blue can be listed as a part of the permissible range.

68. Kwon (1997, 72)
belong to the genre of installation art and constituted an artistic expression of his "monoha" theory. Why did he choose rocks to represent nature as per In-der-Welt-Sein discussed in existentialism, the foundation of his aesthetics? Maybe, it was because he wanted to exist in the space where reality met tradition. Moreover, a host of artists, including Lee Ufan, employ repetition of a given subject on the canvas, which is reminiscent of the repeated stamped patterns on buncheong ware, a representative piece of Korean traditional art work. Lee Ufan's From Points (figure 2) and From Line painted in Japan in the early 1970s, Kim Hwan-gi's Where Will We See Each Other Again? What Will We Be By Then? produced in 1970, and the Waterdrops series by Kim Chang-ryeol, who was active in Paris in the late 1960s, express traditional naiveté through simple repetition of the subject. In those pieces, the artists' creative brush strokes generate artistic excellence.

It is fair to say that the Korean aesthetic serves as a guiding principle for modern artists and continues to inspire ideas. We need to renew our understanding of the Korean aesthetic through the following European scholar's critique of the relationship between traditional and modern art:

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69. "Monoha," in which Lee Ufan played a leading role, is a Japanese school of art from the early 1970s which stresses the characteristics of the existential mode of the object. See Kim Mi-gyeong (2006).
70. Yi Jun (2003, 10-12).
71. Yi Jun (2003); Yi Ufan, Picture, 90.

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A subtle, ineffable attraction runs through Korean art. The beauty of naiveté beyond artistry often creates a crude or desolate feeling, but . . . such simple beauty is a characteristic of brilliant Korean artworks. This aesthetic direction and sensibility does not seem too far from that of modern Western aesthetics.

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**GLOSSARY**

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(J.: Japanese)