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## MOTHER-OF-PEARL LACQUERWARE FROM KOREA

**Asian Art Museum presents first ever U.S. exhibition devoted to time-honored Korean tradition, featuring rare historic luxuries alongside contemporary masterpieces**



SAN FRANCISCO, April 25, 2016 — Intricate flowers, swirling leaves, and graceful birds poised to fly, all illuminated in precious mother-of-pearl on a sleek lacquer background. From April 29 to Oct. 23, the Asian Art Museum presents *Mother-of-Pearl Lacquerware from Korea*, an original exhibition combining new insights into this ancient tradition whose enduring creative power continues to inspire artists and artisans.

Drawn primarily from the Asian Art Museum's unique holdings of mid-to-late Joseon dynasty lacquerware — with loans from LACMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as art institutions in Korea — the exhibition demonstrates the aesthetic and technical development of mother-of-pearl lacquerware through to the present day.

Never before has a U.S. museum featured a survey of mother-of-pearl lacquerware exclusively from Korea. This ornate, painstakingly meticulous art has been practiced in Asia for thousands of years, and was perfected on the Korean Peninsula centuries ago. Through a select group of 30 radiant objects, spanning the domestic craftsmanship of dynasties past to cutting-edge contemporary art, audiences will deepen their appreciation for this alluring technique and delight in its novel interpretations by living artists.

"This exhibition provides a bridge between the past and the future. What makes it so special is that we have examples that are hundreds of years old and it's uncommon to find these pieces in such good condition," says Associate Curator of Korean Art, Hyonjeong Kim Han. "In both South Korea and the U.S., relatively little attention has been given to the study and research into this precious, time-honored tradition, which is why we felt it was critical to take a multifaceted approach, exploring historical, artistic, and technical themes, as well as the conservation of Korean lacquers."

### Highlights of Korean mother-of-pearl lacquerware juxtapose old and new

With Korea now seen as a global powerhouse in art and culture, there has been a renewed interest in traditional aesthetics and handicraft techniques. Lacquer is a kind of "organic plastic" made from layering, drying, and polishing tree sap into a luminously smooth surface that can take many months to finish. Delicate inlays of mother-of-pearl — in the past

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Table with phoenix, crane, and peach motif, 1800–1900. Korea, Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). Lacquered wood with inlaid mother-of-pearl. *Asian Art Museum, Museum purchase, 2016.39.* Photograph © Asian Art Museum.

harvested from abalone shells along the Korean coast — endow the lacquered boxes, tables, cabinets, and other objects on display with a courtly luster that underscores the status of their owners and makers. Highlights among these heirlooms include delightfully elaborate keepsake boxes from the early 1500s to the mid 1600s, a selection of 18th-century luxury tables, and a rare late-Joseon dynasty reading desk.



“There are few traditional artisans still practicing this technique in Korea,” explains Han. “But contemporary artists have revived the tradition of mother-of-pearl to express change and constancy. It allows them to be in harmony with their culture, while still connecting to a contemporary conversation about art.”

The exhibition places multiple mother-of-pearl works from today’s Korea directly into dialogue with the past. Enormous “pebbles” by Hwang Samyong, which required roughly 250 hours each to complete, exude a witty simplicity glossed with luxury. Seven wall panels completely patterned with mother-of-pearl by Kim Yousun are infused with impressionistic energy and light, recalling Van Gogh’s luminous swirls.

Multimedia artist Lee Leenam will also debut a new video work titled *Reborn Light: Mother-of-Pearl* featuring a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Joseon dynasty painting from the Asian Art Museum’s collection as its background. Playing with the notion of luminescence, Lee brings to life the still elements in the museum’s painting, and creates a fantastical story in which elements from the past, from art, and from a fictional future interact.



“The Asian Art Museum was the first museum in America to have a dedicated Korean art curator and gallery, so we have always been a leader in finding innovative ways to present Korean art and culture outside of Asia,” notes Asian Art Museum Director Jay Xu. “This exhibition furthers the museum’s commitment to sparking conversations about what’s next, in San Francisco and around the globe.”

### New conservation partnerships lead to surprising discoveries to share with visitors

In preparing objects from the Asian Art Museum’s collection for exhibition, museum curators and conservators collaborated with the Getty Conservation Institute to examine a range of historic samples using sophisticated X-ray and chemical spectrography. This was the first time the Getty had studied Korean lacquerware up close, and together with colleagues at the Asian Art Museum, long-lost techniques were recovered, including intricate under-gilding processes and other ancient skills that had not previously been documented.

To enhance audience access to these discoveries, the museum has also produced a new video describing the craftsmanship and conservation of these vibrant artworks. The video was produced with funding from the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation, which has long recognized and supported the Asian Art Museum’s various conservation projects.

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Above: Reading desk with motif of the Ten Symbols of Longevity, 1750–1850. Korea, Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). Lacquered wood with inlaid mother-of-pearl. *Asian Art Museum, Acquisition made possible by Korean Art and Culture Committee*, 2016.37. Photograph © Asian Art Museum.

Below: Pebbles (P1409, P1501, P1602), 2014–2016, by Hwang Samyong (Korean, b. 1960). Mother-of-pearl and lacquer on fiberglass. *Crosspoint Cultural Foundation, Korea*. © Hwang Samyong. Photograph © Crosspoint Cultural Foundation, Korea.

### Museum to host symposium, demonstrations, and workshops for all audiences

In addition to the exhibition, on Saturday, May 21 the Asian Art Museum will host a public symposium for historians and conservators of lacquerware, “Looking at Mother-of-Pearl Lacquerware from Korea,” to share and discuss new findings in the field. Scholars will present their latest research, while audiences will then be treated to live demonstrations of the design and production of mother-of-pearl inlays. Visitors will also be invited to create their own mother-of-pearl art project in artisan-led activities at the museum.



Thanks to support from Korea Foundation, the museum will be open for free to all visitors in order to celebrate Korea Day celebrations on Sunday, Sept. 25, with additional family-friendly programs and activities centered on *Mother-of-Pearl Lacquerware from Korea*.

### EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION

*Mother-of-Pearl Lacquerware from Korea* is organized by the Asian Art Museum. Presentation in the museum's Korean Galleries and Tateuchi Thematic Gallery is made possible with the generous support of the Koret Foundation and Korea Foundation.

### PUBLICATION

A fully illustrated booklet accompanies *Mother-of-Pearl Lacquerware from Korea*, published by the Asian Art Museum. Available for FREE in museum galleries.

### 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 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.

Information: 415.581.3500 or [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org)

Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, California 94102 U.S.A.

Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 PM starting Feb. 26 through Oct. 8. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

General Admission: FREE for museum members, \$15 for adults, \$10 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youths (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD students with ID. General admission on Thursdays after 5 PM is \$5 for all visitors (except those under 12, SFUSD students, and museum members, who are always admitted FREE). General admission is FREE to all on Target First Free Sundays (the first Sunday of every month).

Access: The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access: 415.581.3598; TDD: 415.861.2035.

Don't miss a moment: @AsianArtMuseum

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