KOREAN ART OBJECTS AT SOAS

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Introduction

Since its foundation in 1916, the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS) has acquired valuable artefacts donated by dignitaries, academics, artists and others. As a result, it now houses a substantial number of precious manuscripts, prints and paintings which it holds in the Archives and Special Collections of the SOAS Library, as well as 400 non-archival artworks from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Included among the non-archival as well as the archival collections are several artworks that were either made by Korean artists or depict Korean scenes. Little was known about the non-archival collection until 2005 when SOAS began to compile an inventory of the artefacts. In the process several significant works of art were discovered, and in 2007 they were shown to the public for the first time in an exhibition titled ‘Objects of Instruction: Treasures of the School of Oriental and African Studies’ that opened at the Brunei Gallery – an exhibition space within the Brunei Building on the main SOAS campus. Curated by Dr Anna Contadini, Professor of the History of Islamic Art in the Department of the History of Art and Archaeology, the exhibition numbered around 120 artefacts from a wide range of regions that the School focuses on: East Asia, South East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The objects were illustrated in the accompanying exhibition catalogue that summarized highlights of the exhibition (Contadini 2007). This included some of the School’s Korean artefacts which will be examined here in more detail alongside others that were not displayed in the exhibition.

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2 The School was originally named the School of Oriental Studies (SOS). It took its present title in 1938, by which time it had also established itself as a centre for African Studies.
SOAS holds around thirty manuscripts and works of art that relate to Korea, either through manufacture or subject matter, and they signify the School’s long-standing and strong links with Korea. Some of the artworks were made by Korean artists while others were produced by individuals of non-Korean descent who took a keen interest in depicting and recording Korea’s distinctive national characteristics and idiosyncrasies. The artefacts are of important artistic and historical value, and cement the position of SOAS as a keeper and disseminator of knowledge in its broadest sense. Many of the artworks are beautiful and worthy of study simply for their aesthetic appeal. But it is the stories they tell that make them fascinating subjects of enquiry. The library’s collection of Korean manuscripts is discussed in the introduction to this volume and so this chapter centres on works of art; the iconography and manufacture of these works will be placed within a broader artistic, cultural and historical framework. Additionally, the chapter will also address the stories that surround these artworks and how they ended up at SOAS.

_Korean art in Europe_

SOAS is probably the only academic institution in Europe to hold Korean works of art. Some of them seem to have been given as gifts to the School in the early twentieth century, when British curators and collectors of Korean art were actively purchasing objects, often through dealers in London or in Korea itself. It was around this time that the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum acquired large numbers of Korean artefacts and they now hold two of the most significant Korean collections in the West in terms of the breadth and quality of objects. However, they are not the only museums in the UK with Korean collections. The National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge have also acquired Korean artworks over the years, and they each include public gallery spaces devoted exclusively to their displays, signalling a rising interest in Korea among museum curators and visitors.

Within a European context the UK is unusual for its strong and well-researched collections of Korean art. However, in terms of the number of Korean artefacts, the UK is surpassed by Germany, where more than 6,000 Korean objects are spread over more than ten museums, including the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, the Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne, the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg and the Museum of Applied Arts in