

Baekja 백자

A Story of Korean Porcelain

20 May - 15 August 2021

Introduction

Baekja - A Story of Korean Porcelain focuses on the production of white porcelain, or “baekja”, in Korea from a historical perspective. Building on the gallery’s extensive collection of white porcelain pots and vessels, the exhibition features pieces dating back as far as the 12th century together with more recent works.

Together with celadon and buncheong, white porcelain is one of the three main ceramic traditions in Korean culture. Early in the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), potters, who had been influenced by Yuan and Ming porcelain from China, were able to produce true or hard-paste white porcelain. Its beauty and strength led it to become the chosen material for royal ceramics.

Porcelain was produced at the official kilns in Gwangju, Gyeonggi Province under the supervision of the Saongwon, the government office responsible for providing food for the king and royal court. Glaze colour varied over time and decoration was introduced through underglaze painting with pigments, such as cobalt (blue), iron (brown) or copper (red). Cobalt was a very expensive pigment, so blue and white porcelain was reserved for the royal court; private ownership was forbidden. The most skilled court painters were sent to the official kilns to paint directly onto porcelain vessels.

The Joseon dynasty adhered to the ideology of Neo-Confucianism, which emphasised the importance of ceremonies, rituals and propriety. A number of state ancestral rites and court ceremonies came to be grouped together as the ‘Five Rites of State’. A range of porcelain vessels, including placenta jars, burial goods and blue and white jars with a dragon motif were produced for use in the rites.

Neo-Confucianism focuses on two levels of human existence: self-cultivation at the individual level and human relations at the social level. Confucius defined self-cultivation as consisting of four acts: constant mental introspection; development and refinement of morals; careful maintenance of propriety; and close observation of one’s behaviour in solitude. White porcelain was seen as the physical embodiment of the mind and spirit of the Neo-Confucian scholars.

A popular subject for blue and white porcelain was the ‘Four Gentlemen’, or ‘four gracious plants’: plum blossom, chrysanthemum, orchid and bamboo. These held particular significance for Joseon scholars, reminding them that virtue was as important as wisdom. Plum blossom is admired for being the first to bloom in early spring, braving the winter cold; the chrysanthemum blooms late into autumn, despite the imminent threat of winter; orchids can be found deep in forests, their delicate scent permeating the air; and bamboo remains green even in the coldest months.

The restrictions about owning blue and white porcelain were gradually lifted, so that scholar-officials and eventually wealthy commoners could possess them. The diversity of vessel forms increased, with porcelain used for tableware and other utensils. The range of decorative motifs expanded to include auspicious symbols, such as the ten longevity symbols and dragons, phoenix, tigers, bats and carp. They were often depicted in the more free-flowing style of folk painting.

The Joseon legacy continues to influence modern Korea. White porcelain remains popular to this day, from that most iconic Korean object, the moon jar, to tableware.





Contents



15th century



18th century



19th century

Soft-paste porcelain was produced during the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392). It was fired in the same kilns as celadon ware, but did not reach the temperature required to become fully 'porcelainized'. As a result, it has a softer surface and an off-white colour. It was produced in limited quantities, so there are relatively few examples. A handful of pieces of Goryeo hard-paste porcelain has also been found; they are similar in colour to Chinese white porcelain of the period.

Some soft-paste porcelain was also produced in the early years of the Joseon dynasty, fired in kilns alongside buncheong ware. However, early in the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), potters, who had been influenced by Yuan and Ming porcelain from China, were able to produce true or hard-paste white porcelain. The earliest Joseon examples appear to have been produced at kilns in Gwangju. However, it took until the latter half of the 15th century for rural kilns to produce hard-paste porcelain for local consumers. Joseon porcelain was covered with a translucent glaze that sometimes imparted a grey or blue hue.

The moon jar, that most iconic Korean ceramic object, is also an example of white porcelain. It was produced during the latter half of the 17th century through into the 18th century. They were produced in several counties at the Bunwon royal complex, although sites were moved at regular intervals, when local firewood supplies were exhausted.

White Porcelain Bowl

15th century

H10cm D18cm

HCP19





White Porcelain Brush Washer

15th century
H6cm D9.5cm
HCP71

Yoo Gyeho Lidded Pot

15th century

H9.2cm D8cm

HCP174





White Porcelain Bowl

15th century
H10cm D19cm
HCP122

White Porcelain Offering Plate

18th century

H5cm D12cm

HCP52





***White Porcelain Offering Plate
with Faceted Foot***

19th century
H6cm D13.5cm
HCP40

White Porcelain Medicine Pot

19th century

H8.5cm D8cm

HCP76





***White Porcelain Flask with Cobalt
Blue Decoration***

19th century

H19cm

HCP56



White Porcelain Offering Plate

19th century
H9.3cm D8.7cm
HCP33

White Porcelain Lidded Bowl

19th century

H11cm D16cm

HCP46





White Porcelain Flask

19th century

H23cm

HCP57

White Porcelain Flask

19th century

H17cm

HCP43





White Porcelain Jar

19th century

H33.5cm

HCP59

***White Porcelain Flask with Crane
Decoration***

19th century

H32cm

HCP18





***White Porcelain Pot with Floral
Decoration***

19th century
H12cm D8.5cm
HCP175

***White Porcelain Vase with
Dragon Decoration***

19th century

H42.5cm

HCP61





***White Porcelain Flask with Floral
Decoration***

19th century

H20cm

HCP15

Moon Jar

19th century

H37.5cm D16cm

HCP173







Our gallery

Han Collection

Han Collection was founded in London in 2006 with the aim of bringing exceptional Korean contemporary art and antiques to an international audience.

Under the direction and curation of Jinsoo Park, founder and Director, Han Collection regularly holds exhibitions at its gallery space in 33 Museum Street and takes part in prestigious art fairs such as the Olympia Art & Antiques Fair, Collect Art Fair, London Craft Week, Busan Annual Market of Art and more.

The gallery also sources important institutions for the likes of the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, UK..

Through our commitment and expertise, we present exceptional Korean art and antiques that express an authentic vision, superb craftsmanship and an intellectual engagement with the world audiences.

Han Collection is pleased offer antique and art advisory and appraisal service to both individual and corporate clients. Site visits to homes and offices can be arranged, and we are happy to work with clients to provide antiques and art which reflects personal taste or captures the ethos of a museum, gallery or private company. With our unrivalled experience and specialist knowledge, Han Collection is able to source a wide range of Korean antiques and arts.

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Credits

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Literature

Earth, Fire, Soul: The Masterpieces of Korean Ceramics, National Museum of Korea, 2018
Joseon Korea - Court Treasures and City Life, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, 2017
Traditional Korean Ceramics: A Look by a Scientist, Carolyn Kyongshin Koh Choo, Designnanoom, 2016