

Special Feature

# From Colonial Dilettantism to the Korean Wave: The Formation and Ever-changing Roles of Korean Art Collections in the United States

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## Introduction

Overseas Korean collections encompass artifacts that have left the country through a variety of channels. Among these, some were sent abroad as diplomatic gifts at the national level, while others were removed through unjust means such as looting and theft. However, the majority were acquired by foreigners who entered Korea after the opening of its ports, either as gifts or through legitimate purchases. This paper seeks to categorize the key actors and collection periods of Korean art in the United States into four distinct phases and analyze their respective characteristics.

The first period spans from 1882, following the United States-Korea Treaty of Amity and Commerce, to 1905, when Korea lost its diplomatic sovereignty under the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 (Eulsa Treaty). During this time, foreign visitors to Korea were predominantly missionaries and diplomats on official duties. The second period extends from 1905 to 1945, covering the entirety of the Japanese colonial era. During this phase, a significant volume of Korean art was exported overseas, primarily through Japanese antique dealers who operated their business in Seoul. These dealers often transacted with major U.S. institutions, such as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Peabody Essex Museum. Consequently, the role of Japanese antique dealers was instrumental not only in establishing Korean collections in Japan but also in the United States. The third period follows Korea's liberation in 1945 and includes the U.S. military government period as well as the continued presence of U.S. forces in Korea. During this time, Korean art was collected by U.S. diplomats, military personnel, and civilian workers associated with the U.S. military. This period is characterized by a close alliance between the United States and Korea, with frequent visits and extended stays by both diplomatic and military personnel. The final period examines the history of American collectors specializing in Korean art after 1953.

This paper will thus highlight the unique nature of Korean art collections in the United States, the impact of United States-Korea relations on the development of these collections, and the broader significance of these connections. Furthermore, it will critically assess the historical context of these collections, propose solutions to address existing issues, and explore future directions for the utilization of Korean art collections.

## The History of the Formation of Korean Art Collections in the United States

### *The Official Acquisition of Korean Art by Diplomats, Soldiers, and Intelligence Officers (1882–1905)*

Beginning with the 1882 United States-Korea Treaty of Amity and Commerce, the earliest American visitors to Korea primarily came for official duties. These individuals were mainly missionaries, physicians, diplomats, educators, soldiers, and intelligence officers. The gifts presented to them by the Korean royal court formed the basis of some of the most significant overseas collections of Korean art.<sup>1</sup> It is rare for Korean royal artworks to include inscriptions or records of the artists, but the items given to these visitors can often be traced through acquisition records, allowing scholars to estimate that they were produced before the date in these records at the latest. These collections not only reflect the extent of American understanding of Korea at the time but also include objects that were collected officially by the U.S. government.

One notable figure from this period is Robert Wilson Shufeldt (1822–1895), a U.S. Navy admiral who negotiated the United States-Korea Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Although it is unlikely that Shufeldt met King Gojong (r. 1864–1907) during the treaty negotiations, in 1886, four years after the treaty was concluded, King Gojong invited Shufeldt to Korea in recognition of his diplomatic contributions. Shufeldt entered Korea with his adopted daughter, Mary Acromfie Shufeldt (known as Molly). Among the artifacts she later donated to the Smithsonian Institution is an embroidered folding screen featuring *chaekgeori* (a type of still-life painting), which was valued at US\$400. Considering the quality and scale of the piece, it is regarded as a premier example of royal art. Not all of Shufeldt's collection, however, consisted of gifts from the royal court. Prior to his involvement in the treaty, Shufeldt had spent a considerable amount of time in Japan, where he had also collected art. In an 1880 letter to Mary, who was then in the United States, Shufeldt described shopping in Nagasaki: "Yesterday I went shopping in Old Nagasaki. The town is only a shadow of its former self, European civilization is killing it. I found

1 For the collecting activities during this period see Woo 2018.

little of value—no bronzes or lacquerware worth purchasing—just a few rare Yuan blue-and-white porcelain plates and a set of Kaga tea plates and cups, were all I bought and there for their rarity!”<sup>2</sup> This correspondence indicates that while Shufeldt was carrying out his official duties as a U.S. Navy admiral and envoy, he was also actively collecting Asian artifacts for personal interest. During his 1886 visit to Korea, Shufeldt purchased various folk artifacts, including 120 paintings from Kim Jun-geun’s *Gisan pungsokdo* (Genre Scenes of Gisan). Among them, 97 are now housed at the Smithsonian Institution, and the remaining 23 are at the Penn Museum (formerly the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Kim Jun-geun is known to have sold genre paintings to foreigners at major open ports such as Wonsan, Choryang in Busan, and Jemulpo in Incheon.

Another prominent figure from this period is Edwin Vernon Morgan (1865–1934), who served as a diplomat in the Korean Empire in 1905. His collection was donated to the Peabody Essex Museum by his nephews and nieces after his death. In 2023, an additional screen from Morgan’s collection, *The Banquet of Guo Ziyi*, which had never been used and is notable for its high-quality pigments and flawless design, was also donated to the Peabody Essex Museum (J. Kim 2024).

John Baptiste Bernadou (1858–1908) is another significant collector from this period. As a U.S. Navy intelligence officer sent by the U.S. government to assess Korea’s economic and strategic potential, Bernadou resided in Korea from 1882 to 1885. In addition to learning the Korean language and gathering information on Korea’s geography, industries, and natural resources, he collected a substantial number of Korean folk artifacts, crafts, and artworks.<sup>4</sup> His collection included high-quality royal works such as *Wanghoedo* (*Tribute Missions to the Son of Heaven*), but much of it comprised *minhwa* (folk paintings) that were widely available in local markets.<sup>5</sup> These *minhwa* overlapped with the collections

of other European visitors from the same period.<sup>6</sup> Many European collectors viewed donating their collections to museums in their home countries as a social responsibility and form of noblesse oblige. For them, donating objects from newly explored regions to contribute to academic research and exhibitions was seen as a public service. In addition, many Europeans were not private travelers but sponsored by national institutions. For example, Charles Varat (1842/43–1893), an ethnologist and anthropologist sponsored by the French Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts, visited Korea in 1888. His collection significantly contributed to the establishment of the Korean gallery at the Guimet Museum. As an ethnologist, Varat focused on ethnographic aspects in his collection.<sup>7</sup> During this period, ethnography continued to hold considerable influence in Europe, particularly in the context of colonial collecting traditions from the age of exploration and imperialism. As a result, even if the Korean collections from this period were purely artistic or fine artworks, they were often categorized in museum departments as items of natural history, anthropology, ethnography, and folklore.

### *The Export of Korean Art by Japanese Antique Dealers (1905–1945)*

During the Japanese colonial period, the most dynamic and influential agents responsible for the sale of Korean art in the United States were Japanese antique dealers, particularly Yamanaka & Co. and Mayuyama & Co. Among them, Yamanaka & Co., headquartered in Osaka, experienced significant international growth under the leadership of Sadajirō Yamanaka (1866–1936).<sup>8</sup> In 1894, Yamanaka embarked on a journey to New York with approximately JPY¥50,000 worth of works. He organized the first sales exhibition mainly on Japanese art and craft, which was met with considerable success. This success was bolstered by key American collectors, including William Sturgis Bigelow (1850–1926), Edward S. Morse (1838–1925), who served as the director of the Peabody Essex Museum from 1880 to 1916, and Ernest F. Fenollosa

2 Letter to M. M. Molly Shufeldt by R. W. Shufeldt May 3, 1880. The original text is provided by the Northeast Asian History Foundation’s website, “Modern Korean Diplomatic Documents,” available at [http://contents.nahf.or.kr/item/level.do?levelId=gk.d\\_0006\\_2050](http://contents.nahf.or.kr/item/level.do?levelId=gk.d_0006_2050) (accessed June 30, 2024).

3 For the genre paintings of Kim Jun-geun collected by Shufeldt, see Shin 2020; Kwon 2022.

4 For the collecting activities of Bernadou, see Park et al. 2020, 20–70.

5 For the *Tribute Missions to the Son of Heaven* collected by Bernadou, see Park 2018, 63–66. For Bernadou’s collection, see Houchins 2004, 15–21.

6 For the *minhwa* collections of Charles Varat and John Bernadou, see Yun 2018, 111–25.

7 Charles Varat was able to collect folk art among the local products of Joseon with the help of the diplomat Victor Collin de Plancy, who was stationed in Joseon at the time. Regarding Charles Varat’s collecting activities, see Varat and Chaillé-Long 2006, 64.

8 For the history of Yamanaka, see Okamura 2003, 9–49, Brady 2020, 21–184, and Yamanaka Sadajirō-den hensankai 1939.

(1853–1908), a professor at Tokyo University and an expert on Japanese art. With their support, Yamanaka firmly established his business on Fifth Avenue in New York, where he sold not only fine art such as Japanese paintings but also a variety of crafts and tea utensils, among others.

Encouraged by the enthusiastic reception in New York, Yamanaka expanded his business, establishing a *bonsai* production facility near Boston to cater to horticultural demand. By 1899, he had opened a branch in Boston, quickly followed by another in Atlantic City. Yamanaka's enterprise spread across the eastern United States, with branches in Maine, Rhode Island, Washington D.C., and Florida. Notable clients of the New York branch included collectors such as Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919) and John D. Rockefeller Jr. (1874–1960) (Brady 2020, 103–57). By 1900, Yamanaka had opened a branch in London, followed by an agency in Paris in 1905, and another branch in Chicago in 1928. The scale of Yamanaka's operations was vast. Over 400 Asian artworks in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art can be traced to Yamanaka & Co. Of the Korean artworks in this museum's collection, approximately 90 pieces were acquired either through Sadajirō Yamanaka before 1905 or through Yamanaka & Co. after that. These works span various genres, including ceramics, paintings, crafts, and sculptures, ranging from a grand folding screen—nearly seven meters wide and three meters tall—created for the imperial court of the Korean Empire to simple *minhwa* folk paintings.<sup>9</sup>

The second most active dealer in Korean art during the Japanese colonial period was Mayuyama & Co., founded by Matsutarō Mayuyama (1882–1935).<sup>10</sup> In 1905, Matsutarō relocated to Beijing to learn the antique business, at a time when Eastern art was increasingly popular in the West and Beijing had emerged as a central hub in the antique market. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a boom in railway construction in China, which resulted in the discovery of numerous ancient artifacts. Additionally, turmoil within the Qing dynasty led to the leakage of royal treasures into the market. Sensing an opportunity, Matsutarō began importing Qing dynasty ceramics into Japan. By 1916, his antique shop in Ginza, Tokyo, had become highly successful. His son, Jun'kichi Mayuyama (1913–1999), later took over the business, continuing its expansion

and establishing connections with leading institutions and private collectors in the United States, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Seattle Art Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, and figures like John D. Rockefeller III. Jun'kichi Mayuyama's contributions to the development of Asian art galleries in American museums were on par with those of other prominent dealers such as C. T. Loo (1880–1957), a major figure in Chinese art.

While these Japanese antique dealers have faced moral criticism for exporting artifacts from occupied regions including Korea, their role in shaping Asian art collections in the West remains significant. Despite the ethical complexities surrounding their activities, it is undeniable that Yamanaka & Co. and Mayuyama & Co. played pivotal roles in building collections of Korean art in the United States, for which they were recognized by institutions in Britain and France.<sup>11</sup>

### *Collecting by Diplomats and U.S. Military Personnel after 1945*

After the Liberation in 1945 and during the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) period, many American diplomats and politicians, including the U.S. Secretary of Defense and even presidents, visited Korea. Among them, Lea Sneider (1925–2020), the wife of Richard Lee Sneider (1922–1986), who served as the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea from 1974 to 1978, is a figure who warrants mentioning first. Lea Sneider consistently collected art pieces during her stay in Korea together with her husband and, after returning to the United States, she opened an Asian art antique shop in New York called “Lea Sneider Asian Art,” which she operated for 30 years.

Richard Sneider began his career at the U.S. State Department as a specialist in Japan and Korea and special advisor on U.N. issues, and he continued to hold various positions including serving as Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Japan. He was a recognized expert in Asian affairs until his death in 1986. During his time in Korea, he played a crucial role in significant events, including United States-Korea trade relations, the military alliance between the two countries, and the Korea gate lobbying scandal.

9 For the largest gold paintings traded at Yamanaka and their distribution channels, see Kim 2018.

10 For an overview of the history of Mayuyama & Co., Ltd. see <https://www.mayuyama-junkichi.jp> (accessed July 10, 2024).

11 Sadajirō Yamanaka was posthumously awarded the Legion of Honor in France and received the honor of being confirmed as a Royal Warrant supplier to the British royal family by King George V of the United Kingdom.

While in Korea, Lea Sneider collected a diverse range of artifacts, including ceramics, woodcraft, paintings, Buddhist sculptures, and shamanistic tools.<sup>12</sup> Her exposure to Korean art deepened when she met the architect, folk art collector, and educator Zo Zayong (1926–2000), which sparked her passion for Korean folk paintings. She traveled regularly to Seoul, Daegu, and Busan to gather works, focusing particularly on folk art and crafts that had not received recognition in Korea at the time. Upon returning to the United States in 1978, she began promoting Korean and Japanese art. The greatest achievement among her contributions was the exhibition of mainly her collection of Korean artifacts that was held in 1983 at the Asia Society in New York. The exhibition was further enriched by the participation of Robert Moes, the then Asian art curator at the Brooklyn Museum. Titled “Auspicious Spirits: Korean Folk Paintings and Related Objects,” the exhibition was accompanied by the publication of an catalog of excellent quality and relevant research findings (Moes 1983a, 1983b). It was a rare and therefore pioneering attempt, as a Korean art exhibition held in the United States at a time when understanding of Korea was limited, to focus on folk crafts and folk paintings, thereby introducing Korean art in earnest and highlighting its appeal in America. Even after leaving Korea after her husband’s



Figure 1. *Jeju Island Munjado*, ink and color on paper, 162 × 396 cm, Peabody Essex Museum, Massachusetts

deployment, Lea Sneider continued to visit the country regularly to acquire artifacts. Works such as the *Munjado* (*Pictorial Ideographs of the Eight Confucian Virtues*) from the Harvard Art Museums, the *chaekgeori* from the Honolulu Museum of Art, and the *Birds and Flowers*, *Flower and Rocks*, and *Jeju Island Munjado* from the Peabody Essex Museum all exemplify the refined beauty of folk paintings (Figure 1). This was a time when very few individuals in Korea were collecting *Jeju Island Munjado*, let alone folk paintings. Her selection and acquisition are evidence of her distinctive vision and taste.

Even after the U.S. military government period ended, the U.S. military remained stationed in Korea, resulting in the presence of many American soldiers and civilian employees in the country. One of these individuals, Robert Mattielli (1925–), who lived in Seoul from 1958 to 1988 and actively collected around 2,000 pieces of Korean art, stands out as a significant collector of Korean art (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> Having worked as a civilian employee at the U.S. military for 30 years in Korea, Mattielli supported the ongoing exhibition of Korean art in the northwest United States by loaning, donating, and bequeathing his collection to institutions such as the Portland Art Museum, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon, and the Seattle Art Museum. Among his

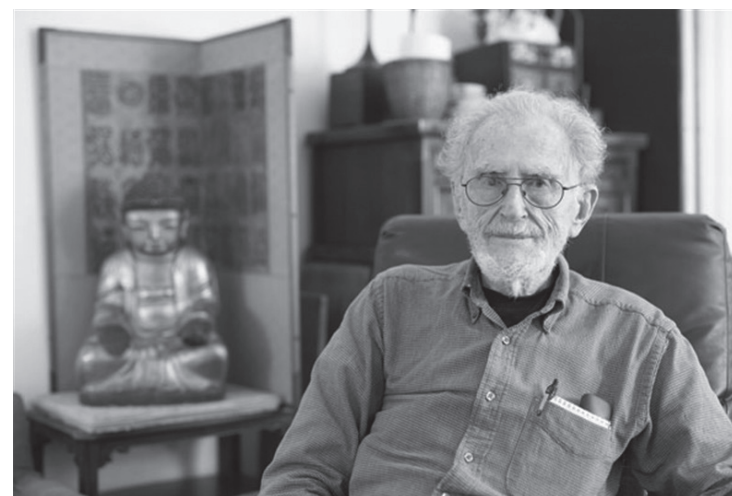


Figure 2. Robert Mattielli, photo by and © Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation

12 The interview with Lea Sneider was published in the *Korea Daily New York* on October 4, 2008, under the title “Kkokdu deul i nae ai deul cheoreom na reul jikyeo jujiyo” (The Kkokdu Protect Me Like My Children). For this, see [https://www.nyculturebeat.com/index.php?mid=People2&document\\_srl=3132665](https://www.nyculturebeat.com/index.php?mid=People2&document_srl=3132665) (accessed July 11, 2024).

13 For the history of the formation of the Mattielli Collection, see Kim 2024.

contributions, literary materials like family trees and letters were donated to the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Academy of Korean Studies.<sup>14</sup> Mattielli still has about 1,900 artifacts at his home, many of which are art pieces that served as cultural products for foreigners, which were rarely collected at that time by locals. For example, the 10-panel printed folding screen *One Hundred Children* is clearly a product made after the introduction of printing technology. Printed paintings gained popularity as folk art and commercial art starting from the 1920s and were widely distributed throughout the country. *One Hundred Children* is presumed to be one of those art works produced in large quantities about popular subjects to meet the growing demand of enthusiasts of paintings and calligraphic works. Interestingly, another 10-panel painted folding screen *One Hundred Children* features children in traditional Korean clothing engaged in activities like kite flying and snowball fights. This is different from the versions that depicted young boys dressed in Chinese-style clothing and playing games originating from China, such as *Pretend to Be Magistrate and Cock-Fighting* (Figure 3). The folding screens produced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are



Figure 3. Part of *One Hundred Children*, Mattielli Collection

worth noting in that they visually represent the unique customs of Korea back then. In addition, it is insightful to consider that these works were marketed as cultural products for foreigners at Insadong during that era. They are also significant given the rarity of such examples still existing in Korea.

The cases of Lea Sneider and Robert Mattielli highlight the importance of their collecting activities in the context of the historical relationship between Korea and the United States during the post-1945 military government administration and military presence period.

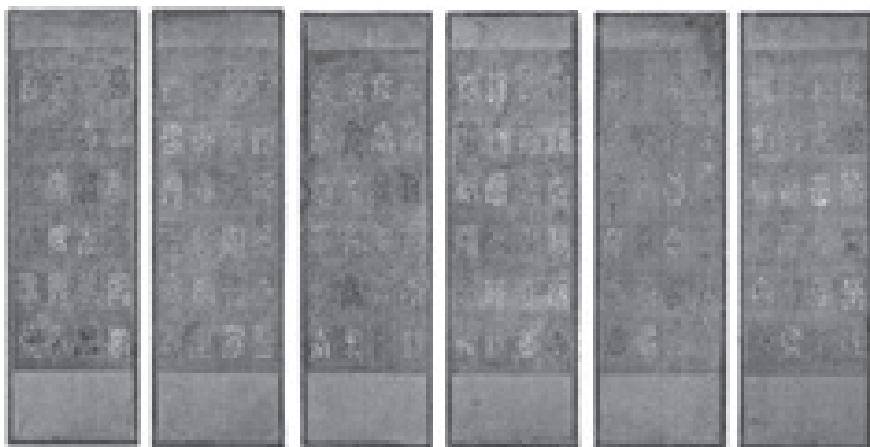
### *Collecting by Professional Collectors in the United States after 1953*

The final type of contribution to Korean collections in the United States comes from specialized collectors who primarily acquire artworks that are already in the United States, either by purchasing them or through dealers, rather than visiting Korea to collect them. Mary Griggs Burke (1916–2012) is a prominent example of a specialized collector of Asian art and spent 50 years collecting them in the United States. Burke began her serious collection of Asian art after visiting Japan in 1965, where she purchased her first collection, Shinto painting of the Kamakura period. She consulted Professor Miyeko Murase 村瀬美恵子 (1924– ) of the Art History Department at Columbia University in this process, whose advice provided her collection with depth as well as balance in terms of genre.<sup>15</sup> It was during this time that Burke amassed a significant number of Korean artworks. For decades, she was deeply involved in the Asia division of Columbia University's Art History Department and generously contributed to scholarships supporting the graduate program there.<sup>16</sup> She was also known for opening her collection to students at any time to encourage their research. The doors of her mini-museum in Manhattan was frequently open for research, and once a year, Burk invited students and researchers to her residence in Oyster Bay, Long Island, and hold seminars. In 2006, Burke announced that she was going to donate her collection to both the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. After her passing in 2012 and a long process of research and discussions on the part of the two museums, her collection was

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the Mary Burke Japanese Collection studied by Mineko Murase, see Murase 2000, 3–408.

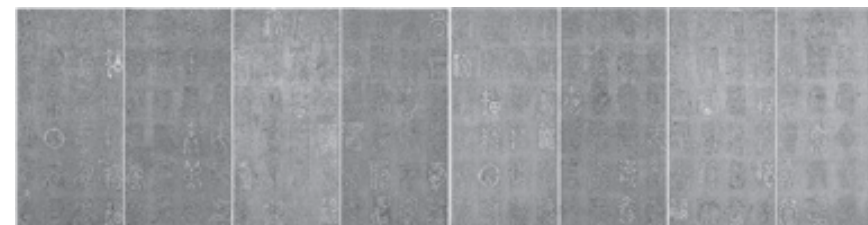
<sup>16</sup> For the formation of the Mary Burke Collection and activities supporting the art history academia, see <https://burkecollection.org> (accessed July 14, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> For the Mattielli Collection donated to the Harvard-Yenching Institute, see Kim 2021, 312–15.



**Figure 4.** *Subokja (Longevity and Good Fortune)*, gold-thread embroidery on silk, 86.7 × 193.2 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota

divided and housed between the two museums. In addition to the artifacts, Burke donated a large sum of money for future exhibitions of and research on the items. However, the curators of both institutions were tasked with a daunting challenge, because she required that the types and characteristics of the items of the Burke collection housed at either institution should not overlap with the other. The task to classify the artifacts, therefore, necessitated substantial research, discussions, and negotiations. The Burke collection that was divided between the two institutes consists of a total of 857 Japanese artworks, 91 Korean artworks, and 64 Chinese artworks. Burke's Korean collection encompasses all types of Korean ceramics, from earthenware to celadon, *buncheong* ware, and white porcelain, and is characterized by its inclusion of major artworks, ranging from Buddhist paintings commissioned by Queen Munjeong (1501–1565) for her son King Myeongjong 明宗 (r. 1534–1567) to high-quality folk paintings. Among Burke's collection, the Minneapolis Institute of Art houses the six-panel folding screen *Subokja (Longevity and Good Fortune)*, with the characters *su* (longevity 壽) and *bok* (good fortune 福) depicted on every other panel alternatively (Figure 4). Each panel contains one of the characters embroidered in various forms such as seal script that are arranged in six lines by four columns. Interestingly, an identical piece acquired and owned by the late director of the Museum of Korean Embroidery, Heo Dong-hwa (1926–2018), featuring an outline for the same embroidery pattern,



**Figure 5.** *Subokja (Longevity and Good Fortune)*, embroidery on silk, 65 × 280 cm, Seoul Museum of Craft Art, Seoul

is housed at the Seoul Museum of Craft Art (Figure 5). The former screen at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, however, consists of six panels, whereas the latter at the Seoul Museum of Craft Art is an eight-panel folding screen. A closer look reveals that the first panel of the latter corresponds to the second panel of the former; the second panel of the latter corresponds to the third panel of the former; and the third panel of the latter corresponds to the fourth panel of the former. The fifth panels of both folding screens are the same. The sixth panel of the latter then corresponds to the first panel of the former, and the seventh panel of the latter correspond to the sixth panel of the former. Simply put, it appears that the fifth and eighth panel are missing from the former folding screen housed at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Of note is how the first panel and the last, or eighth, panel of the latter housed at the Seoul Museum of Craft Art are each decorated along the edges with ten of each character of *su* and *bok*, respectively. This suggests that the second panel in the former should in fact be repositioned as the first panel to properly follow its original layout. This example demonstrates how comparing similar items in Korea and collections outside of Korea works to mutually expand and enhance the understanding of both. Most of the Korean collection gathered by Burke, including this piece, was acquired by Keum Ja Kang (1941–), who managed an antiques business in New York. In sum, Burke was a specialized collector of various genres of Korean art who acquired her collection through dealers in the United States without visiting Korea.

Another notable collector of Korean art is Robert Moore (1930–), who is based primarily in Los Angeles. Although he briefly served as a U.S. Army soldier in Korea in 1955, most of his collection was acquired in the United States. He sought out and persuaded those who had visited Korea as missionaries

or diplomats, or their descendants, to expand his collection.<sup>17</sup> Moore continues to actively collect artifacts and has sold items from his collection over several times. In 2000, he sold 250 pieces of Korean art, including ceramics, paintings, textiles, furniture, sculptures, and crafts, to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, during which he also donated 750 smaller items, including ceramic shards. His collection stretches from royal artworks of superb quality such as *Screen of Banquets for Dowager Queen Sinjeong in Gyeongbokgung Palace* 戊辰進饌圖屏, which was created to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of Queen Sinjeong in 1868, to shamanistic paintings and folk art. Unlike others, collectors like Burke and Moore stand out in that they did not export their acquisitions that were collected in Korea but instead focused on acquiring artifacts that were already in the United States.

## Issues of Provenance, Repatriation, and Utilization of Korean Art Collections

### *Nationality Debates Surrounding Korean Collections in the United States*

In some cases, the items currently among the collections of Korean art in the United States were initially identified as Chinese or Japanese and were reclassified as Korean after research findings accumulated over time. In particular, it is not uncommon for holding institutions to have categorized artifacts taken out of Korea under Japanese colonial rule as Chinese or Japanese. A good example is *Sea, Cranes, and Peaches* at the Dayton Art Institute, which was recently identified as Korean. This piece was donated by Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson (1905–2002) on September 12, 1941.<sup>18</sup> Prior to her marriage, Patterson had already established a significant reputation as a pioneering female journalist, an unusual achievement for her time. After marrying the diplomat Jefferson Patterson (1891–1977) in June 1940, she continued to serve U.S. diplomatic efforts worldwide, which means that the donation of this artifact

took place slightly over a year after her marriage. Despite being donated by her, it does not appear that she actually used the item. Museum documentation records that the screen was originally acquired in the late 1920s by her maternal uncle, Charles C. Goodrich (1871–1932), specifically for decorating his drawing room. Goodrich worked in technical development for the B. F. Goodrich Company, a major automobile tire and related product manufacturer founded by his father, Benjamin Goodrich (1841–1888). Following Charles Goodrich's death in 1932, *Sea, Cranes, and Peaches* was transferred to other relatives in Maine and eventually reached the Dayton Art Institute in 1941 with the help of Laurance Page Roberts (1907–2002), the then curator of the Asian Art Department at the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>19</sup> At the time of donation, the museum cataloged the piece as a highly decorative Japanese folding screen. Subsequent assessments done in 1958 and 1978 by experts of each field reidentified the screen as Chinese. In 1958, Sherman Emery Lee (1918–2008), curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, classified the work as an excellent and rare, albeit insignificant, 16<sup>th</sup>- or 17<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese painting that was reframed in Japan. A foundational figure in Chinese art history in the United States, Sherman Lee was then serving as director of Oriental Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, not far from the Dayton Art Institute. In 1978, Takashi Sugiura (1913–2005), an art conservator at the Freer Gallery, noting its need for repair, suggested that the piece might be Chinese due to the size of the gilt, which was relatively smaller than ordinary Japanese pieces.<sup>20</sup> Decades later, in 2007, professors Hiromitsu Ogawa 小川裕充 and Masaaki Itakura 板倉聖哲, along with a research team from Tokyo University, conducted a comprehensive survey of Chinese paintings in collections located throughout the United States, during which they published a black-and-white image of this work (Ogawa and Itakura 2013, 305). No comment conflicting with the previous conclusions were made about its origin. Misato Ido 井戸美里, a professor at Kyoto Institute of Technology, was the first person to question its origin, which was later confirmed through a series of academic conferences and symposia to reach the consensus that it was Korean.<sup>21</sup> This case is one of the many situations that

17 I conducted an interview with Robert Moore on June 28, 2022, at his home near Los Angeles regarding the background of his Korean collection.

18 For the provenance of *Sea, Cranes, and Peaches* at the Dayton Art Institute, see Kim 2020.

19 The documents related to the acquisition of works held at the Dayton Art Institute were provided by Peter Doebler, the curator of the museum.

20 For the content of object inventory card at the Dayton Art Institute, see Kim 2020, 111–13.

21 For the outcomes of the symposium, see Gugoe sojae munhwajae jaedan 2020, 12–160.



could happen during Japanese colonial rule when Korea, as a colonized nation, lacked international representation and reminds present and future researchers that there may yet be artifacts held in collections of East Asian art in the United States that turn out to be Korean.

### *Cultural Goods for Foreigners and Their Status*

Among the Korean artifacts housed in U.S. institutions are pieces that likely would not have been collected by Korean institutions. These are works targeting foreigners that were created in Korea specifically for export or commercial purposes, often referred to as export art, commercial art, or cultural products. A representative example is *Smiling Tiger*, which the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University currently holds. Acquired in 1989, the woodblock print bears the seals Suam 水巖 and Han Jin-hae 韓鎭海, identifying the artist. Additional annotations on the piece, “180/500” and “J. H. Han 1973,” further indicate edition number and year of production (Figure 6).

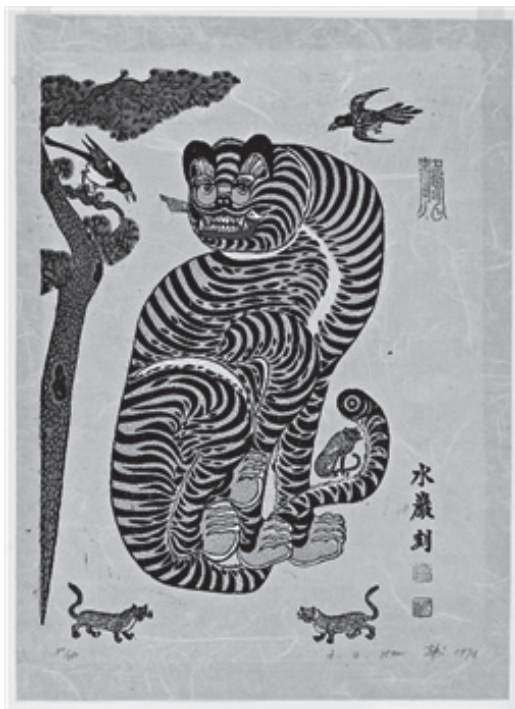


Figure 6. Han Jin-hae, *Smiling Tiger*, 1973, color woodblock print, Cantor Arts Center, California

Han Jin-hae’s woodblock prints are not exclusive to the Cantor Arts Center. Another of Han’s works, *Talismanic Picture of Tigers and Magpies*, was acquired by the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 2022, and in 2024, a genre painting print by Han was added to the collection at the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In February 2024, another woodblock print featuring tigers and magpies by Han was auctioned at Bonhams Skinner. The auctioned version was the same print as the print housed at the Cantor Arts Center, although the annotation “239/500” indicates that it was printed somewhat later than the Cantor edition.

Suam Han Jin-hae’s career took off in 1969 after he won a special prize in a nationwide print competition in 1968.<sup>22</sup> He first began showcasing his works at Su Gallery in 1970 and sold his works from Jaha Gallery, later renamed Joseon Gallery, and various other galleries located in the arcade connecting Bando Hotel and Josun Hotel. The works that were especially popular among foreign collectors were his print adaptations of genre paintings by the artist Sin Yun-bok (1758–1813) and the motif of magpies and tigers. His fame led to the exhibition of Han’s works at the Walker Hill Gallery and the Korean Folk Village, with some pieces even sent to the United States for exhibition and sale through the Korean Student Association at George Washington University. According to Han’s personal records, he sold a total of 8,661 prints from 1969 to 1982 (Kim 2019). As nearly fifty years have passed since these works had been collected, currently the younger generation succeeding the collectors are likely selling them at auctions or donating them to institutions.

Although such works may not have easily gained institutional recognition in Korea, they function as representations of Korean aesthetic values in the United States. Korean collections held in by foreign institutions have served broader roles beyond pure artistic or aesthetic appreciation. In the United States, the exhibition halls featuring Korean artifacts educate visitors on Korea’s history, act as focal points for the Korean diaspora, and serve as venues for cultural events within Asian immigrant communities. Consequently, assessing these collections purely from the academic perspective within Korea has its limitations, as these works assume unique roles and cultural significance abroad,

22 The article interviewing Han Jin-hae was published in the November 2019 issue of *Wolgan minbwa*. The Gahoe Museum held an exhibition titled “1970s Genre Paintings, Cultural Products, and Hotel Galleries” from November 3 to November 13, 2019.

warranting a reevaluation of their status through standards distinct from those applied in Korea.

### *The Collection of Korean Art as Ethnography and Its Limitations*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, European intellectuals collected artifacts from Asia as objects of natural history, anthropology, ethnography, and folklore. These acquisitions were seen as intellectual legacy and, in some cases, trophies of the age of exploration, the era of imperialism, and colonial expansion. However, in the German-speaking cultural sphere encompassing Germany and Austria, there is now a strong push to critically self-reflect upon and overcome these colonialist approaches to methods of collection, classification, and exhibition. Institutions that have amassed extensive Korean collections such as the Museum of Ethnology, Hamburg, the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, and the Museum of Ethnology, Vienna, have been rebranded over the past decade with more neutral names—the Museum am Rothenbaum, Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK, Museum at the Rothenbaum, Cultures and Arts of the World), and the Berlin Humboldt Forum, which encompasses the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and the Museum of Asian Art, and the Weltmuseum Wien (World Museum in Vienna), respectively—reflecting this shift in perspective.

During the period when the intellectual legacy of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe continued to influence the United States, collections of Korean art there were similarly valued not purely for their aesthetic qualities but were largely classified as objects of anthropology or ethnography. As a result, many of these collections were not housed at art museums but museums of natural history, anthropology, or ethnography. Remarkably, even works of the highest caliber in the fine arts were and still are frequently managed by natural history or anthropology departments rather than art museums. For example, the collection of Korean art at the Smithsonian Institution, with the exception of ceramics, is mainly managed by the ethnology division of the National Museum of Natural History rather than by the National Museum of Asian Art. For instance, the masterpiece of royal art, *chaekgeori*, collected by Robert Shufeldt, remains unexhibited due to its placement at the National Museum of National History under the Smithsonian Institution.

Such misplacement has resulted in many artworks being treated at the same level as natural resources such as mineral specimens or marine fossils and

folk objects and, in some cases, are overshadowed by more popular displays such as dinosaur exhibits, with the result of being deprived of any chance to be exhibited at all. The encouraging news, though, is that during the recent years, Europe has been seeking to reevaluate and dismantle the colonialist framework inherent in disciplines like ethnography, which historically treated Asian artifacts primarily as research objects within colonial structures.<sup>23</sup> This rethinking has led to new classification systems and methodologies in dealing with Asian artifacts. Collections of Korean art in the United States similarly must undergo a reassessment that recognizes their intrinsic value as art to newly categorize and interpret from a fresh perspective.

### *Repatriation Issues and Alternatives*

The most pressing issue surrounding Korean art held abroad is the question of repatriation. A significant amount of cultural heritage was removed from Korea during periods of colonial rule under Japan, the Korean War, and the U.S. military government era. This issue is deeply intertwined with the very sensitive parts of international law. Despite the obvious fact that repatriation is necessary when artifacts were illegally or immorally exported, proving the conditions of their removal is often challenging, and even when evidence of wrongful export can be established, the complexities of modern history and diplomatic relations often require involved parties to navigate around the situation with care.

There have, however, been some successful cases of repatriation nevertheless by proving illegality or relying on goodwill. A good example is the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the royal seals of Queen Munjeong and King Hyeonjong among its collection. When these royal seals were recognized to have been stolen from Jongmyo (the royal ancestral shrine) by U.S. military personnel during the Korean War, they were confiscated and held by U.S. Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) in 2013. Following the conclusion of legal proceedings, the United States returned these items to the South Korean government. This instance represents an extremely important example of a state institution confirming the illegal export of Korean heritage and officially repatriating it at the governmental level.

<sup>23</sup> For the critical perspective on the history of ethnography and anthropology as frameworks for museum collections, see Von Oswald and Tinius 2020, 17–42.

There are also examples of the repatriation of Korean cultural artifacts that happened based on personal goodwill. In 2014, it became known that the *Five Buddhas*, a Buddhist painting originally stored at Buljojeon Hall of Songgwangsa Temple, Suncheon, had been stolen. The collector, Robert Mattielli, had purchased the painting from an antique shop in Anguk-dong, Seoul, in the early 1970s and brought it to the United States in 1985, later entrusting it to the Portland Art Museum. Upon receiving provenance information from the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage of Korea that the painting had been looted, Mattielli voluntarily decided to return it to Korea. The returned *Five Buddhas*, one of the rare *Fifty-Three Buddhas* paintings based on the *Sutra on the Contemplation of the Two Bodhisattvas Bhaisajyarāja and Bhaisajyasamudgata* 觀藥王藥上二菩薩經 and only passed down among a small number of Buddhist temples, had originally adorned the left wall near the entrance of the Buljojeon Hall of Songgwangsa Temple. The return of this painting is not only academically valuable but also significant in terms of the history of Korean cultural heritage management, since the owner, Mattielli, was not legally obliged to return it but chose to repatriate it regardless purely based on ethics and goodwill.

Repatriation based on goodwill is increasing at an institutional level. For instance, the Cleveland Museum of Art returned 18 pieces of white porcelain from the tomb of Yi Gi-ha (1646–1718) to the Hansan Yi clan.<sup>24</sup> These pieces had been lost during the clan's relocation of Yi's tomb and, in 1998, were discovered to have been illicitly removed from the country. When the Cleveland Museum of Art was informed by the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation of the unethical route through which the artifacts had reached their collection, the museum underwent internal discussions and ultimately returned the items to Korea. This case is yet another important example of repatriation of cultural heritage based on goodwill of the owning institution in spite of the lack of any legal compulsion (Im 2022).

According to a 2024 report from the Korean Heritage Service, there are currently 246,304 pieces of Korean cultural heritage scattered across 29 countries, though the actual figure is likely higher considering private collections not included in this statistic. Collections of Korean art outside of Korea need to

properly represent Korean history and culture abroad. In addition, for artifacts that can be of high scholarly value to Korean academic communities, those unique in their type and without similar examples in Korea, and those whose loan to Korea is not practically feasible, alternative measures can be used to make them known in Korea. For example, in early 2024, the National Palace Museum of Korea produced media contents of the folding screen of *Seven Jeweled Mountain* and exhibited it alongside a high-quality replica of the original housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art during the same period when the latter museum exhibited *Seven Jeweled Mountain* as well. This coordinated display at both museums marked a shift away from the belief that exhibitions require the physical presence of original artifacts. In particular, the media content serves as a promising approach for presenting overseas Korean collections and should be actively explored as an alternative exhibition method in the future.

### The Value and Future Prospects for the Utilization of Korean Art Collections in the United States

Korean art collections in the United States are significant beyond simply being examples of Korean art housed overseas. Their value is particularly notable in three respects—as chronological indicators for dating similar artifacts, as cultural connections shaped by political, diplomatic, trade, educational, and missionary interactions, and as focal points for preserving Korea's heritage abroad—which the following paragraphs will be looking into in more detail.

First, Korean artifacts existing overseas provide a year after which they could not have been produced, which is informative in dating them as well as similar pieces within Korea. Unlike literati paintings and calligraphic works, which usually bear the artists' names, year of production, and the context behind the art, creations such as royal court paintings, crafts, embroidery, and folk art often lack such information. However, once they are acquired by foreign collectors, the timing of their acquisition or the period of their stay in Korea can provide a clue in estimating the year of production of the particular item. In other words, the items would have been produced at least before they were collected. This can serve as a reference point for evaluating similar artifacts in Korea. For example, although the *Banquet of Queen Mother of the West* at the Peabody Essex Museum lacks any artist signature or seal, information of its

24 For the provenance of *Epitaph Plaques for Yi Gi-ha*, see Cha and Ahn 2022.



Figure 7. Edwin Vernon Morgan  
(available at Wikipedia)

provenance reveals that it was part of the collection of Edwin Vernon Morgan (1865–1934), an American diplomat who served in places including Cuba, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Portugal. During his deployment in Saint Petersburg in Russia and Dalian of Manchukuo between 1899 and 1905, he was able to gain expertise on Far East Asia. He began serving in Seoul starting from March 1905, but when Korea lost diplomatic sovereignty after the signing of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 and became a protectorate of Japan, he returned to the United States in December that same year (Figure 7). While serving in Northeast Asia, he collected a significant number of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese arts and crafts, which his descendants mostly donated to the Peabody Essex Museum after Morgan's death. This provenance of the *Banquet of Queen Mother of the West* thus suggests that it was created before December 1905 at the latest and that it was already in a completed and purchasable state by then, whether Edwin Morgan received it as a gift from the royal court or bought it himself. Such examples like this can establish critical benchmarks for the assessment of comparable artifacts.

Second, these collections embody rich narratives as products of historical interactions in politics, diplomacy, trade, education, and missionary work. Artifacts that crossed borders in premodern and modern times, when transnational mobility was markedly more difficult than the present, often carry stories of the people who obtained them. They represent the experiences of



Figure 8. The Poster of 2023  
Exhibition for the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of  
Korea-Canada Diplomatic Relations,  
Korean Cultural Centre in Canada

missionaries, who risked their lives to perform their work in Korea—dedicated to medical and educational service—and ended up spending their entire lives in Korea, diplomats residing in Korea, and even those traveling for business. These stories link the place of the present with the places they returned to outside Korea in the past. The collection of Canadian missionary James Scarth Gale (1863–1937), held at the Royal Ontario Museum, exemplifies this connection. Gale, who served in Korea for 40 years, from 1888 to 1927, was the first pastor in charge of Yeondong Church at Jongno 5-ga in 1900 and, based on his high proficiency in the Korean language, published a Korean-English lexicography, translated the bible, and even worked on translating Korean classics such as *The Cloud Dream of the Nine* and *The Tale of Chunhyang*.<sup>25</sup> His son George Gale (1911–2007) later donated his father's collection to the Royal Ontario

25 For the James Gale Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, see Park et al. 2020, 136–211. For the history of the formation of the Korean collection at the Royal Ontario Museum see Shen 2019.

Museum and donated funds to the University of Toronto, creating the basis of the James Scarth Gale Scholarship at the school, which supports students of East Asian studies even in the present. Gale's collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, which has featured in various Canada-Korea diplomatic and cultural exchanges—including as one of the many exhibitions held in 2023 to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties between Korea and Canada—has not only been a subject of study for scholars today studying the history of Canada-Korea relations but also served as a prominent example of the first K-Art in Canada (Figure 8).

Third, overseas collections serve as focal points for preserving Korea's tangible and intangible heritage abroad. Numerous institutions, particularly in the United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Japan, have permanent Korean art collections and regularly open special exhibitions dedicated to Korean art. One of the earliest and largest exhibits was the 5,000 Years of Korean Art, which toured across the United States for two years starting from 1981 and attracted over a million visitors. This exhibition helped Korean Americans reconnect with their ancestral heritage and introduced Korea's art and history to local non-Korean residents. Among the more recent notable cases involves the Dayton Art Institute in Ohio. Until 2017, this institute was not known at all for its Korean art holdings, but when the institution's possession of a 12-panel folding screen, *Sea, Cranes, and Peaches*, donated to the museum in 1941 (Figure 9), became known to the public, the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation conducted a full survey of Korean artifacts among the institution's collection. After being conserved and exhibited at the National Palace Museum of Korea in 2021, *Sea, Cranes, and Peaches* was returned to the Dayton Art Institute, where it was featured in the 2022 exhibition, *Art for the Ages: Conservation at DAI*. The discovery of this folding screen also was a turning point for the museum, which uncovered 70 additional Korean artifacts in its storage and used this opportunity to newly open a gallery dedicated to Korean art in 2023 with support from the National Museum of Korea.<sup>26</sup> The series of events has played a crucial role in raising awareness of Korean art in the American Midwest, an area where cultural exchange with Korea has been relatively limited. In this way, Korean art collections abroad, whether large or



**Figure 9.** *Sea, Cranes, and Peaches*, colors and gold on silk, 210 × 720.5 cm, Dayton Art Institute, Ohio

small, continue to function as vital educational resources and platforms for promoting Korea's culture, art, and history to global audiences.

## Conclusion

Artifacts from the past are not limited to its meaning merely as an object. They have unique power as a condensation of time, from their creation to the present moment they are being looked at. The weight of this time bridge people in the past with those living in the present and wordlessly convey their stories and information. Looking forward, Korean art collections abroad will continue to serve as educational resources and cultural anchors for Korean Americans and even for other Americans with diverse backgrounds interested in Korea's history, culture, and art. They also have the potential to break through established genre hierarchies within Korea and offer new perspectives for evaluating Korean artifacts.

The global appreciation and rediscovery of Korean art and culture have reached unprecedented intensity, receiving more attention than ever before. In the United States, several recent exhibitions have showcased Korean art, prompting the art world to seek out an expanded notion of Korean-ness and explore narratives that connect Korea's past and present. Just as Chinoiserie was popular in Europe from the late 17<sup>th</sup> to late 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Japonisme brought Japanese aesthetics into prominence in the European society during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Korean Wave is currently reshaping global culture through novel interpretations. This is a point at which recognizing the value and

26 For the formation of Korean collection at the Dayton Art Institute, see Doeblner 2018.

significance of Korean art collections in the United States and expanding their role will be more essential than ever.

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## Abstract

This paper examines the history of Korean art collections in the United States by dividing it into four major periods and discussing key issues to each period. During the first period, from 1882 to 1910, foreigners who visited Joseon and the Korean Empire collected Korean artworks. In the second period, Japanese antique dealers primarily gathered artworks in colonial Korea and sold them to American institutions and individuals. The third period, under U.S. military government rule following World War II, during the Korean War, and subsequent U.S. military presence, was marked by American residents collecting Korean art. The fourth period involves professional collectors who acquired Korean artworks through dealers in the United States instead of traveling to Korea and collecting them in person. This history of Korean art collections raises issues related to nationality, ethnography, and colonial collecting practices. Additionally, certain types of artworks that have not been highly valued in Korea received significant attention and were actively collected within the United States. This paper proposes alternative exhibition methods for overseas cultural heritage and calls for a reevaluation of Korean art collections in the United States from a perspective that moves beyond an ethnographic gaze.

**Keywords:** Korean art collections, colonial collecting, Korean Wave, ethnography, provenance, repatriation