

Reconsidering Goryeo Art and Its Significance in Academia and Beyond

Various exhibitions and conferences took place in 2018 to mark the 1,100th founding anniversary of the Goryeo kingdom. These significant projects introduced new content and interpretations by highlighting the multifaceted aspects of Goryeo culture. Two such projects include the National Museum of Korea's special exhibition, "Goryeo: The Glory of Korea," and the 2018 Fall Art History Conference, "Goryeo: Its Glorious Art," jointly organized by the National Museum of Korea and the Art History Association of Korea (AHAK). In linking the special exhibition and conference under the umbrella theme of Goryeo art, a great effort was made to appeal to both academia and the general population. Moreover, the two events are meaningful in terms of their composition, content, scale, and level of research. This review will briefly touch upon both events, with a focus on their achievements and significance. It will also contemplate the optimum methods of incorporating and interpreting Goryeo art in future studies and exhibitions for the purposes of facilitating progression in the field of Korean art history.

Introduction to the Special Exhibition and Conference

The National Museum of Korea hosted a special exhibition titled "Goryeo: The Glory of Korea" from December 2018 until March 2019. There were nearly 450 key artifacts exhibited from thirty-four institutions in Korea and eleven overseas organizations including England, the United States, Italy, and Japan (Figure 1). It was a landmark exhibition organized on Goryeo art in terms of the quality, variety, and number of artworks displayed as well as dedicated exhibition space. In addition, the exhibition incorporated many objects considered masterpieces of the Goryeo era—nineteen national treasures and thirty three objects designated treasure level. After the 2000's, the National Museum of Korea consistently exhibited Goryeo art in mediums representative of the period such as lacquerwares, gravestones, *sagyeong* (Buddhist manuscripts), Buddhist

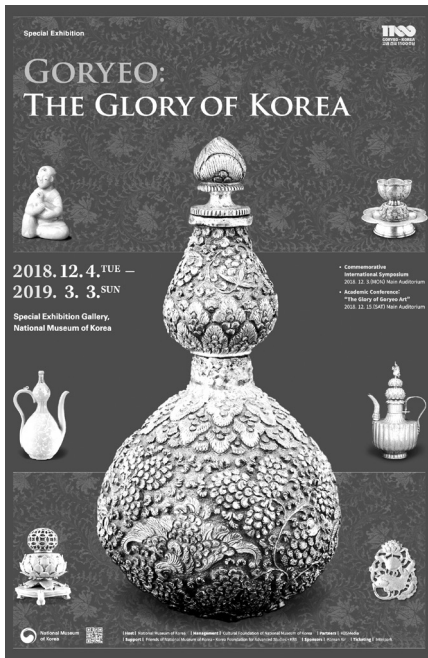


Figure 1. Goryeo Special Exhibition Poster

paintings, and celadons. However, the museum's 2018-2019 exhibition was particularly special as it aimed to capture the characteristics of Goryeo culture in its entirety, based on both previous exhibitions and recent research published on the art of the period.

The exhibition was divided into four major themes: Gaegyeong, Temple, Tea, and Arts and Crafts. The first section focused on Gaegyeong, the capital of the Goryeo dynasty and heart of its culture for 500 years. The exhibition's efforts in bringing Gaegyeong, an ancient city lost in the past, to life seemed to stimulate the visitors' imaginations.

Song, Liao, and Jin potteries excavated in Gaegyeong, Islamic glassware, lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl, celadons, metalwork, and jewelry were on display. The section highlighted Gaegyeong's international ties and its open attitude towards foreign nations—a point supported by the large variety of foreign goods found in the capital. The theme also focused on the city's exquisite and elegant beauty as the place of residence for the royal family and nobility.

The second section of the exhibition explored "The Way to the Temple." In accordance with the theme, this section featured recreations of Buddhist temples—a true physical manifestation of Goryeo Buddhist culture. As it was the largest section of the exhibition based on size, viewers were able to view a wide collection of Buddhist art such as sculptures, paintings, clothing, accessories, Buddha shrines, and Buddhist ornaments. A subtheme of the section compared Goryeo's Buddhist art to that of China's five dynasties (Song, Liao, Jin, Dali, and Yuan) and Japan's Heian and Kamakura periods. The juxtaposition showed how Goryeo's art had evolved through continuous exchange and interaction with neighboring East Asian Buddhist cultures. This gave visitors an opportunity to experience the internationality and originality

that strongly characterize Goryeo's Buddhist art.

The third section of the exhibition was "A Place for Tea." The space allowed visitors to share in the typical individual's visual, auditory, and olfactory experience of enjoying tea in emotional plenitude during the Goryeo period (Figure 2). A variety of tools, stone tea mills, celadon bowls, and cups furnished the space. The viewers' encounter with the refinements of the Confucian literati of Goryeo created within the tea space was particularly impressive. Calligraphy and paintings of the Goryeo literati were notable highlights of the section, which include King Gongmin's "Yeopgido" and "Chullyupdo," Lee Jehyeon's "Gimadogangdo," and An Hyang and Lee Jehyeon's "Geunyeokseohwi."

The fourth and last section of the exhibition offered an area for visitors to view numerous arts and crafts objects under the theme of "The Brilliant Technical and Design Expertise of Goryeo." Visitors observed the sophistication and elegance of arts and crafts from the 12th and 13th centuries, the height of Goryeo's art and culture. A notable design aspect of this section was the new display approach of placing celadons and metalware throughout the exhibition according to color (green, red, gold, and white) rather than by genre. Though unusual, the design choice helped viewers look beyond just the medium and devote more of their attention to the objects' forms, patterns, and colors.

In the same year of 2018, the Art History Association of Korea hosted its fall art history conference under the heading "Goryeo: Its Glorious Art," in tandem to the National Museum's special Goryeo exhibition. This intended connection between the two institutions was mutually beneficial. Not only did it bolster the academic aspect of the exhibition but it also enabled scholars to conduct research based on new material and methodologies. The conference organized around three major themes similar to the ones introduced in the special exhibition: Cultural Exchange and the Internationality of Goryeo Art, Religion and Rituals of Buddhist Art, and the Aesthetic of the Goryeo Aristocrats Revealed in Arts and Crafts. Each theme was then comprised of three individual presentations, bringing the total number of subsections to nine. The

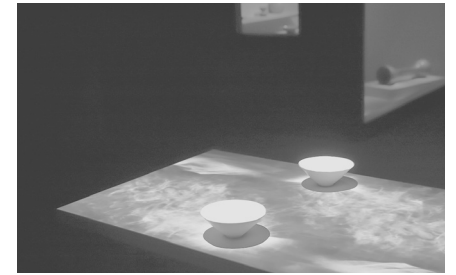


Figure 2. An Imaginary Space for Tea (from the Goryeo Special Exhibition)

first overarching section started with a presentation on Goryeo's foreign trade as well as its cultural and material exchange. The next part was a presentation on the ceramic exchange between Goryeo and the Song/Yuan dynasties that serves as a vestigial reminder of Goryeo's international exchange. Lastly, there was an examination of the scholarly value attributed to the book *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高麗圖經 by Xu Jing (1091-1153).

The second part focused on Goryeo Buddhist art with subsections exploring the themes of Buddhist paintings, gilt-bronze Buddhist shrines, and dry lacquer seated Buddhas. Beyond looking at the form and iconography of Buddhist art objects, the presentations also attempted to identify the conditions of enshrinement and the specific occasions or related religious rituals in which the objects were actually used. The presentation on the dry lacquer seated Buddha from the National Museum of Korea, also featured in the special exhibition, had a special emphasis on introducing new findings based on recent scientific analyses.

The third section contained presentations on metalware and lacquerware from the Goryeo period. One important presentation covered the subject of metal crafts through an examination of the "Gilt-Silver Ewer with Basin" from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. The presentation was comprehensive in its consideration of technique, beauty of form, usage, and dating processes. Another notable presentation on lacquerware centered on the topics of production techniques and scientific species analysis.

The Accomplishments and Significance of the National Museum's Special Exhibition "Goryeo: The Glory of Korea"

Even by the standards of the National Museum of Korea, the special exhibition was a large scale and highly anticipated project. As such, the museum made unprecedented efforts in the selection of exhibition materials, exhibition design, and preparation in its showcase of Goryeo art, differentiating the 2018 event from previous exhibitions. The exhibition had a clear objective—to display the multifaceted aspects of Goryeo culture. Therefore, several elements had to be significantly different from past forays into Goryeo art in terms of exhibition structure, subject, content, and technique.

As mentioned earlier, the exhibition's four major themes were Gaegyeong, Temple, Tea, and Arts and Crafts. As a whole, the themes aimed to shed light

on the living spaces, religion/ideology, craft skills, and aesthetics of the Goryeo people. While other exhibitions on Goryeo art tended to focus on individual art pieces, the National Museum attempted to create an organic unity among the artworks as well as between the exhibition space and artworks on display. Two significant examples are the relationship of Song/Yuan ceramics to the spatial context of Gaegyeong and the connections among the celadon bowls, paintings, books of literati, and the teahouse. The exhibition themes especially shifted the focus from individual artworks to the harmony that existed among the Buddhist paintings, statues, and temples. Additionally, the exhibition made a point to compare Goryeo Buddhist art to its counterparts in China and Japan—underlining the close connections amongst all three East Asian Buddhist cultures. By bringing attention to the role of Goryeo culture within the broader circumstances of East Asia, the exhibition also attempted to stress Goryeo's universality and specificity in an international context.

The special exhibition was boldly unique in that it deviated from the usual focus on genre or chronology of exhibition materials. Genre and chronology are two principles primarily used in the consideration or research of ancient art. They are effective tools in assessing the development of and changes in art of certain periods over time. However, there are also limitations as genre and chronology alone fail to capture the essence of a culture, within any timeframe, in its entirety. It is the total sum of the ongoing influences and interactions amongst all genres of art that form a culture's style. Thus, the National Museum exhibition included objects from a variety of genres in an attempt to present a holistic view of both the tangible and intangible characteristics of Goryeo culture in various thematic spaces. For example, the assembly of numerous artifacts such as maps, books, woodblocks, scriptures, ceramics, metalware, glassware, jewelry, etc. embodied the city of Gaegyeong. The diversity of genres in the exhibition was a necessary and significant acknowledgement that only the combination of artifacts from all genres is what represents Goryeo culture as a whole. Designing exhibitions to explore parameters beyond the traditional framework of genre and chronology will be a crucial challenge for future exhibitions on ancient art.

Overall, the exhibition was successful in helping the general audience reform their perceptions of Goryeo with new themes and content. Antecedent exhibition themes typically broached the topics of the rise of the Musin military regime, war with the Mongols, and Goryeo's identity as a Buddhist nation.

However, the special exhibition took an innovative approach and tied together several diverse aspects of Goryeo such as cultural openness, internationality, tea culture, advanced technology, and Confucianism. Despite the positive outcome, there is one criticism that originates from the disproportionate emphasis on Buddhist culture and art. The consequence of investing a majority of the exhibition's efforts on Buddhism is a lack of consideration in other spaces and the neglect of some important elements of Goryeo culture. For example, in addition to Buddhism and Confucianism, the royal family and aristocracy also embraced Taoist philosophy. Thus, there are many relics related to the Goryeo people's belief in Taoist principles. Unfortunately, the exhibition overlooked this important part of Goryeo art.

Distinct features of the exhibition were the contemporary artworks displayed, effective display techniques, efficient use of materials, and eye-catching exhibition design. This is evident in the installation of artist Park Seonki's charcoal art at the entrance to "The Way to the Temple" as part of recreating the temple environment. A replica of a space for enjoying tea also demonstrated the harmonious unity of Goryeo's material and spiritual cultures. It is difficult to accurately portray Goryeo tea culture or the spiritual plentitude of enjoying tea based on existing records or artifacts. Although the exhibition incorporated a physical teahouse reimaged with the appropriate celadon teacups and utensils, the tea space recreated using modern technology was more meaningful and impressive. Visitors had the opportunity to experience the same emotional tranquility of the Goryeo people admiring their surroundings while drinking tea.

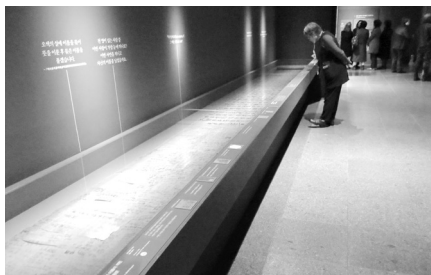


Figure 3. "Baekwoon Seongbul Prayer," Goryeo 1346, Artifact from Yaksayeoraewasang (Seated Bhaishajyaguru) at Cheongyang Janggoksa Temple (from Goryeo Special Exhibition)

The unprecedented large-scale exhibition on Goryeo with its wide range of high-quality artifacts mesmerized visitors. Researchers constantly await the opportunity to observe artifacts that are either rarely included in exhibitions or in collections that are not open to the public. Accordingly, a big draw for the exhibition was the large number of Buddhist statues sourced from temples across Korea—artifacts

with restricted access outside of their host structures. Some of these are the statue of Master Huirang from Haeinsa Temple, Yaksayeoraewasang (seated Bhaishajyaguru) from Janggoksa Temple, and the seated gilt-bronze bodhisattva statue from Daeheung Temple. To such a degree, the exhibition was a rare chance for both researchers and the general public to view and compare various Goryeo Buddhist statues in one setting.

Other secured artworks such as chlorite cups and basins, previously unavailable for public view, were on display along with Buddhist statues, textiles, calligraphy, and paintings of King Gongmin and the late Goryeo literati. The 10-meter long "Baekwoon Seongbul Prayer" from the seated Bhaishajyaguru at Janggoksa Temple was fully unfurled and another large draw to the exhibition. The prayer contains the requests of more than one thousand people and covers a variety of topics: the pleas of parents who wish for their children's health and wealth, a woman who desires to be reborn a man, and prayers for peace and prosperity of the country among countless others. As a whole, the collection of prayers provide an enjoyable and easily digestible way of understanding Buddhist art, making it more approachable to a wide audience.

Through this exhibition, visitors experienced many aspects of Goryeo culture, albeit to varying degrees, from the recreated Gaegyeong and its surrounding temples to the teahouse experience. However, the complex spatial structure proved to be an impediment preventing first-time visitors from fully appreciating the breadth of the exhibition. The large number of artifacts packed in the relatively small exhibition space was a regrettable shortcoming. Among the crowds of viewers filling up the gaps between the crammed artifacts, the maxim "less is more" came to mind.

Unlike previous exhibitions that organized artifacts by genre and chronology, the Goryeo Special Exhibition intended to represent Goryeo culture in its entirety through its comprehensively chosen artifacts, regardless of medium. Befitting such a landmark exhibition, the National Museum utilized Korean media outlets and videos to actively promote the exhibition throughout the country. The exhibition's materials and content soon became a topic of interest for many people. In contrast, publicity overseas was virtually nonexistent. Promotional materials written in English were limited to a brief introduction on the museum homepage and a short pamphlet guide furnished at the exhibition. Under such circumstances, it is doubtful that foreign scholars in Korean Art and General Studies or foreigners generally interested in Korean

culture were aware of the Goryeo Special Exhibition. Moving forward, institutions will continue to hold quality exhibitions to showcase the splendid cultural characteristics of Korea. The issue for the special exhibition and many of the exhibitions currently in the planning stages is not the lack of content or quality. The foremost concern is the shortage of resources or support in the promotion of these exhibitions overseas. It will be necessary, therefore, to establish a standard manual, department, or team of professionals such as curators to take charge of this matter in the future.

The Accomplishments and Significance of the Conference, “Goryeo: Its Glorious Art” by the Art History Association of Korea

The conference,¹ held in connection with the special exhibition, had its own meaningful achievements rarely seen in previous conferences, as well as some limitations. In accordance with the structure and themes of the special exhibition, the conference centered on highlighting the cultural characteristics of the Goryeo period through its art, rather than on the genre of each individual artwork. It attempted to characterize Goryeo culture over nine presentations under the following three themes: Internationality, Religion and Ritual, and Aristocratic Aesthetics.

Most studies in art history follow a close rubric of analyzing the genre and age of the artwork, and lean heavily on form, iconography, date of composition, and production background. Yet the 2018 conference sought to emphasize what Goryeo art symbolizes in its entirety through a focus on the applications,

usage, and production techniques of the exhibited items rather than on the aforementioned issues. While this was largely because it was essential that the topics aligned with the special exhibition, there was also a desire to challenge existing perspectives. For example, in traditional discussions of Goryeo celadon, the focus was on the date of composition, form, iconography, and influences. In a sharp departure from convention, the conference discussed celadon as a trade item of Goryeo with the Song and Yuan dynasties. Numerous instances of Song/Yuan ceramics excavated in Goryeo and vice versa revealed that celadons were actual items exchanged for consumption and reflective of Goryeo's international ties. The discussion of Buddhist paintings and gilt-bronze Buddhist shrines also shifted the focus from iconography or form to matters of application like the place of usage, process of enshrinement, and related rituals.

One point that could have been improved was the fact that the papers presented under the three major themes all represented the same genres. The internationality of the Goryeo period was addressed only in relation to ceramics, religion, and rituals were discussed only as it pertained to Buddhist art, and the aesthetic of the aristocracy was only explored within the medium of arts and crafts. While the subjects of inquiry needed to be connected to a certain genre, a richer discussion could have been possible if more mediums had been addressed within each theme. The internationality of Goryeo art is evidenced not only in ceramics but also in Buddhist arts and crafts. Additionally, a more concrete connection between Goryeo art and religion could have been made if the Taoist element of Goryeo celadon and the utensils used in Confucian ceremonies had also been considered. Since aristocratic aesthetics is an element that characterizes Goryeo art in its entirety, fields other than crafts could have been discussed as well.

In general, research papers exploring selected artifacts from the special exhibition at a micro level garnered more attention. Presentations on gilt-bronze Buddhist shrines and gilt-silver ewers revealed new findings through detailed observations and measurements of the artifacts. In the case of objects from overseas museums or private collections, it is not easy for researchers to make detailed observations or take photographs in person. Going forward, the favorable outcome would be for scholars and institutions to conduct more studies examining individual artworks or artifacts from museum and art gallery exhibitions to share at conferences. These types of studies will not only enable researchers to stay informed but also offer an opportunity to further studies on individual artifacts.

1. The conference proceeded in three categories, “International Qualities in Goryeo Art, Reflected in its Exchanges with the Outer World,” “Religion and Rituals Reflected in Goryeo Buddhist Art,” and “Artistic Taste of Goryeo Aristocrats reflected in Goryeo handicraft.” In the first session, presenters Lee Jongmin, Park Jeongmin, and Lee Kang Hahn discussed the Song/Yuan-Goryeo celadon trades, the value of *Gaoli tujing* in Goryeo celadon studies, and Goryeo's foreign encounters, ranging from institutional exchanges to commercial trades. In the second session, presenters Jeong Myeonghi, Jeong Eunwu, and Yang Hijeong discussed items exhibited in the special exhibition and other notable artistic Goryeo gems in general. And in the final session, presenters Choi Eungcheon, Shin Suk, and Park Yeongman discussed Goryeo metal mirror hangers, gilt-silver ewers, and Goryeo lacquerwares. Debaters included Jang Namweon, Li Myeongmi, Choi Yeob, Im Namsu, Lee Yongjin, Song Jiae, and Seunghye Lee. Sessions were overseen by chair persons like Bae Jaeho and Eom Gipyo.

In the last section, “Aristocratic Aesthetics,” there were three presentations on the production techniques of individual artifacts. The article on the metal mirror hanger approached the topic from an art historical point of view, whereas the other two presented progress in preservation science. In one of the latter presentations, the production technique and components of the materials used for the “Lacquer Incense Box Inlaid with Mother-of-pearl” and “Dry Lacquer Seated Buddha” from the National Museum of Korea were discussed based on the results of a long period of scientific research and analysis. Although this was a significant achievement in the field of preservation science, it was also a crucial topic for art history in connection to the circulation of materials and production techniques in East Asia. Continued collaboration between art history and preservation science will facilitate more complete and concrete research on artworks that require scientific analysis and research.

The representative art mediums of the Goryeo period are Buddhist statues, paintings, pagodas, celadons, Najeon lacquerware, and metal crafts. Since a great deal of research in these areas has already been accumulated, it is hard for new or noteworthy research to emerge. Given these circumstances, the conference hosted in connection with the Goryeo Special Exhibition is expected to revitalize the relatively stagnant field of Goryeo art. As mentioned earlier, it is necessary for the field to conduct research in cooperation with preservation science or study individual artworks at the micro level in collaboration with museum and art gallery exhibitions. A new approach looking beyond an object’s form, iconography, and composition date is also required. The conference presented some direction in this regard. The new direction based on the achievements of the conference will steer future generations of scholars to contribute to the further understanding of the cultural characteristics and aspects of Goryeo culture and to a new interpretation of the meaning of Goryeo within the culture of Korea.

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