

ARTIST TALK LOUNGE

"Once upon a Time in the land of gold..."

Soyoung Lee,

Associate Curator for Korean Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Things have changed. Once a country called 'The Land of Morning Calm' by the Nobel Prize-winning Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, Korea has become the country of dynamic talents in films, TV dramas, K-Pop and food as well. Now things Korean are hip and widely appreciated. They call the phenomenon the 'Korean Wave'.

Yet Korean art has not been surfing the high wave. And the art of Korean antiquity is not much known or main stream. When you go to the major museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Brooklyn Museum, you can't help thinking that the much smaller Korean gallery is sandwiched between the gigantic China and the elegant Japan, just like in the atlas.

But things change. The Met Museum opened a new exhibition 'Silla: Korea's Golden Kingdom' which will run through February 23, 2014. Along with the Met show, the art of the Joseon dynasty is the subject of separate exhibitions at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco on view now and at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in March next year.

Q: Can you explain the importance of the exhibit to the Met, and to the Korean community?

A: We are very excited to present Silla: Korea's Golden Kingdom at the Metropolitan Museum. This is perhaps the most significant Korean exhibition at the Met since 5,000 Years of Korean Art in 1981. It's the culmination of five years of collaboration with the National Museum of Korea and Gyeongju National Museum.

I hope this exhibition inspires a sense of pride among the Korean-American community. It's a rare opportunity to experience and reaffirm the glorious culture of Korea's ancient past—right here in New York!

Q: Why Silla? And why is the exhibit focused on the AD 400-800 period of the Silla kingdom?

A: In 2008 when my colleague and co-curator of this show, Denise Leidy, was visiting the Gyeongju National Museum, their staff

asked, "How about if the Met does an exhibition on Silla?"

The history of the Silla kingdom is fascinating, and the art is rich and complex and eclectic. We felt there was a lot there that would appeal to a broad audience. Plus, it's never been done in the West. We wanted to highlight the height of cultural flowering in Silla, hence 400-800 A.D.

Q: What do we know about the source of their wealth, and the use of gold, silver and precious stones in art from the Silla?

A: We don't know much about the locations of Silla gold mines.

But gold was big in Silla! It was the material of choice for personal adornments. Later, gold came to be used for Buddhist statues and reliquaries (especially gilding over cast bronze). Also temples and palaces were decorated with gold.

Some foreign records described Silla as the "land of gold."

Q: How global was the Silla kingdom, and how is their trade with other cultures shown in any of the art pieces in the exhibition?

A: Silla was a part of Eurasia. The gold crowns and other accessories, especially in their spangled ornaments, show similarities to nomadic cultures north and west of Silla. Silla elites also had a taste for foreign-made luxuries. Roman-style glass, for example. In the exhibition is a gold dagger and sheath inlaid with glass and garnet, made somewhere between the Black Sea area and Central Asia. How exactly this imported exotica made its way to Korea remains debatable. Was there direct trade with the peoples far West, or

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Belt with pendant ornaments. Korea, Silla kingdom, second half of 5th century. Excavated from the north mound of Hwangnam Daechong Tomb. Gold; L. 47 1/4 in. (120 cm) Gyeongju National Museum, Korea, National Treasure 192



Pair of earrings. Korea, Silla kingdom, second quarter of 6th century. Excavated from Bomundong Hapjangbun Tomb. Gold; (L) L. 3 3/8 in. (8.6 cm), (R) L. 3 3/8 in. (8.75 cm). National Museum of Korea, National Treasure 90



Crown. Korea, Silla kingdom, second half of 5th century. Excavated from the north mound of Hwangnam Daechong Tomb. Gold and jade; H. 10 3/4 in. (27.3 cm). Gyeongju National Museum, National Treasure 191.

Photo by Sukie Park



Bodhisattva in pensive pose, probably Maitreya (Korean: Mireuk). Korea, Silla kingdom, late 6th–early 7th century. Gilt bronze; H. 36 7/8 in. (93.5 cm). National Museum of Korea, National Treasure 83

did Silla’s contacts with them occur at an intermediary place like China?

Q: The bronze statue of the seated Bodhisattva in pensive pose has similarities to Auguste Rodin’s ‘The Thinker’. Is the meditative pose characteristic of Korean Buddhist sculpture, and what makes this piece a National Treasure?

A: Yes, the pose of the two completely unrelated statues, separated by 1200 years, do seem to echo each other. The so-called “pensive pose” is not unique to Korea but is pan-Asian in Buddhist sculpture.

But the Silla statue, better known as National Treasure 83, in my mind, is one of the most beautiful of its type anywhere. He has a serene expression and a faint smile that’s very alluring. Plus he has sensual lips.

The simple elegance of the face, crown, and upper body contrasts with the rhythmic pattern created by the drapery folds. Also, his fingers and toes—look at the big toe of his right foot!—are so graceful and expressive.

He is a figure in stillness yet with potential for dynamic movement. All of these qualities make this statue so special.

Q: What do you think about the sudden interest in Korean art and

Korean art shows in the major museums in the U.S. recently?

A: I don’t know that it’s a sudden interest so much as a coincidence in timing. But it is really wonderful.

And I know Hyonjeong Kim Han at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and Hyunsoo Woo at the Philadelphia Museum of Art also worked so hard on their projects.

I think people are ready to absorb more than Korean contemporary pop culture—as powerful as that can be.

Certainly the responses so far to the Met’s Silla exhibition have been overwhelmingly positive—people are blown away by the exquisite art created more than a millennium ago.

Soyoung Lee, 42, Associate Curator for Korean Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is one of the heroines behind the Silla show. Born in Indonesia and raised in Sweden, the U.K., Japan and Korea, Ms. Lee studied Asian art at Columbia University where she is preparing her doctorate degree. Her father, Mr. Chan Yong Lee, was director of the Korean Cultural Service New York in 1987~1990.

By Sukie Park

The Royal Tomb of Silla, Hwangnamdaechong

Source: National Museum of Korea

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the excavation of Hwangnamdaechong, a Silla period royal tomb, in 1973.

Hwangnamdaechong boasts the largest scale as a single site of ancient civilization in Korea. The total number of excavated antiquities is a whopping 58,000 including 35,648 pieces from the south mound and 22,793 pieces from the north mound. While it is impossible to display the entire discoveries due to space restriction, the carefully selected collection of 1,268 relics will allow the visitors to gain comprehensive insights of the royal tomb.

Each of the selected items encapsulates the spirit of the Silla people and thus has a significant value, enough to satisfy the ever increasing intellectual curiosity of the visitors. Hwangnamdaechong is named such as the large-scale tomb, is situated in Hwangnamdong, Gyeongju. Originally the tomb began referred to as Tomb No. 98 in 1925 when the distribution map of the 155 Silla tombs was created. Following the excavation and research by the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea between 1973 and 1975, the tomb was named Hwangnamdaechong by the Cultural Properties Committee on July 27, 1976.

The tomb is a double-mound tomb with the south mound built first for the male deceased and the north mound built later for the female deceased. In terms of structure, it is a wooden chamber tomb with stone mound. The length (south-north) is 129m, the width (east-west) is 80m, and the height is 21.9m for the south mound and 22.6m for the north mound. Hwangnamdaechong is the largest of its kind not only in physical size but also in variety and splendor of the relics discovered, which in-

cludes weapons, ornaments, containers, and horse gears. The owner of the south mound is presumably one of the maripgans(Silla monarchs). Researchers estimated the construction period at the early 5th century to the mid 5th century for the south mound, and the mid 5th century to the late 5th century for the north mound.

The Country of Lustrous Gold and Silver

Gyeongju, located in the southeast of Korea, was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Silla (57 B.C.-A.D. 935) for 1000 years. Until now, it is easy to find tombs of the grandest scale in Gyeongju. They were all formed between the 5th century and the middle of the 6th century.

The type of tombs in which such golden crowns were excavated is called “wooden chamber tomb with stone mound.” The wooden chamber tomb with stone mound and gold crown are unique cultural features of Silla, which are not found in other surrounding countries such as Goguryeo, Gaya, or Baekje. To make a wooden chamber tomb with stone mound, after placing the body in a coffin with funerary objects, a wooden line was made, upon which large stones were piled, and soil was poured on top. A common feature among this type of tomb is that they contain many funerary objects. Most of the funerary objects are made of gold and among them, the gold crown symbolized the dignity of the ruler.

Fortunately, this special tomb structure protected the tombs in Gyeongju from damage or robbers. That is why the Japanese called Silla “the country of lustrous gold and silver.”

Reflection of Northern Culture

The time when gold first appeared in Silla is estimated to be at the end of the 4th century. At this time in Silla, the Kim family transferred the crown from generation to generation and called the ruler Maripkhan, meaning “the best Khan.”

The structure of the wooden chamber tomb with stone mound is similar to the tomb style of the northern horse-riding people from Siberia, as well as the Altai and Mongols.

The excavated items would have also been affected by the gold-oriented culture of nomadic tribes such as the Hsianpeitzu that used gold as a means of exchange with the northern areas. Base on these, Silla built its unique gold-rich culture, showcased today by the example of the gold crown.

The gold crown is a splendidly decorated branch- or antler-shaped structure with elaborate decorations on its rounded frame. Where did such design motifs originate? Many tribes in the north believed that the tree is the medium that provided a connection between the sky and the earth, and among men. This is the so-called universe tree or world tree. They also believed that the antlers played a messenger’s role transmitting messages from the gods to human society. The many spangles and the comma-shaped jade stones on the crown represented leaves and fruits.

Likewise, the upright decoration of the gold crown symbolized the world tree and the antlers that served as the antenna to communicate the principles and message of the gods to human society.



Necklace. Korea, Silla kingdom, 6th century. Excavated from Noseo-dong no. 215 Tomb. Gold and jade; L. 32 5/8 in. (83 cm). National Museum of Korea, Treasure 456



Roof tile with bestial face. Korea, Silla kingdom, 7th–8th century. Excavated from Hwangnyongsa Temple site. Earthenware; H. 10 7/8 in. (27.7 cm). Gyeongju National Museum, Korea



Long-necked jar with perforated base and incised decoration of horses. Korea, Silla kingdom, 5th century. Stoneware; H. 16 1/2 in. (42 cm). Gyeongju National Museum, Korea



Pair of shoe soles. Possibly China, Northern Wei dynasty, or Korea, Silla kingdom, 5th century. Excavated from Singnichong Tomb. Gilt bronze; L. 13 3/4 in. (35 cm). National Museum of Korea



Buddha, Korea, Silla kingdom, ca. 706. From the pagoda at Hwangboksa Temple site. Gold; H. 4 3/4 in. (12.2 cm). National Museum of Korea, National Treasure 79