



5. Original glass slide of Korean and Japanese tomb wares (left: Japanese, right: Korean), made by William Gowland in the 1890s. Gowland was one of the first Westerners to notice the similarity between the tomb wares of the two countries.

a British employee of the Imperial Japanese mint in Osaka. A noted metallurgist, he was also a keen and scholarly amateur archaeologist who carried out many excavations in Japan which led him to suspect (correctly as it turned out) that Japanese tomb pottery may have originated in Korea. He therefore visited Korea in 1884, travelling from Seoul to Pusan and purchasing a group of Three Kingdoms ceramics which were later, in 1889, donated to the British Museum. He also published an article in the journal of the Anthropological Institute in 1895 in which he made some remarkably astute comments: 'In form, inscribed designs, marks of matting and the material of which they were made, many are allied to the sepulchral vessels of the dolmens of Japan, but they are not all identical' (fig. 5).<sup>20</sup>

It is ironic that it was during the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945 that people in the West began to see evidence of Korea's rich past in the form of objects excavated from former capitals such as Kyongju and Kaesong as well from the Han Chinese colony of Lelang (Korean: Nangnang) near Pyongyang. Japanese scholars such as Sekino Tadashi and Umehara Sueji in 1921 excavated such important sites as the Gold Crown tomb in Kyongju, Silla's ancient capital, as well as rediscovering the Sokkuram cave temple and excavating some of the Koguryo tomb paintings. They also published a very useful survey of the ceramic industry of Korea in 1926, as one of a series of investigative reports on the peninsula's natural resources.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it has been said that:

Archaeology in Korea at this time was far more developed and more rationally organised than archaeology in Japan itself ... Korean preservation of cultural remains as well as excavation and display were done by a single group which gave a unified approach to the problem of archaeology in Korea. With less than ten personnel and with very limited funds, they were able to achieve a remarkable degree of progress, which far outdistanced similar groups in China and Japan at the same period.<sup>22</sup>

As early as 1911, the British Museum received a gift of a group of thirty-three Koryo



6. Choson dynasty painting of a Buddhist monk on display on the staircase at the house of George Eumorfopoulos in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, London, in 1935, before being acquired by the British Museum. 106 × 74 cm.

celadons collected by George Eumorfopoulos, which may well have been the results of Japanese excavations of the Koryo capital at present-day Kaesong, although there is no documentation to prove this. Indeed, in 1937–8 George Eumorfopoulos provided the British Museum with more Korean art than any other connoisseur, having displayed his collection for a long time in his home in Cheyne Walk in Chelsea in London, where he used to encourage interested visitors to go and view it (fig. 6).

The first time that Korean artefacts were exhibited in London was in a Korean Pavilion at the Anglo-Japanese Exhibition at the White City in 1910, at which Korean crafts were displayed (fig. 7). Held in the year that Japan annexed Korea, this exhibition was designed to increase cultural and commercial ties between Britain and Japan. The shared ethos of empire was, at that time, an important part of their relationship; thus Korea was included as an example of one of the peoples subdued by an expanding imperial Japan, together with Taiwan (Formosa) and the Ainu. Korean objects from that exhibition were donated to the British Museum. They consist mostly of ceramics and folk crafts, such as sedge mats (see fig. 89), fans, chatelaines (see

Appendix 2, fig. 4) and lacquer sewing equipment.<sup>23</sup>

It was in great part due to the interest of Japanese Folk Crafts scholars such as Yanagi Soetsu, Kawai Kanjiro and Hamada Shoji that appreciation particularly of Korean ceramics developed in the West during the first half of the twentieth century. Bernard Leach, who lived and worked in Japan for many years and also travelled to Korea, was part of this group and very influential in educating Western taste. He admired Korean pots for their natural unselfconsciousness, and Yanagi, too, talks of the freedom found in Korean pots, compared to Japanese ones:

In modern art, as everyone knows, the beauty of deformity is very often emphasised, insisted upon. But how different is Korean deformity. The former is produced deliberately, the latter naturally. Korean work is merely the natural result of the artisan's state of mind, which is free from dualistic man-made rules ... Here lies buried the mystery of the endless beauty of the Korean artisan's work. He simply makes what he wants, without pretension.<sup>24</sup>

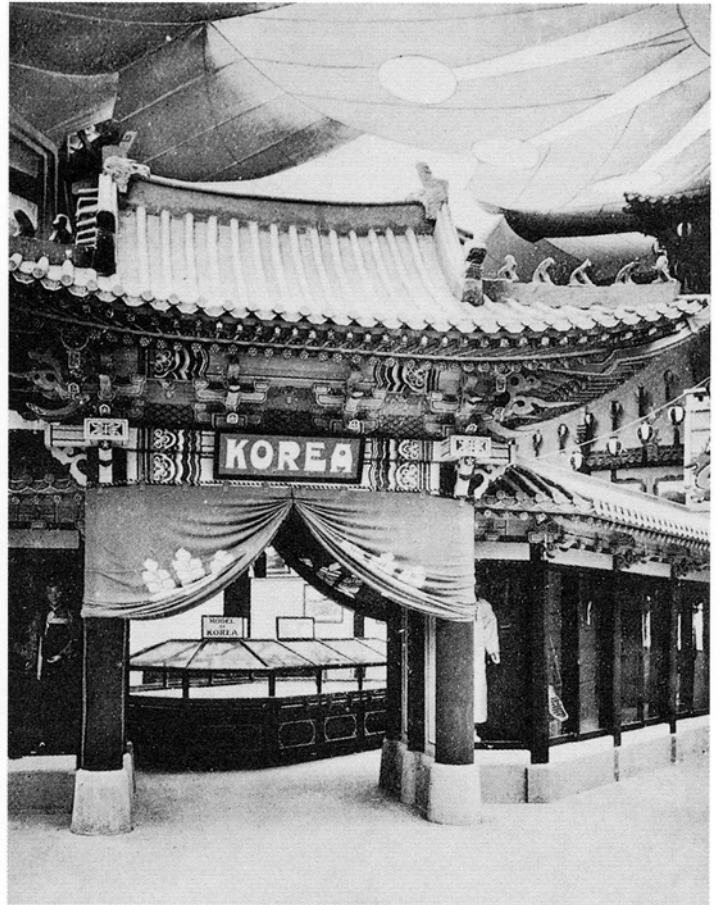
Although there was a certain amount of idealization and even condescension in the attitude to Korean art and craft of Yanagi and his group, there is no doubt that, particularly through Bernard Leach, they opened many Western eyes to its beauty. Bernard Leach is

known to have collected Korean ceramics and furniture<sup>25</sup> and one particularly beautiful piece of white porcelain, which he acquired in Korea in 1935 and gave to the potter Lucie Rie in 1943 and which was kept by her in her studio until her death, is now in the collection of the British Museum (fig. 8).<sup>26</sup>

The fact that most Western collections of Korean art are predominantly of ceramics is probably due partly to the influence of the Japanese Folk Crafts scholars and partly to the general and long-standing Japanese appreciation of Korean ceramics. Such appreciation is seen in the quality of Japanese collections of Korean ceramics (such as the Ataka collection in Osaka). Paintings, screens and sutras remained inaccessible to many Westerners and were not collected in such numbers. Their fragility added to the difficulty of collecting them. Other notable European collectors of Korean ceramics were the Fischers, whose collection is now in the Museum of Far Eastern Art in Cologne. In France, several diplomats built up Korean collections, from Collin de Plancy in the late nineteenth century to Landy and Chambard more recently. However, the size of Western collections of Korean art has always been relatively small, a result in part of the destruction of so much during the wars and occupations suffered by Korea.

The Second World War and the Korean War (1950–53) resulted in many more Westerners becoming aware of Korea. Some collections of Korean art were built up in the postwar period by military, diplomatic and medical personnel from the West, resulting, for example, in the Henderson collection of ceramics at Harvard, the Poulsen-Hansen collection in the British Museum and the Kalbak collection in Copenhagen and Stockholm.<sup>27</sup>

The development of archaeology and art history in Korea since the Korean War has been rapid and there is a vast and growing literature in Korean on these subjects, although still relatively little in English.<sup>28</sup> A great amount of Japanese scholarship remains from the occupation period and there is still a great deal of interest in and study of Korean art and archaeology in present-day Japan. When compared with the study of Chinese and Japanese art history and archaeology by Western scholars, which started much earlier, that of Korea is still in its infancy. The loan exhibitions from Korea which toured the USA in 1980–81



7. Above: Korean pavilion in the Anglo-Japanese Exhibition at the White City, Shepherd's Bush, London, in 1910, the year Korea was formally colonized by Japan. The objects exhibited were later donated to the British Museum.

8. Right: The Austrian-born potter Lucie Rie in her studio with the Choson dynasty white porcelain 'full-moon' jar collected by Bernard Leach in Korea in 1935 and later given to her by Leach, before being purchased by the British Museum. Ht: 47 cm. Photograph by Lord Snowdon.



and Europe in 1984 did much to enthuse and inform the West, and there is now an exciting period when new Korean galleries for Korean art are opening in great Western museums such as the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the Musée Guimet (part of the Louvre), the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.<sup>29</sup> This is the direct result of sponsorship from the government of South Korea and from large Korean companies, initiated during the economically flourishing period of the early 1990s.

## General features of Korean art

Several eminent scholars have attempted to summarize what it is that makes Korean art distinctively Korean and distinguishable from that of neighbouring China and Japan. It is a question that greatly exercises Korean minds in particular. The task is difficult as, especially to Western eyes, there are clear general similarities which arise from a shared heritage of Buddhism and Confucianism and a shared writing system and from geographical proximity and common everyday habits. Korea was a vassal kingdom of China for hundreds of years and latterly a colony of Japan. These are historical facts which cannot be ignored. What has been largely misunderstood in the West, however, are the manifold influences that travelled from Korea to Japan from very early times, perhaps even as early as the Neolithic period. It was the eminent Korean scholar, the late Kim Won-yong, who said: 'The flow of artistic influences and inspiration has always been one-way traffic from China or Korea to Japan ... Korea acted as a cultural bridge between China and Japan, but she was also at times an independent source of inspiration for Japanese art from the bronze age to the 7th century.'<sup>30</sup> The tremendous Korean input into many aspects of Japanese culture has been undervalued. Some would say that this was a deliberate distortion, generally in the form of reference to vague 'continental' influence rather than Korean influence.<sup>31</sup> Other scholars, however, point to amateurish studies by unqualified and ignorant Westerners as a source of misunderstanding in the more recent past about the true nature of Korean art.<sup>32</sup>

The general consensus of opinion is that first expressed by Seckel, if somewhat vaguely, that Korean art can be characterized by 'vitality, spontaneity and unconcern for technical perfection'.<sup>33</sup> The latter can be seen in the way that many Korean pots are slightly asymmetrical, so that if they are turned around, the shape seems to change. The scale of the decoration, on ceramics in particular, gives an impression of spontaneity, with very large flowers or fish being placed beside relatively small trees in an unconcerned fashion. The English collector, Godfrey Gompertz, whose works on Korean ceramics played such an important part in the education of the West, said: 'The Korean potters were often careless or inexpert in technique; they were more concerned to achieve an artistic effect and seldom paid attention to detail.'<sup>34</sup> Since his work was largely the result of Japanese scholarship, however, it may be that he is reflecting the Japanese preoccupation with imperfection as a virtue.

The field of Korean painting and sculpture has been much less studied by Western



9. Japanese woodblock print depicting the procession of the official Korean envoys to Japan in 1711. Such embassies were sent regularly to Japan during the Choson period, accompanied by Korean artists who brought with them the latest trends in painting. 33 × 60 cm.



scholars than that of ceramics, partly because of lack of good examples in the West. Where it has been, it seems to contradict these general assumptions. Recent scholarship in the field of early Buddhist painting, for example, has shown that, far from displaying a lack of concern for technical perfection, the Korean painters and monk-scribes were great masters whose works were appreciated and prized in China and Japan.<sup>35</sup> The same surely applies to Buddhist metalwork of the same period, while the eighth-century cave temple at Sokkuram is as technically perfect and elegant as it is possible to be. The paintings by some of the Korean artists who accompanied the official Korean envoys on their visits to Japan in the late Choson period (fig. 9) were clearly greatly admired and sought after by Japanese cognoscenti, as examples to be followed.<sup>36</sup> Much more objective study of Korean painting and sculpture needs to be carried out in the West before any generalizations can usefully be attempted.