

Korean ceramics

한국
hankug
Korea

도자기
dojagi
ceramics

상감
sanggam
inlay

Ceramics is an enduring art form of Korea. The most renowned ceramic wares of Korea are the celadon of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) and the porcelain of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910).

Beautiful luminescent blue-green celadon wares with inlaid decoration were developed in the Goryeo dynasty. At this time, potters focused on producing perfect celadon glazes, and started to experiment with carved and incised decoration under the glazes. The small and elegant bowl (3489-D3) is an example of celadon from between the late eleventh century and early part of the twelfth century. The bowl has a chrysanthemum motif incised under the glaze. Such chrysanthemum bowls were often produced with stands, and included lotus flower lids for Buddhist temples. The bowl is covered with a clear and highly vitrified grey-green glaze. This colour is caused by the presence of iron in the clay, and iron oxide, manganese oxide and quartz particles in the glaze, as well as the firing conditions inside the kiln, commonly operating at a temperature around or below 1150°C.

Goryeo ceramic patrons and potters were not content with simple colour and subdued carved decoration. By the middle of the twelfth century, celadon objects with inlaid (*sanggam*) decoration, a distinctive technique of the Goryeo dynasty, were being created. A motif was carved or incised on a leather-hard clay body and the design was filled with red or white clay and fired. The body was then covered with a celadon glaze and re-fired. The beautiful vase (AS3-1969) has an elegant outline, with a voluminous pear-shaped body rising into a tapered long neck that flares toward a wide-mouthed rim. The decoration on the bottle shows the delicate technique of *sanggam*. The small chrysanthemum flowers are vivid, with the striking contrast of white and black slip inlaid under glass-like, clear glaze. This bottle attests to the technological and aesthetic achievements of Goryeo potters in their production of elegantly formed and decorated vessels, and the Korean preference for themes from nature.

Inlaid celadon vessels such as this example epitomise the refined sensibilities of the Goryeo aristocracy. While ordinary people used simple, undecorated stoneware, royalty and the aristocracy created a demand for large quantities of celadon-glazed objects. The finest vessels were made in official kilns, and potters worked to government specifications and were supervised by court officials in locations such as Kanjin.

During the Joseon dynasty porcelain was the main ceramic medium of Korea, with a long period of growth in imperial and provincial kilns. The continuing development of ceramic styles was greatly encouraged by government dedication

to Confucianism. With the decline of Buddhism as a state supported religion, the production for temples and other sacred vessels gave way to the manufacture of ceramics used for Confucian rituals. To sustain Confucianism, the literati from the Joseon dynasty ruling class were required to follow lifestyles of purity, simplicity and frugality, and they required ritual vessels that reflected their disciplined observances. As a result of this new austerity, greater emphasis was placed on pure, simple form with less decoration in ceramic design.

The plain, white-bodied stoneware bowl (AS2-1986) was made in the sixteenth century. It represents uniquely Korean aesthetic sensibilities – simple glazes and organic forms in nature, avoiding complexity in style and decoration. These types of bowls were probably used for daily life across different social classes.

While a wide variety of ceramics were produced during the Joseon dynasty, porcelain was notable for having been produced consistently. The pure white porcelain was popular throughout the Joseon period, whereas white porcelain, decorated with designs in underglaze blue, was introduced from China to Korea in the fourteenth century, and made for the royal court and the official class from the mid-fifteenth century onwards.

The large *Dragon jar* (2007.540) of robust and voluptuous shape, made in the eighteenth century, encapsulates the finest elements of Korean blue and white porcelain. The jar is decorated with two dragons chasing flaming pearls among clouds. This jar demonstrates how the Joseon dynasty potters worked closely with court painters to produce vessels with superb painted surfaces. The freedom of drawing on the jar epitomises warmth, spontaneity and vitality, and it is these aesthetic qualities that are unique to Korean art. Koreans believed that dragons defeated evil and brought rain for bountiful harvests. Ceramics, paintings and robes bearing five-clawed dragons were reserved for royal use. The dragon on this jar has four claws, signifying that a court official probably owned it. The dragon and cloud motifs were painted on white clay with cobalt blue pigment, then covered with a transparent glaze and fired at 1300°C.

Many potters were taken to Japan during the Japanese invasions of 1592 and 1597, where advanced Joseon ceramic techniques had a great impact on the development of Japanese ceramics from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth century. Furthermore, many Japanese tea connoisseurs favoured the spontaneous and organic style of Joseon ceramics.

left to right:

KOREAN
Bowl
Goryeo dynasty (1300–50) Korea
porcelain
6.1 x 11.5 x 10.9 cm
Felton Bequest, 1933 (3489-D3)

KOREAN
Vase
Goryeo dynasty (13th century) Korea
stoneware
32.3 x 18.0 cm diameter
Purchased, 1969 (AS3-1969)

KOREAN
Bowl
Joseon dynasty (16th century) Korea
stoneware
11.8 x 15.9 cm diameter
Gift of Klaus F. Naumann, 1986
(AS2-1986)

KOREAN
Dragon jar
Joseon dynasty (18th century) Korea
porcelain
42.7 x 33.0 cm diameter
Purchased, NGV Foundation, NGV
Supporters of Asian Art and the Lillian
Ernestine Lobb Bequest, 2007 (2007.540)

