

Uri Korea

Serenity in the fast lane

An exhibition of the National Folk Museums of Korea and the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg

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The longstanding cooperation between the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg and the National Folk Museum of Korea has made this joint exhibition project possible. It traces the importance of tradition in contemporary Korean society, reveals fractures, contradictions and re-interpretations as well as the renegotiation of traditions to configure them for today's world. Following the end of the Japanese annexation of the country and the Korean War, Korean society embarked upon a self-determined quest to define a newly re-engineered national identity. The great significance today of the objects in the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde is linked to the high regard in which historical artefacts and traditions are held in daily life in South Korea. For the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to place its own collection in a contemporary cultural context.

In this connection, selected objects from the major historical collection are being exhibited and, with the help of our Korean colleagues, interpreted. The Korea Collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde comprises almost 3000 items, of which 150 will be on show.

Many of these artefacts came to the Museum through the agency of the Hamburg merchant H.C. Eduard Meyer, who ran an export and import business in Korea from 1884 on. After his appointment by King Gojong, he represented Korea in Germany as the first honorary consul for more than 20 years. Further items were collected by the geologist Prof. Carl Gottsche, Professor at the Colonial Institute, the nucleus of the later University of Hamburg, who was commissioned by King Gojong to prospect for mineral resources. He brought home to the Museum a collection of Korean maps of great significance for the history of science. Starting in the 1970s, the ethnologists and former employees of the Museum Gernot Prunner and Cho Hungyoun expanded the collections dealing with Korean shamanism and everyday living culture which already existed and brought them up to date. Since 2014, scholars from the South Korean *National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage* (NRICH) have been researching the collection and are compiling a catalogue of the items in it.



Due to the Japanese annexation from 1910-1945 and the Korean War, there are more artistic and cultural treasures abroad today than in Korea itself. The NRICH research project, ongoing worldwide now for two decades, has the goal of registering the artistic and cultural treasures abroad and regaining access to the country's own cultural heritage. The objects in the Hamburg collection are important testimony to the history of art and science, religious independence and erstwhile everyday life in the country. They document the scientific interest in as well as Hamburg's relations to Korea.

A country in the fast lane

The preparations for this exhibition have been underway since 2015, building on the research under the auspices of the NRICH projects mentioned above which preceded it. The curating team of the National Folk Museum of Korea designed an exhibition as a snapshot of today's South Korea, focusing on themes of everyday life. These include the "culture of the fast lane", the result of the development which turned Korea from one of the poorest countries in the world to one of the major industrial nations within the space of only two decades. This finds its expression, for instance, in standardized apartments, since 90% of the population live in cities, and in the "education fever" which makes it the highest scoring country in the world in terms of education.

On top of this, the exhibition shows the trend to the single-person karaoke booth together with the "Korean wave" triggered in Asia and the USA by the success of K-Pop and Korean drama series.

Another important topic is Korean cuisine.

Fermented foods, which have long been a staple of eating habits in Korea, are becoming ever more popular internationally. Modern designer tableware, like other design objects in the 21st century, take their inspiration from an aesthetic of understatement and elegance similar to the ideal aimed at in the bygone days of the Joseon Dynasty (1392- 1910). This aesthetic is the second pole of the contrasting principles of "serenity" and "living in the fast lane", and at the same time points to the Hamburg Museum's collection, which comes from that earlier period.



A special role in the exhibition is played by the works of Koo Bohnchang. The artist, born in 1953, who studied photography in Hamburg in the 1980s, devotes intensive study to the aesthetic of the Joseon Dynasty and transfers it into a modern image and video language. His works are a bridge linking the tech-savvy, fast-moving modern world of South Korea and the deliberate reduction to the essentials which he sees as the key characteristic of Korean culture and aesthetics.

Serenity

The curating team of the Museum für Völkerkunde planned the historical part of the exhibition around the Museum's collection; it deals with themes from Korean tradition which inform the public discourse in Korean society today. First among these is the Confucian ideal of simplicity, here revealed in the aesthetic of historical artefacts for everyday use. Further items from the collection belong to the tradition of Neo-Confucianism – a doctrine which, despite its name, is in fact older than the school of Confucianism practised today in China, and which has remained a strong influence in Korea to this day.

The theme of a society stratified by status – crystallized in elaborate dress codes – indicates the importance of education as the basis of any career path even in the Joseon Period (1392-1910). Korea's place in the world as it saw itself – it initially modelled itself closely on China, but from the 15th century on increasingly emphasized its position as an independent country with its own culture – can be seen in the distinctive development of cartography, a shift towards indigenous religious traditions such as the mountain god and village guardian figures as well as a gradual dissociation from China in art through emphasis on the strong colours of the "Minhwa" painting tradition, only found in Korea.

Interviews with Korean artists and scholars about their view of the importance of the traditions shown here for Korea today round off this part of the exhibition. Beginning in the 1970s, Korean traditions have been consciously "reconquered" and reevaluated, after being forbidden during the Japanese annexation from 1910-1945 – at times even going so far as to ban Koreans from using their own language and personal names – and after the country had suffered the almost total loss of its cultural monuments and creative artists in the Korean War.

For these reasons the Korean exhibition team was concerned to present the history of the country from their own perspective and to concentrate on those events which have shaped their understanding of the world today.



A concluding part of the exhibition looks at the significance of collections such as that in the Museum für Völkerkunde for Korean research and presents the joint research project.

An exhibition of the National Folk Museum of Korea und the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Media Hamburg.



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