

KOREAN CERAMICS

Korean ceramics have long been admired, collected and imitated throughout Asia and the West. Despite evolving aesthetic preferences, changing technologies and strong influences from China and Japan (brought about through foreign trade, invasion and occupation), Korean ceramics throughout history can be distinguished from those of Japan and China by their uniquely Korean spontaneity and subtlety, their distinctive interpretation of the natural world and their creative infusion and adaptation of outside influences.

Korean ceramics function as ceremonial, funerary and everyday household objects. Generally speaking, the finest, most decorative ceramic vessels were used in ceremonies and/or burials, while less elaborate vessels were made with everyday use in mind. Many of the oldest examples have been preserved because they were buried in tombs and protected from the elements.

NEOLITHIC PERIOD (about 6000-1000 BCE)

Based on archaeological excavations, it is believed that Korea's ceramic tradition began during the early Neolithic period. Ceramics from the period have been found throughout the peninsula and their construction and decoration of early clay vessels varies from site to site. Neolithic vessels were used primarily for storing grains.

The earliest Neolithic ceramics are called *Chulmun*, meaning "comb motif," and referring to the geometric patterns incised into the outer walls of the vessels. Chulmun ceramics parallel the "cord incised" ceramics of the Jomon period in Japan (8000-200 BCE). Thin-walled earthenware vessels from this early period are a variety of shapes, including deep, flat-bottomed containers and narrow vessels with pointed or rounded bottoms. Early vessel shapes allowed for cooking in open fires – elongated to maximize the surface area heated and to stabilize them in the fire.

Another category of Neolithic ceramics is *Mumun* or "unpatterned." These pots tend to be made of coarse clay, and are left undecorated. Some have rolled rims and/or handles.

PROTO-THREE KINGDOMS AND THREE KINGDOMS PERIOD (c. CE 300-668)

Leading up to and during the Three Kingdoms Period, there were a number of stylistic phases and technological developments in ceramics. Distinctive of the Proto-Three Kingdoms period are jars with "ox-horn" shaped handles like the example in the Institute's collection (gift of funds from Fred and Ellen Wells, image not available). These vessels were most likely used for funerary offerings.



Kaya, Storage Jar, 99.8

The first true *stonewares* were produced during the Kaya period (CE 42-562). Stoneware and the earlier *earthenwares* differ in a number of ways. Earthenware is relatively soft, usually contains a lot of iron and cannot withstand firing at temperatures over 1100^oC. In addition to iron, stonewares contain silica and aluminum. Firing at low temperatures produces softer ceramics not unlike earthenware. At temperatures over 1000^oC, a harder ceramic material called mullite is produced.

PROTO-THREE
KINGDOMS
AND THREE
KINGDOMS
PERIOD
(c. CE 300-668),
cont.

Characteristic of Kaya ceramics are “perforated pedestals” – the vessels are elevated and the pedestals they sit upon include cutout geometric designs. This type of vessels were also popular in the Silla Kingdom (57 BCE-668 CE) and the Unified Silla period (668-935). Pedestal vessels likely held funerary offerings for the ancestors, not unlike ceremonial Chinese bronzes.



Silla, *Stem bowl*, 89.118

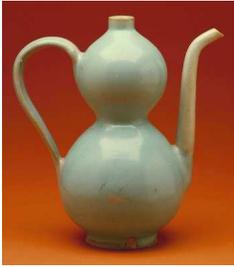


Unified Silla, *Cup with cover*, 73.46.9a,b

In the Paekche Kingdom (18 BCE- 660 CE) and throughout the Unified Silla Dynasty (668-935), Buddhism began to influence ceramic forms and functions. Buddhist designs were painted on vessels and the *ewer* form (long-necked with a globular base and a handle) used on Buddhist altars was popularized.

Also widespread during the Three Kingdoms period was the use of the potter’s wheel, which had been introduced to the Korean peninsula during the late Neolithic period (1st century BCE). The use of the wheel allowed artists to more easily craft very regular, symmetrical vessels. In later periods in both Korea and Japan, the wheel was rejected in favor of the irregularity of hand-coiled forms.

Another Three Kingdoms ceramic tradition, of which few examples remain, is that of figurative ceramic vessels depicting humans and creatures. The Institute does not currently own an example of this unique artform. The construction and simplified style are similar to Japanese *haniwa* figures.



Koryo, *Ewer*, 99.41a,b

KORYO PERIOD
(918-1392)

Ceramics of the Koryo period reflect the refined aristocratic taste of the court and the continued influence of Buddhism and Chinese artistic trends.

Prevalent during the period was Kingfisher blue celadon glaze, introduced by the Chinese and adapted to suit Korean tastes. Korean celadon-glazed stonewares have long been admired and collected in China, Japan and the West, and even the Chinese artists have admitted that Korean celadons eclipsed their own. A unique Korean technique called *sanggam* (inlay) was used to decorate many celadon vessels. Inlay involves carving designs into the clay and then filling the incised lines with red or white slip (a mixture of clay and water), producing black or white patterns under the green-gray celadon glaze after firing.

A Buddhist vessel from India called a *kundika* (water sprinkler) was popularized and elaborately crafted in bronze and ceramic during the Koryo period. *Kundika* are used by Buddhist priests to purify the ground during ceremonies.



Koryo, *Kundika*, 76.72.42

Koryo ceramics were typically porcelaneous stoneware, meaning the ceramics were fired at 1300^o C (the same temperature used for porcelain), but the kaolin clay required to achieve the stark white of porcelain was not used in favor of a clay that instead turns reddish-brown after firing. It was during the Koryo period that *underglazing* was first introduced as a technique for decorating ceramics. Underglazing involves the surface application of mineral pigments (usually painted on with a brush), over which a clear glaze is applied and fired, preserving and keeping visible the mineral pigments beneath. It is a less expensive and less labor intensive means of achieving a decorative effect imitating inlay.

CHOSON PERIOD
(1392-1910)

During the subsequent Choson dynasty, the literati class (*yangban*) garnered a great deal of influence and led to the rise of Neo-Confucianism as the official state political and educational system. Buddhism was discouraged by the state and went into a decline in official circles. The changes in political, spiritual and social attitudes during this period are reflected in changing ceramic taste.

Porcelains were first made in Korea during this period. Porcelain is fired at 1300°C and higher and the clay contains the added ingredient *kaolin*. Although vessels remained highly refined, they differed from the Koryo vessels in their expressive quality afforded by quickly and freely painted designs. In addition to brownish-red copper- and iron-oxide underglazes like those used in the Koryo period, cobalt blue underglaze was introduced and became a popular, albeit more expensive, alternative. Copper- and iron-oxide underglazed vessels were collected and admired by members of the literati class, while blue and white wares were more in the taste of the aristocratic class.



Choson, *Dragon jar*, cobalt blue underglaze, 99.168

Sometimes artists used both iron-oxide and cobalt blue on the same vessel like the example below (76.72.29). Porcelains in the Choson period were also commonly left undecorated, except for an extremely thin layer of celadon glaze, as an expression of Confucian modesty (often referred to as “white ware”). White ware was used initially in Confucian ceremonies, and later, less refined vessels were used for everyday storage and dinnerware.



Choson, *Vase*, iron-oxide and cobalt underglaze, 76.72.29



Choson, *Maebyeong Jar*, white ware, 99.5

CHOSON PERIOD
(1392-1910),
cont.

Intentionally imperfect *punch'ong* ("pale green") stoneware is emblematic of the Choson dynasty. *Punch'ong* wares (called *Mishima* in Japanese) are typically decorated with stamped or inlaid designs (see 76.72.15 pictured below). Rejecting the subtle refinement of Koryo decoration, artists took great pleasure in accentuating the natural properties of clay and glazes. They delighted in working quickly and allowing glazes to drip and pool naturally onto vessels (see 99.7 below) that showed the imperfections of the clay. During this period, artists began stamping their name (usually a pseudonym adopted as an artist's "pen name") and the place of production or the office or official who commissioned the work on the bottom of ceramic vessels. *Punch'ong* ware teabowls became very popular in the Japanese tea ceremony and were taken to Japan in large quantities.



Choson, *Flask*, 99.7



Choson, *Mishima bowl with stamped designs*, 76.72.15

CONTEMPORARY
CERAMICS

During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945), the production of Korean ceramics declined and was strongly influenced by the Japanese folk ceramics movement. Large quantities of kaolin-rich clay harvested from the Korean peninsula was exported to Japan for use there. However, the historic ceramic traditions of Korea caught the attention of international museums and collectors during the occupation through archaeological excavations organized by the Japanese.

After the end of the Korean War, ceramic arts were revived and reinvigorated. Potters today are trained at the university level in a wide range of styles and methods rooted in Korea's rich ceramic past. New ceramic construction and glazing techniques and technologies such as gas-fired kilns have also been introduced, adding a contemporary flare to the work being produced today. Contemporary ceramic artists continue to produce functional wares and create innovative ceramic sculpture and installation art.

Presently, the Institute does not have contemporary Korean ceramics on display.

COLLECTION IN FOCUS GUIDE PROGRAM
Japanese and Korean Art

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