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News



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ASIAN ART MUSEUM UNVEILS *COUTURE KOREA*
First Major Exhibition of Korean Fashion in U.S. Showcases
Traditional Styles Alongside Contemporary Designs, Highlighting
Global Influence from Seoul to San Francisco



San Francisco, October 5 — *Couture Korea* presents historic and contemporary fashion from Korea and beyond, exclusively at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco from November 3, 2017 to February 4, 2018. The result of a partnership between the Seoul-based Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation and the Asian Art Museum, this original exhibition introduces American audiences to the incomparable artistry and the living legacy of Korean dress. *Couture Korea* — whose title borrows from the French to convey Korea's comparable tradition of exquisite, handcrafted tailoring — weaves together courtly costume from centuries past with the runways of today's fashion capitals.

The exhibition features more than 120 works, including a king's ethereal robe, various 18th-century women's ensembles and layers of silk undergarments, alongside contemporary clothing stitched from hardworking denim and even high-tech neoprene. Re-creations of Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) garments using handmade fabrics are juxtaposed with modern styles by celebrated Korean designers Jin Teok, Im Seonoc and Jung Misun as well as looks from Chanel's Karl Lagerfeld that were inspired by Korean artistic traditions.

"*Couture Korea* elegantly interlaces the traditions of the past with contemporary clothing design to illuminate the ways Koreans — and fashion aficionados around the world — express themselves and their cultural affiliations through dress today," explains exhibition curator and

King Yeongjo's outer robe (dopo), 2015. Reconstruction based on a pre-1740 garment. Silk. *Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation*. Photograph © Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation.

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Asian Art Museum Associate Curator of Korean Art Hyonjeong Kim Han. “By guiding audiences in identifying the unique shapes, materials and colors that distinguish the spirit of Korean fashion, we reveal fashion’s critical role in defining Korean cultural identity now and in the future.”

Visitors to *Couture Korea* will come away with a rich understanding not only of the social and cultural roots, but the growing global impact, of Korean fashion. The Asian Art Museum is the only venue for *Couture Korea*.

Exhibition Highlights Fashion as Cultural Expression and Cultural Emissary

Tying together clothing, history and art, *Couture Korea* is divided into three sections to convey the spirit of fashion as a living link to the past that also helps explain the complexity of an ever-more interconnected world.

As the last East Asian country to open its doors to the West, Korea remained relatively untouched by European fashions. Until the late 19th century, Korean daily life — whether in the palace or the countryside — was permeated by a strict Confucian ideology that valued modesty, self-control and attention to detail and exerted these values through strict dress codes.

What is *Hanbok*

The first section of the exhibition is titled “**What is *Hanbok*?**” It explains that *hanbok* is the most recognizable traditional Korean ensemble and that it originated during a long period of relatively insulated cultural development. *Hanbok* is characterized by:

- For women, a high, full skirt (*chima*) with a longer blouse (*jeogori*) that can be loose or tight-fitting.
- For men, a looser *jeogori*, pants (*baji*) and an outer robe (*po*).

Sumptuary laws governed which classes could wear certain colors, combinations of garments, materials (such as silk, cotton, and ramie — a fine linen-like fiber) and even accessories like scholars’ sculpturally stiff horsehair hats.

For audiences to grasp the fine points of this age-old system, the exhibition opens with an overview of the Confucian customs and principles that infused aristocratic dress in Joseon-dynasty Korea. Most of the traditional garments in this part of the exhibition have been reproduced in the 21st century, using historical relics and paintings as references. Highlights include:

- **King Yeongjo’s outer robe (*dopo*)**, a delicate recreation of a pre-1740 translucent silk robe rediscovered rolled up inside a statue placed in an important Buddhist temple



Woman's winter ensemble, 2016. Reconstruction based on an eighteenth-century painting. Wool, silk, cotton, and linen. *Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation*. Photograph © Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation.

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patronized by the royal family. The *dopo* still bears an inscribed prayer by King Yeongjo. A clean, sophisticated article of informal clothing, as opposed to the formal garments that typically survive, Yeongjo's *outer robe* exemplifies his refined, philosophical approach to dress.

- An eye-catchingly modern **woman's winter ensemble** reconstructed in wool, silk, cotton and linen after a famous 18th-century painting by Shin Yunbok (1758–after 1813) depicting an elite courtesan caught out after curfew. The short jacket, tight sleeves, voluminous skirt and exposed undergarments were cutting-edge fashion at the time, styles propelled, much like today, by risk-taking women. Bound by many restrictions to their dress and social pressure to appear modest in public, most women at the time — privileged or not — were hesitant to follow such daring trends.
- Festive clothing lovingly embroidered with symbols of prosperity and happiness, from **ceremonial costumes for the first birthdays of boys and girls** to elaborate **bridal robes** (*hwarot*), reveal a colorful side of the more restrained designs favored by the upper classes, such as a black-and-white **scholar's robe** (*sim'u*).

Between East and West

Fast-forwarding to the recent past, *Couture Korea* strikes a balance “**Between East and West**. ” This second part of the exhibition presents iconic looks from **Jin Teok (b. 1934)** and **Karl Lagerfeld (b. 1938)**, designers celebrated by the global fashion community. While both are best known for Western-style fashion, they have, and continue to share, an interest in finding new ways to reinterpret Korean tradition in contemporary contexts.

Jin has famously repurposed a Korean bridal robe (*hwarot*) as a long vest and juxtaposed it with a utilitarian jean skirt, bringing together a subtle interplay of deeply personal themes. Jin describes the look in the exhibition publication:



“In this garment, I wanted to embody the conflicting stories of *hwarot* and denim. A wedding is surely a celebratory event and expresses happiness and hope. In contrast, denim suggests labor and pain. The materials themselves reveal conflicting stories, one about the past and the other about the present. When *hwarot* and denim, tradition and modernity, East and West, and play and work are brought together, a dramatic narrative unfolds.”

Lagerfeld looked directly to Korean traditional arts, like mother-of-pearl lacquerware and elaborate wrapping cloths pieced from remnant scraps (*bojagi*), as well as the silhouette of *hanbok*, for his 2016 Chanel Cruise collection. Lagerfeld explained to the Asian Art Museum how, “I had never seen a collection inspired by the heritage of Korea in a modern way. I love classical Korean patchwork, the proportions of dresses and even the fibers.”

He has incorporated elements into his collection that are instantly recognizable as Korean, but in a respectful, modern way that approaches design thematically rather than in an appropriative manner. “Accessories can also be affected by traditional things,” Lagerfeld continued. “Even a tradition that looks completely different. I like the idea rather than the reality of certain motifs.”

Ensemble inspired by traditional Korean wrapping cloth (*bojagi*), from the Cruise collection, 2016, by Karl Lagerfeld (German, b. 1938) for Chanel. Jacket and skirt: wool tweed; blouse: silk twill; pumps: calfskin; jewelry: pearl and glass. *Chanel Patrimoine Collection, Paris*. Photograph © Chanel.

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From Seoul to San Francisco

The final section of *Couture Korea*, “**From Seoul to San Francisco**,” takes visitors from the museum to the studios, streets and boutiques of today’s forward-looking Korea. Trend-conscious teenagers and fashionistas sporting *hanbok* have been spotted for years around Seoul. To elaborate on the enduring appeal of such traditional apparel, the exhibition explores the signature looks of contemporary Korean designers **Im Seonoc (b. 1962)** and **Jung Misun (b. 1984)**. By focusing on the versatility and understated chic of older silhouettes, Im and Jung update inherited styles with natural draping or industrial fabrics that appeal to women interested in looking modern and feeling comfortable while expressing a deeper affinity for Korean cultural identity.

“The garments presented in *Couture Korea* are important not only as markers of Korean culture — as outward symbols of a specifically Korean aesthetic — but also as artworks of the highest standard,” says Asian Art Museum Director and CEO Jay Xu. “They take the simple act of dressing to a new level. Their design and creation, built upon a truly rich heritage as this exhibition demonstrates, can be appreciated by an international audience.”

From November 7 onwards, a satellite installation in the Korean art galleries will present artworks from the museum’s collection — portraits, personal accessories and *bojagi* wrapping cloths — to provide additional historical and cultural context for visitors to *Couture Korea*. A curatorial and audience favorite, *Scholars’ Books and Things*, a large, eight-panel folding screen by Yi Eungrok (1808–after 1874) artfully depicting the myriad accoutrements of a late-Joseon dynasty intellectual, will be displayed for the first time in years.

Programs Draw Lines from Age-Old Traditions to Today’s Trend-Setters

Programs presented in conjunction with *Couture Korea* at the Asian Art Museum include:

Jin Teok: Pioneer of Korean Fashion

Nov 4

Conversation between fashion historian Neil Wu-Gibbs and designer Jin Teok, whose work features prominently in the exhibition.

K-Fashion Bash

Nov 19

Day-long celebration of Korean pop culture — from music to food to beauty — with a special panel of fashion influencers and designers discussing current trends and personal inspiration, moderated by *San Francisco Chronicle* style reporter and connectivity columnist Tony Bravo. Support for this program is generously provided by Kaiser Permanente and Bank of America.

Korean Fashion from the Joseon Dynasty to Today

Dec 9

Hear from textile historian Lee Talbot and Korean dress historian Minjee Kim as they present

Woman's winter ensemble, 2016. Reconstruction based on an eighteenth-century painting. Wool, silk, cotton, and linen. *Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation*. Photograph © Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation.

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an overview of 18th-century Korean fashion and the inspiration, appropriation and innovation currently at play in contemporary Korean and global fashion.

Please check the museum website for all program details:

www.asianart.org/exhibitions/couture-korea

Exhibition Organization

Couture Korea is co-organized by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation, Korea. Presentation is made possible with the generous support of the Korea Foundation, Sulwhasoo, Korean Air, The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang Fund for Excellence in Exhibitions and Presentations, Warren Felson and Lucy Sun, Anne and Timothy Kahn, Fred Levin and Nancy Livingston, The Shenson Foundation, in Memory of Ben & A. Jess Shenson, John Maa, M.D., Stephanie and James Marver, Suno Kay Osterweis, Salle E. Yoo and Jeffrey P. Gray, Lawrence and Gorretti Lui, and Ruth and Ken Wilcox. Support for the exhibition catalogue publication is provided by Sung Jin and Frank Ingriselli.

About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco's premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures from throughout Asia spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences, centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

Exhibition Hours: Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Closed Mondays.

Exhibition Admission: FREE for museum members and children (12 & under). On weekdays, \$20 for adults and \$15 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On weekends, \$25 for adults and \$20 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On Target First Free Sundays admission to the exhibition is \$10.

General Museum Admission: FREE for museum members, \$15 for adults, \$10 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youth (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD students with ID. General admission is FREE to all on Target First Free Sundays (the first Sunday of every month).

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