

Korean Aesthetic Consciousness Reflected in the Ceramic Art of Joseon¹

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1. Introduction

Using the formal features of ceramics in the Joseon Dynasty, this paper examines Korean aesthetic consciousness and sensibility, especially as expressed in white porcelain, showing how this aesthetic consciousness was related to ruling-class ideology.

Ethnic art expresses the culture of a certain group. A sensibility can be expressed within the culture of a country in many forms. Various art forms express the aesthetic ideals of Korea, such as *salpuri* (a traditional dance style), *talchum* (a mask dance), genre paintings of the late Joseon Dynasty, *hanbok* (traditional clothes), and gardens. The pottery of the Joseon period should not be overlooked in this connection.

According to Gregory Henderson (1922–1988), who became a collector of Korean ceramics while working at the US Embassy in Seoul,

Koreans, in citing their own accomplishments, point rather to their national phonetic script, Hangeul, to their probably pre-Gutenberg use, of movable type in printing, or to their tortoise ship. Great as these accomplishments were, however, they were very poorly communicated to anyone else and seem to have had little or no discernable effect on the rest of the world. Korean ceramics, in contrast, both in Kaya and in Yi, crucially influenced Japanese ceramics and have had, both directly and through Japan, continuous influence on the last half century of modern pottery throughout much of the world.²

Korean ceramics are, in fact, distinctive. The Goryeo potters learned the technique of creating celadon-glazed ware from the potters of the Song Dynasty, but by the 13th century, they had developed it to a point beyond that of mainland China. Europe at the time was not a technical or artistic competitor in pottery. For these reasons, Henderson praised the uniqueness of the art of Korean ceramics.

The art and thought of world-renowned potter Bernard Leach (1887–1979) and folk craft activist Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961) were also influenced by Korean ceramics. What are the aesthetic qualities of Joseon pottery? What allowed them to have such aesthetic quality?

First, I examine the background of the pottery culture of the Joseon Dynasty and the flow of standard ceramics, considering its aesthetic qualities through a reading of domestic and foreign critics, especially Yanagi and Henderson.

¹ This article is based on the presentation given at the International Conference of “Aesthetic Consciousness in East Asia” on October 29, 2015 organized by The Academy of Korean Studies.

² Gregory Henderson, “Korean Ceramics: An Art’s Variety.” *Catalog Exhibition of Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Henderson* (February 9 to March 9, 1969). Divisions of Art Gally, Ohio State University. p. 17.

2. The Age of White Porcelain, Joseon

In terms of ceramic art, Joseon was the age of white porcelain. At the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, Buncheong (a grayish-blue-powdered celadon) was the most commonly produced, taking the place of Goryeo celadon. However, beginning in the latter half of the 15th century, white porcelain was produced in large quantity in official kiln (官窯) installations, and white porcelain emerged as the highest-quality ceramics produced during the Joseon period.



Figure 1. 12th-century Goryeo bottle(left) and 15th-century Joseon bottle (right)

This white porcelain exhibits a completely different sensibility from the jade-colored Goryeo celadon, having many differences in its appearance.

Although they were used for the same purpose, Goryeo and Joseon ceramics differ in their sensibilities. The jade celadon bottles made during the Goryeo period are thin, delicate, and elegant in shape. On the other hand, the white porcelain bottles of the Joseon Dynasty are thick and rough. They show a relatively artless sense of security when compared to Goryeo celadon (See Figure 1).

Why did the shape of ceramics, even those used for the same purpose, change in this way? It may be that the ideology and philosophy of the state itself altered as time passed and that this change in ideology affected the formal features of ceramic art as practiced.

In the Goryeo period, aristocrats formed a centralized ruling class. It is the culture of this class that is most represented from this era. However, during the Joseon period, Buddhism, which was the state religion during the Goryeo period, was abandoned in favor of a new ruling ideology based on neo-Confucianism. Social reform was promoted through the ideology of national socialism. Common people as well as aristocrats were entitled to attain the highest qualifications for government service through the state examination. This change in ideology led the culture of the two periods down entirely different roads, influencing changes in craft.³

³ Kang Byeong-hee, "The Beauty of the Korean Joseon Dynasty," *KIC News* Vol.17., No.3, 2014, p.65. Korean names are all given in Korean order, *i.e.*, surname first.

First, let's briefly examine the characteristics of Joseon ceramics.

During the Joseon Dynasty, white porcelain with no inherent pattern was the most basic form of pottery. This porcelain was divided into white porcelain, red-hot iron white porcelain (鐵畫白磁), and copper white porcelain (銅畫白磁), depending on what pigment was used to add patterns and images. Other styles included white porcelain painted with openwork (透刻), embossed carving, and intaglio (陰刻) that were done without using colored pigments. The absence of color was a prominent feature of much Joseon white porcelain.

In the early 15th century, blue and white ware was made, following trends in China. The blue and white ware of the Joseon Dynasty was dedicated to the royal family and aristocratic classes, who alone were entitled to enjoy it.

The vessels used in royal palaces and national ceremonies, such as dragon jars (龍樽) and vases, maintained their dignified and majestic forms for 500 years without major changes, following the guidelines set out in Ritual Theory (禮論). The theme of the Four Gracious Plants (四君子) was often depicted on pottery, as a symbol of the frugal noble.

Plain white porcelain was most prized during the Joseon Dynasty. Many records in *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* (朝鮮王朝實錄) or other contemporary documents indicating that pure white ware was valued because it is technically very difficult to make pure white ware, which was taken to express purity and innocence.

Sung-Hyun, in his *Yongjae Chonghua* (慵齋叢話),⁴ wrote that all royal vessels were made of white porcelain in the time of King Sejong. *Gwanghaegun's Diary* (光海君日記) and the *Gyeongguk Daejeon Annotation* (經國大典註解) also recorded that the king used white porcelain, princes used blue porcelain, and other government officials in the royal palace used painted porcelain. It is certainly rare for royalty anywhere in the world, during any period, to exclusively use a pure white lacquer with no pattern.

This is in sharp contrast to the patterns of production found in the neighboring countries of China and Japan, where most white porcelain exhibits patterns made by using various coloring agents on the white, and only rarely are white porcelains found without patterns. In an early-14th-century trade ship found offshore of Shinan, Korea, about 20,000 pieces of white and blue porcelain were found, but almost no pure white ware.

From the mid-14th century, the Chinese began to make their own white porcelain and disseminate it rapidly. Beginning with the early Ming Dynasty, porcelain was developed with overglaze decorations, and the colorful porcelain with three- or five-color patterns entered the mainstream of Chinese ceramics.

Japan adopted China's gorgeous blue and white porcelain and its cultivated ceramics culture. In the late 17th century, the ceramics culture of Japan began to be developed and exported all over the world, and now that country is a leader in world ceramics culture.

However, even though the mainstream of Chinese ceramics was encountered during the Joseon Dynasty, including both the popular blue-white porcelain and the colored ceramics, only blue and

⁴ Sung-Hyun (成俔, 1439–1504) lived during the early Joseon period. *Yongjae Chonghua* is the name of his book, which deals with civilian customs and cultural institutions from the Goryeo period to King Sungjong of Joseon.

white porcelain were styles were taken up in Korea. During the 500 years of the Joseon period, there was almost no manufacture of colored porcelain.⁵

What was so attractive and worth pursuing in the white porcelain? It is necessary to begin with an analysis of the characteristics of Korean ceramics.

A representative historian of the aesthetics and art of Korea, Go Yu-seup (高裕燮, 1905–1944) categorized the aesthetic quality of Korea as *gusuhan mat* (delicate flavor). Such a flavor is a taste that is pure and innocent, not derived from sharpness, discrepancy, or rupture.

When this delicate flavor appears in a more localized form, it becomes *gosuhan mat* (savory flavor), and a typical example of this is the color of white porcelain.⁶ On the outside, it is merely white, but it can be characterized by various factors that seep in. There is an analogy here, based on the fact that the color of the white porcelain is not a uniform white but is a product of a deep tastefulness condensed into various colors, such as the color of Oriental ink (墨色).

Choi Sun-u (1916–1984), a disciple of Go Yu-seop, isolated *kansomi* (簡素美) as a unique Korean aesthetic quality, describing white porcelain as a representative example of this. Choi Sun-u also characterized Joseon ceramics as having a kind of warming sensation that deeply cohered and did not become weak or flabby.⁷

Jo Yo-han (1926–2002) found that the white porcelain style was derived from an unconscious trust in nature.

“The true essence of Korean beauty is that it does not use petty tricks but takes on an attitude of making that empties the mind. Instead of creating superfluity, Lao-Tzu’s letting nature be (無爲自然) or the Buddhist *yathabhutam* gave birth to the archaic beauty of Korea.”⁸

According to Jo Yo-han, making white porcelain has two steps: (1) putting a pattern on the body and glaze on it (釉下施文) and (2) baking a porcelain and mixing the ingredients in a kind of milky oil with the glaze to reveal the pattern, followed by re-baking (釉上下文). Joseon white porcelain followed the former method (釉下施文), even preferring pure white porcelain that has no pattern to the above method.

This style comes from the heart of Koreans, who love white. Because the moon jar (a common type of white porcelain object) is not symmetrical, it appears natural and relaxed, containing a sense of security. For this reason, it is called a typical example of “the archaic beauty (古拙美) of Korea”⁹

What qualities did Joseon pottery possess in the eyes of foreigners?

⁵ Chung Yang-mo, “The beauty of Joseon white porcelain and blue and white porcelain,” *Monthly Chosun*, November. In this place, Chung also wrote that in the *Oju-Yeonmunjangjeon-Sango* (五洲衍文長箋散稿), known the encyclopedia of the late Joseon dynasty, there is a record that white porcelain was highly esteemed in the Joseon Dynasty, and when it was painted, it was judged to be less than pure. Excavations of ceramics from Joseon-era kilns all over the country show that white porcelain was over 99% of all porcelain in the 17th century, and patterns using blue (blue), iron (reddish brown), and fairy (red) are quite rare.

⁶ Go Yu-Seup, *Collected Works of Go Yu-Seu* (Youlhwadang, 2007), p.110.

⁷ Choi Sun-u, “Our Art”, *Collected Works of Choi Sun-u*, Vol.5, Hakgojae, (1992), p. 247

⁸ Jo Yo-Han, *The Review of Korean Beauty*, (Youlhwadang, 2010), P.247.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 339–341.

3. Yanagi Muneyoshi and the Beauty of Joseon Ceramics

Yanagi Muneyoshi, a well-known representative of the Japanese Folk Crafts Movement (the *Mingei* movement), was fascinated by Korean art, its Buddhist art, ceramics, and simple craftsmanship, writing many reviews on Joseon art.¹⁰

Yanagi began to be attracted to the pottery of Joseon after receiving a small pottery given as a gift by Asagawa Noritaka (1884–1964), an elementary school art teacher, in 1914 (Figure 2). In that year he discussed the ceramics of Joseon as follows.

Let's examine a joy I have newly discovered here: the beauty of the form that appears in ceramics. This is a completely new surprise that was hinted at by the pottery of Joseon. I cannot consider the shape of this pottery lightly as a small thing, although I paid little attention to it earlier. It provides a great clue to seeing nature.... Until yesterday, I was not even able to dream that I would be able to read human warmth, nobility, and magnificence in the cold earthenware. To the extent that I can determine, the most developed sense of this form of beauty is found in Ancient Joseon people (古朝鮮人).¹¹



Picture2. Blue and white ceramics vase.
Height 13.5cm.

Yanagi, who lost his heart to Joseon pottery, decided to travel to Korea in 1916 and meet Asagawa Takumi (1890–1931), a collector of Joseon art, living in Joseon, engaging more deeply in his interest of Joseon art, especially on ceramics.

A large Joseon urn, part of Takumi's collection, caused him, as he described later, to be surrounded by emotions that he had never experienced before. He wrote, "I hope to write the history of Joseon art in the near future".¹² Yanagi's motivation for establishing the Korean National Museum originated in his inspirations by Joseon ceramics.

The importance of Yanagi's theory of Joseon art included the perception that while the great achievements in Korean art are often thought to have occurred during the pre-Goryeo era, specifically Korean characteristics appear in the works of the Joseon Dynasty.

What did Yanagi understand the characteristics of Korean ceramics to be? The characteristics of Joseon ceramics that were described by Yanagi should be examined.

¹⁰ Yanagi and his colleagues in the folk movement, shared an aesthetic sensibility that had great appreciation for the Joseon art and the traditional crafts of the Edo period.

¹¹ Yanagi Muneyoshi, "Communication from Abiko," *Yanagi Muneyoshi Zenshu* [Collected Works of Yanagi Soetsu], (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo 1981), I, p. 334. The number I designates Volume I of the collected works, meaning that this reference is to p. 334 of the guide book. References to the completed works of Yanagi Muneyoshi can be seen below, represented with the corresponding volume and page numbers

¹² *Ibid.*, VI, p. 69.

According to Yanagi, before the Joseon Dynasty, “the Orient was all under the influence of the Tang and Song culture—not only Silla but the entire peninsula that connected the continent to the religion and art of Japan across the sea, in a time of unified Buddhism in the east.

However, when Confucianism replaced Buddhism in the Joseon Dynasty, the two philosophies were found to be incompatible. Anyone who tries to understand and study the art of the Joseon Dynasty in its essence must understand the violent trends of the times and the background of Confucianism.”¹³

As is clear from the above, Yanagi argued that the change in religion from Buddhism to Confucianism was what changed Joseon art in a fundamental way.

He further states that Buddhism teaches the relativity of the earth can be overcome and how all peoples can be united in paradise (淨土), but Confucianism teaches “how to love our own country and live comfortably on earth. As Buddhism that puts Nirvana (彼岸) in the center became less powerful, and Confucianism, which places earthly teachings first gained power, conflict arose between countries and the existence of family came to the fore. Art, for its part, began to change direction, following the changing religion.”¹⁴

Therefore, unlike the case of Goryeo, during the Joseon Dynasty, it was considered that “acquiring a grounded, settled foundation” was the central problem, an idea that also appeared in pottery. While, in the Goryeo period, distinctive types or lines of delicate and elegant emotion were prominent, the ceramics of Joseon were “much simpler in form and volume, focused more on meaning than emotion. Therefore, “the work created during the Joseon period was more powerful than that of Goryeo. If woman’s beauty is found in the work of Goryeo, the beauty of man in Leejo’s works”¹⁵. In other words, Joseon pottery has a boldness that is rarely seen in Goryeo. The Foot (高台) are relatively small and their mouths (口部) are often very high. This is rarely seen in China.¹⁶ Yanagi also pointed out that Joseon ceramics are also unique in their glazes.

“Even though [Joseon pottery] is made of the same white porcelain, how different it is from Ming porcelain, which bears a chilly and sharp pure white! A hint of a light blue color is always found in [Joseon pottery], it is surrounded by a color like a powder, or it shows an off-white color that seems to sink into it. This seems to me to be a manifestation of a mind that descends within itself.”¹⁷

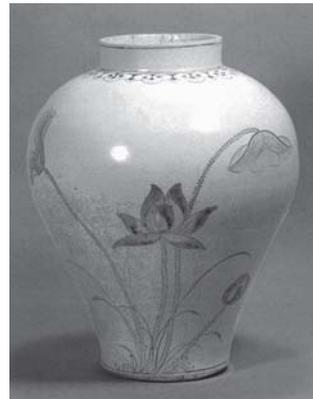


Figure 3. Blue and white pot with a red and blue pattern, 18th century.

¹³ *Ibid.*, VI, pp.156-157.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, p. 157.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, pp. 157-159.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, p. 161.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, VI, pp. 161-162.

Yanagi often discussed the shape and color of Joseon ceramics, especially the beauty of their simple forms. “China is provocative. However, Joseon works never force us. Often they are like a child’s picture of a free-spirited taste”¹⁸

On the color of Joseon pottery, Yanagi observed that

“In here (Joseon), I cannot see any of that reddish-gray (赤絵)¹⁹ that was so developed in the Ming Dynasty and then competitively boasted its beauty in Japan. Osyu (吳州風の赤色), which grants a feeling of the modesty and the dim, is almost all of the selected colors... this is a marvelous thing in Joseon, which is developed especially in porcelains.”²⁰

Yanagi was fascinated by the ceramic art of Joseon and the formative qualities it possessed, and he wrote in his book “The Beauty and Character of Ijo Porcelain” (1959), which he wrote two years before his death, that “In explaining beauty in Buddhist terms, using the example of Joseon porcelain to describe the cause of beauty is as good as a lively explanation”.²¹

Yanagi again expressed himself on the beauty of Joseon porcelain:

It can express the nature of beauty in Buddhist terms very well. ... *Huni* (不二) is that which does not lean on either side—left or right—and nothing causes a choice to be made. Thus, it gently conforms to all circumstances and bears no trace of obsession with anything. If you call it *hunisin* (不二心), this *hunisin* was provided in the heart of the Joseon people from birth. Whatever they made spontaneously emitted *hunibi* (不二美). The sketch of my thought is that this *hunisin* (不二心) is the nature of the beauty of this pottery²².

The Japanese were characterized by Yanagi as dividing the world when making things into two kinds, that bearing beauty and that bearing ugliness, but in the Joseon, things were made without this consciousness and were more beautiful as a result.

Yanagi termed the works of Joseon “the previous things of the beauty and ugliness” and Japanese works as “the afterword things of the beauty and ugliness.” The latter, in his words, can never overcome the beauty of the former; therefore, “even if someone has a sense of beauty, this does not necessarily lead to creating a beautiful thing.”

As is clear here, in Yanagi, “the beauty that accepts incompleteness” is more deeply impressive than the “beauty reluctant to accept incompleteness.” He stressed the points that “Whether one is beautiful or ugly, there is a way to be free and beautiful,” and “Beauty reaches its extreme state where there are no obstacles to it”²³ This should be understood as referring to the nature of beauty as it

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, p.162.

¹⁹ This refers to a pottery colored red that bears designs or images painted using pigments such as green, purple, and blue. It was common during the Chinese Song Dynasty and in Japan during the Shōhō (正保年間, 1644–1648).

²⁰ *Yanagi Muneyoshi Zenshu*, op. cit., VI, pp. 162-163.

²¹ *Ibid.*, VI, p. 519.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 12.

naturally arises from the unconsciousness of the producer. That is, no production method is inherently related to beauty and ugliness or perfection and imperfection.

Yanagi felt attracted to Joseon pottery because it exhibited no significant difference between *jôtemono* (the aristocratic) and *getemono* (common things), as was unlike in Japan. This also relates to his opinion that the essence of a craft is in its use.

Yanagi noted that while there was a government kiln in Joseon, there was no private studio, forcing all work to be anonymous. Thus, during the Joseon Dynasty, everything, from ceremonies to tableware and interior furnishing, was not made for viewing but for actual use, resulting in the lack of a custom of keeping ceramics close and enjoying them, as was found in Japan. He suggests that this is the main reason for the beauty of Joseon ceramics.

This claim precisely grasps the aesthetic ideology of the Joseon ruling class, who felt a strong rejection about “losing its essence or ideals by immersing themselves in one thing”, that is, “the *wanmul sangji* (玩物喪志)”.

Yanagi sums up this thought in this way:

In general, an object made for use is considered to have lower quality, but, for just that reason, no opportunity was found to force, distort, or pursue grace. Therefore, it could be possible to avoid the detrimental effects of the production. This style is natural and candid. Furthermore, since it is only intended for use, it must be made with good health. It has no sickness or nervousness. Pottery for the use was saved from danger. There is no such necessity in Japan, where there is much individualized pottery. In Japan, too, truly beautiful things may be found in common vessels.²⁴

In the next section, we examine the characteristics of Korean pottery through the eyes of Gregory Henderson, a collector of Korean pottery, with a Western rather than Asian perspective.

4. Gregory Henderson and Joseon Ceramics

Gregory Henderson came to Seoul in July 1948 to serve as a vice-consul at the US Embassy there and began collecting Korean ceramics with a great deal of interest. He was fluent in Japanese and Korean. When he served as the President of the Kyoto Cultural Center in Japan (1953–1955), he shared his interest in Korean ceramics in his association with Noritaka (浅川伯教). During his time at the US Embassy in Seoul, he deepened his knowledge of Korean art, connecting with Korean specialists such as Kim Won-ryong.

Joseph H. Thayer, Henderson’s grandfather, was a merchant in China, and Professor Langdon Warner, under whom Henderson studied Oriental art at Harvard, was friends with his father. Henderson acquired a profound interest in Eastern art early in his life. He was not a theorist like Yanagi; he created no artistic criticism or aesthetic commentary on Joseon ceramics or the sense of the Joseon period, but he was an expert in Korean history. He thus wrote on the political situation in

²⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, pp. 249-250.

Korea relative to socio-political history, examining beautiful pottery from a social and political perspective.

Henderson, like Yanagi, acknowledged that Korean ceramics were influenced by the overwhelming and sophisticated Chinese ceramics culture.

However, he insisted that “the important thing is that Korean pottery did not imitate Chinese pottery but accepted it creatively,” and saw Korean pottery as an unusual art. This reflects Yanagi’s recognition of the unique beauty of Joseon art, differentiating the Joseon art from that of China. In this context, what are the characteristics of Korean ceramics that Henderson focused on?

Henderson highlighted such characteristics of weight or roughness in Korean ceramics, explaining that these characteristics gave visual effects that avoid fussiness, brittleness, or fragility. Along these lines, he described Korean pottery as rough, haphazard, lacking formality, imperfect, spontaneous, and innovative. This product, according to him, was the result of “a general lack of schemes or formality.”²⁵

The origin of these qualities, he held, was to be found in the internal structure of Korean society, which is characterized by the absence of any intermediaries between the peasantry and the kingship, in contrast to Western or Japanese feudal society. Rather, in Korean society, whirlwind politics drive all political entities before the power of the centralized government. Henderson suggests the following argument, relating the structural characteristics of Korean society to the characteristics of Joseon ceramics.

Although the energetic intangibility of Korean ceramics leads to other characteristics, we can estimate the common characteristics of Korean society with this background. When this central control weakened, there was no mechanism to replace it. Control and dialogue between the upper and lower strata were cut off which freed socially disowned potters. Korean pottery was more liberal than Europe, China and Japan. As a result, Korean pottery tried to find a solution on its own, and achieved “spontaneity” in taste and culture at the moment of creativeness.²⁶

According to Henderson, when the potters of Joseon became liberated from forms and from the imposed standards learned from those who lived with the feudal lord,

During the Joseon Dynasty, then, free from schematized techniques, processes, and fussy details, the road was open to create an original pottery characterized by vigor and a certain devil-may-care insouciance.

This style was far from artistic and aristocratic tastes. Potters, however, had confidence in their productions, because they had no need to concern themselves about the actual emotional standards. This means that control and dialogue between the upper and lower strata of the Joseon Dynasty were severed, freeing the socially accepted potters. Korean potters worked on creating a solution themselves; at the moment of creation, they achieved a spontaneity in taste and patterns. The inborn talent that appears to be exhibited in the works of these Joseon potters has been noted.

²⁵ Kim Jung-gi, *The Land of Beauty, Jeseon–Yanagi, Asakawa Brothers, Henderson’s Ceramic Tales*, (Hanul, 2011), p. 284 re-citation. Gregory Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 285 re-citation.

Henderson, like Yanagi and other students of Korean art, also argued that the arts of Korea experienced an aesthetic revolution during the transition from Goryeo to Joseon in the late 14th century. He noted that Lotus Buddhism, which underpinned political relationships during the Goryeo period, was abolished, and the ideology of the nation was overthrown. A new ideology, formed on the doctrines of Chu-Tzu, which emphasized simplicity, temperance, and abstinence, came to dominance in the Joseon Dynasty. Henderson saw the aesthetic difference between the upper and lower levels during the Joseon Dynasty as the key to understanding Joseon pottery. Here, Henderson differs from Yanagi.

Yanagi claimed that a reason for the beauty of Joseon pottery is that there was no significant difference between *jôtemono* (the aristocratic) and *getemono* (common things). Henderson claimed that the unconscious state ideology that overthrew Goryeo did not spread everywhere immediately, leaving a gap between the upper-level dynastic power and the lower classes, which widened; as a result, the aesthetics became differentiated. The ruling class, which held the upper power, preferred white porcelain and in small quantities, while the lower classes called for mass production and greater variety in porcelain.

For white porcelain, Joseon central power's initiative characterized white porcelain, as the Gwangju branch was responsible for its production for the court. The beauty of white porcelain lies in its great chasteness and beauty, which symbolized the dynasty's taste, the whiteness representing the nation, simplicity and a conscious cult of asceticism. In particular, at first, the white color of the white porcelain was clear and glowing color, but later transformed into milky white, and after 1780 it turned into a bluish white with a cool blue color, which symbolizes the pure ideal of the Joseon Dynasty.

Henderson noted that the white porcelain of the Ming Dynasty was produced in large quantities and exported to distant places such as the Near East and Egypt, but Joseon Dynasty kilns developed an indigenous blue-white porcelain for domestic consumption. The white porcelain of Joseon showed a separate identity from its counterpart in the Ming Dynasty in its form, pattern, and feeling. Professor Mauri, who examined the white porcelain of the Joseon Dynasty in the Henderson Collection, found that while the white porcelain of the Joseon Dynasty used a chrysanthemum pigment that was imported from China, its effect was to produce a distinctive color, silent and elegant, unlike the lustrous white porcelain produced in China.

Comparative analyses of the aesthetic qualities the pottery produced during the Joseon period shows that the white porcelain of Joseon is created without the use of troublesome techniques that would supply various colors to the pieces, instead taking a simple color, a deformity-free form, and a free and natural beauty. Keeping these aesthetic qualities in mind, in the next section, we examine two features that are frequently discussed.

5. Characteristics of Joseon Ceramics and Korean Aesthetic Consciousness

The primary aesthetic quality of Joseon white porcelain is an emphasis on the beauty of the margins. Ceramic artists therefore refused to decorate their pottery with glaze. A secondary charac-

teristic is that this art remains close to nature and evades being artistic.

The most remarkable thing to note in the history of Korean ceramics is the refusal of overglaze decoration (釉上彩). Joseon-era ceramics were influenced by China from beginning to end. One is reminded of Ming and Qing ceramics in the form and decorative patterns of Joseon ceramics. However, Chinese ceramics were created by using overglazing techniques (上繪技術) beginning in the late 15th century, and since the 16th century, five-colored (五彩) porcelain was popularized.

These ceramics were being exported to Europe at least from the 17th century, and they were leaders in the flow of world ceramics. Japanese products joined this flow. Joseon alone was silent and ignored trends in pottery commerce.

In the world of high-temperature ceramics, there is a sharp distinction between porcelain with an overglaze decoration (釉上彩) and that with a glaze decoration on the bottom (釉下彩). Overglaze decoration is disadvantageous, because the production process is complicated: it must be baked at a high temperature, decorated at a low temperature, and then baked again at a low temperature. On the other hand, this technique enables the free use of vivid colors.

Joseon craftsmen did not use this low-temperature painting method, in which the use of colorful colors employed by Chinese and Japanese potters is greatly simplified. They restricted themselves to solemn colors, using a high-difficulty method, until the end.

It is thought that the choice of method whereby Joseon white porcelain was produced was not due to a restriction caused by any lack of technology but stemmed from an aesthetic sense that resisted having more decoration than necessary. Additionally, the creation of colorful ceramics would have gone against contemporary Confucian values.

The archaeologist Kim Jae-yeol, ties this aesthetic to shamanism, which is a matrix of Korean culture. Although it cannot be definitively shown that the influence of shamanism is responsible for this aesthetic, it has been noted in many studies Koreans have a tendency to avoid patterns, a tendency to reject excessive decoration, and a preference for white. This can be seen in many aspects of the art and crafts of Korea. The *hanbok* of the Joseon Dynasty tends to be monochromatic, often white, for both genders, unlike the Japanese kimono, which boasts brilliant motifs, or the Chinese *qipao*, which stands out for its colorful embroidery. If we take into account that the ruling class, which was not constrained by supply and demand, were on the forefront of such trends, it is difficult to interpret this one as being due to a lack of technology or funding.

The literati of the Joseon Dynasty were dominated by the neo-Confucianist ideology that things should be used as a means for the virtue of the subject. Therefore, they expressed displeasure in falling into the state of the *wanmul sangji* (玩物喪志)²⁷. It thus appears likely that this trend played a role in the rejection of decoration.

The second striking characteristic of the products of Joseon pottery is their proximity to natural objects, as a result of the distance they maintain from technical skill. The art historian Choi Gong-ho concluded that it would be difficult judge that the aesthetic qualities of Korean products include elaboration and magnificence.

The impressions of the Japanese and Western missionaries in the beginnings of foreign study of

²⁷ To lose the ideal by sticking to favorite objects.

Korean art and the domestic scholars who were able to describe it on a subjective footing before and after liberation from the colonial period were agreed in their evaluation that Korean art is close to nature and keeps technique at a distance.

Choi Gong-ho, noting that the product of Korean traditional crafts, such as Joseon white porcelain, is not itself a technique, developed an understanding of *the grand aesthetic consciousness* (大觀的美意識) that was prevalent in the ruling class of the Joseon Dynasty.

This grand aesthetic consciousness is the sense that was spread on the basis of *cheongong-uisik* (天工意識, consciousness worshiping the harmony of nature) and *munbang cheongwan* (文房清玩, pure enjoyment of scholars' accoutrements).

First, consciousness worshiping the harmony of nature (天工意識).

The most widely shared concept among texts examining Korean aesthetics is the beauty of nature. This implies a minimization of the intervention of artificial technology, but it can also mean that the artist employed a sophisticated technique but hid its traces. *Cheongong-uisik*, for its part, is a concept that shares much with beauty of nature. It is man-made, but denotes a natural state, as if the object were a product of heaven and not an artifact.

In Korean literature, *cheongong* (天工) means the harmony of the heavens or of natural objects. It is the opposite of artificial. It is a human product that nevertheless has reached a state of nature, as if it was divinely created, which implies that it embodies an accomplishment corresponding to an elegance and dignity that is neither spectacular nor insufficient. If this technique is interrupted, *cheongong* (天工) will be interfered with be transformed into *gyotal cheongong* (巧奪天工), an artificial sophistication surpassing the natural one. Because technique comes from human beings, eliminating this artificiality as much as possible was required to approach the ideal of *cheongong*. However, the exclusion of the use was against the spirit of *cheongong*. This is because the false consciousness that creates useless objects is distant from the concept of '*cheongong*'.

It is due to this ideology of Joseon that its products bore a naturalness that was present for a long period, as being in harmony with one's surroundings, as well as discovering the proper use of something, is an attribute of Joseon craft.

At that time, *the trend of expressing qianwan* (清玩風潮) was commonly found. The literati did not only have a choice of objects but also a positive tendency to create their own ideal standards, record them, and maintain them.

Many Qing dynasty objects have been found with poetry and names written on them by literati. These expressed in detail their standards of dignity. In the following statement of Hong Man-sun,²⁸ summarizing criteria for den furniture, is a significant example of the state of this practice.

When you make a desk or a table, it is very indecent to put a banding decoration or cloud-shaped carvings between the legs and the top plate. Do not decorate metal ornaments, and do not paint on them using red or yellow lacquer or carve strange flowers (奇花) on the palette. It is worse than the shabby and old.²⁹

²⁸ A scholar in the King Sukjong period (1643–1715). He emphasized practical welfare by studying agronomy and medicine.

²⁹ Choi Gong-Ho, "Aesthetics of Korean Art." *Art History Forum*. Vol 35. 2012. Re-citation from p. 255.

This is also in an article suggesting that small expressions or elaborate portrayals undermine the essence. It is an example of how the ruling class of Korea lived thriftily to practice contemporary Confucian ideology.

Choi claims that the tendency of *QingWan* (清玩) making the practice of the ideology of Neo-Confucianism in everyday life, and the making way by the thought of *Cheogong* which excluded a artificial technique as much as possible, was the cause of creating an atmosphere that does not pay much attention to the trivial part. In this atmosphere it would not have been considered anything of great importance, if someone took issue with a small defect.³⁰

Given these facts, the aesthetic qualities that appear in Joseon white porcelain, namely, archaism, simplicity, shabbiness, unrestrained liberty, and natural beauty were part of a morality formed by the aesthetic ideology of the Joseon ruling class. This ideology is based on ‘the rejection of *wanmul sangji* (玩物喪志)’ and ‘*cheongong-uisik* (天工意識)’ and is expressed as understated sensibility. This sensibility spread as the popular class emerged during the late Joseon Dynasty, and it came to form a characteristic of a general Korean aesthetic sense, which, even as it is passing through a variety of changes under the influence of globalization, still maintains a rejection of the complexity of form and a love of the white and simplicity even today, expressed in the aesthetic sensibility of many Koreans.

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³⁰ *Ibid.*