

The Significance of Korean Ceramic Patterns: Exploring Historical Changes, Symbolic Meanings and Development Directions

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Abstract

Ceramics comprise a significant portion of our cultural heritage, each piece manifesting unique attributes from its historical period and region of origin, discernible through embedded patterns. These patterns not only amplify the artistic appeal of the ceramics but are rich in symbolic meanings so they can provide insight into historical progressions. This paper presents a chronologically organized study of Korean ceramic patterns and explore their transformation inherent meanings and the craftsmanship of South Korean ceramics. Through this comprehensive comparison, the remarkable diversity and excellence of Korean ceramics are illuminated to pave the way for the creation of future masterpieces that seamlessly combine the mystical elegance of Goryeo ceramics with the humor, openness and moderation embodied by Joseon ceramics.

Keyword : ceramic, Goryeo, Joseon, ceramic patterns, distiction

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, South Korea has attained global recognition as a dominant force in the semiconductor industry while the international acclaim for Korean pop art, including K-pop, movies, and dramas, has surpassed expectations. However, it is important to recognize that the present stature and impact of the Republic of Korea did not arise overnight. By exploring the artifacts showcased in various museums, we can discern traces of our ancestors' extraordinary aesthetic sensibility and craftsmanship. Among these artistic expressions, pottery holds a paramount position as a revered and essential component of our cultural heritage. The very etymology of 'Korea,' denoting South Korea in English, can be traced back to the era of 'Goryeo,' a period marked by the flourishing splendor and delicate craftsmanship of pottery to provide irrefutable evidence of its enduring significance.

Goryeo pottery epitomizes the pinnacle of excellence and seamlessly blends unparalleled production techniques and artistic mastery prevalent during its time. It serves as a reflection of the amalgamation

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between our contemporary world's cutting-edge semiconductor technology and the captivating artistry embodied by the Korean Wave which has captivated audiences worldwide. A noteworthy statistic further emphasizes the prominence of pottery within our cultural landscape: out of the 195,271 artifacts housed by the National Museum of Korea in 2019, pottery accounts for the largest single item count with an impressive total of 55,511 artifacts. Moreover, pottery takes center stage in exhibitions that showcase Korean cultural assets prominently featured in domestic university museums as well as dedicated Korean-themed sections of museums abroad [1]. Much study with the focus on the pottery has been conducted to reveal the relationship between craft production and social change [2] and potter development and its technologies [3]. Some studies mainly focus on the particular regional pottery on Jeju Island [4]. In line with the recent research, Korean ceramics display distinctive characteristics that vary across different periods and regions. Ceramic patterns and serves to enhance the aesthetic and artistic qualities of pottery. They embodies not only decorative functions but also encompass a rich array of symbolic meanings unique to each pattern. Through an in-depth examination of these ceramic patterns, visitors are afforded a glimpse into the historical evolution encapsulated within them.

The purpose of this study is to delve into the chronological progression of domestic ceramic patterns to uncover the intricate meanings embedded within each pattern and shed light on the excellence and future prospects of Korean pottery. By undertaking this comprehensive exploration, the paper expects to appreciate and celebrate the diverse legacy of Korean ceramics, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of their cultural significance and inspiring future artistic achievements.

2. Periodic transformations of ceramic patterns

2.1 Pre-Goryoe Dynasty Ceramic patterns

The history of ceramics on the Korean Peninsula spans approximately 12,000 years with the origins of pottery in Korea dating back over 6,000 years to the New Stone Age. During the Neolithic Period, as agricultural practices emerged, clay was shaped into bowls and earthenware objects that were subsequently fired at temperatures ranging from 600 to 800°C. Notably, these earthenware vessels were adorned with comb patterns although the precise symbolic meaning behind these patterns remains elusive, possibly rooted in the enigmatic origins of the ancient people that evade contemporary interpretation. Patterns functioned as a form of communication and expression in the absence of a written language to serve as a conduit for the thoughts and emotions of individuals. Throughout the Korean Peninsula, a rich variety of patterns imbued with intricate and symbolic meanings permeated various aspects of life

including religious practices and the utilitarian objects of everyday existence [5].



[Fig. 1] Earthenware patterns of the Three Kingdoms period

As shown in [Fig. 1], the evolution of earthenware craftsmanship during the Early Iron Age, Three Kingdoms Period and Unified Silla Period witnessed the production of diverse bowls. Among these periods, Goguryeo's earthenware patterns displayed distinct geometric and schematic designs, likely influenced by the characteristics of the kingdom itself [6]. In contrast, Baekje featured a range of patterns including the snail pattern, rainbow pattern and lattice pattern. As for the Silla Period, gray-blue hard earthenware gained popularity adorned with patterns such as the triangular parallel line pattern, grid pattern, double round pattern, wavy side pattern, and dotted side patterns. The heterogeneous earthenware and clay figures of this period showcased intricate depictions of human, snake, turtle, horse and fish patterns. Despite being rooted in the same cultural context, the three kingdoms exhibited individuality and local styles to indicate that patterns as an integral element of formative expression diverged due to variations in customs, natural environment, religion and education [5]. Furthermore, the application of pottery patterns within the three kingdoms served as a means to articulate their respective ideal worlds that are shaped by political positions and ideological systems [7].

During the Unified Silla Period, the shapes and patterns of ceramics underwent transformative changes influenced by the assimilation of Tang Dynasty's metal culture. As shown in [Fig. 2], patterns such as snowflake and cloud patterns which were imbued with Buddhist influences were expressed using printing techniques. In addition, notable shifts in formal design occurred, including the introduction of lids and heels. Moreover, the overall decorative patterns transitioned from geometric inscription patterns to more familiar motifs such as flowers and beads. The production of ceramics during this period placed an emphasis on practicality driven by the concept of decorative or ritual objects with glaze playing a significant role in the colorful patterns that would emerge in subsequent eras.



[Fig. 2] Unified Silla Era Earthenware Pattern

2.2 Pattern of pottery during the Goryeo Dynasty

The Goryeo Dynasty renowned as a period of remarkable development in ceramic culture and the epitome of aesthetic excellence witnessed significant transformations in the realm of pottery. The convergence of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism coupled with technological advancements resulted in the seamless integration of rationality, practicality and decorative patterns. Notably, a diverse array of patterns emerged to draw inspiration from the natural world, with plant motifs taking center stage. These motifs included the Severn Treasure motif (Chilbomun), the hooked cross motif (Manjamun), the Greek fret motif (Noimun), Yeouidoomun, the pearl motif (Jarimun) and Yeounjumun. The 12th century experienced a surge in the development of new patterns fueled by the progressive indignation of pattern design, utilization of diverse materials and advancements in glaze technology. These advancements enabled the vibrant expression of a myriad of colors within the patterns [8].

The refinement of techniques and painting methods during this era laid the foundation for an aristocratic pottery culture, characterized by exquisite craftsmanship and meticulous attention to detail. In addition to the primary patterns that garnered attention, the emergence of auxiliary patterns became increasingly prevalent to extend from the leg to the heel support. These subordinate patterns played a crucial role in achieving a sense of harmony and complementarity in order to enrich the overall aesthetic experience. The influence of Buddhist aesthetics and aristocratic culture reverberated through the formative characteristics and patterns to favor the graceful lines of willow motifs. These influences transcended the realm of inlaid pottery that leaves an indelible imprint on earthenware and other artifacts

of the era.



[Fig. 3] Goryeo Dynasty Ceramic Patterns

As shown in [Fig. 3], the Goryeo Dynasty witnessed the emergence of distinctive patterns in pottery to encompass animal, plant and mythological motifs. Animal patterns developed in correlation with the natural environment and the prevailing practice of nature worship. These patterns can be traced back to ancient rock paintings during the Bronze Age and further evolve in mural paintings of the Three Kingdoms Period and find expression in zodiacal images during the Unified Silla Period. In the context of the Goryeo Dynasty, animal patterns took on complete and intricate forms intertwined with folk beliefs. Plant patterns predominantly centered around the lotus flower a motif that originated in the Three Kingdoms Period concurrent with the introduction of Buddhism. Lotus patterns adorned various ceramics and were served as symbolic pedestals for Buddha and bodhisattvas, symbolizing their enlightened state and venerable connection to the truth [9].

Mythological patterns, on the other hand, encompassed the four cardinal guardians: the white tiger of the west, the blue dragon of the east, the phoenix of the south and the dragon of the north. These mythical creatures assumed the role of protectors to guard the east, west, north, and south respectively based on the principles of the Four Shinto faiths. The Blue Dragon, as the guardian of the east, embodied qualities of harmony, mastery and protection. It existed as an amalgamation of various real and imagined animals that represent an imaginary entity embodying the collective abilities and strengths of these creatures. Among the four deities, the Blue Dragon occupied a prominent position, frequently featuring in ancient literary works. The dragon assumed diverse forms, functions and origins to signify

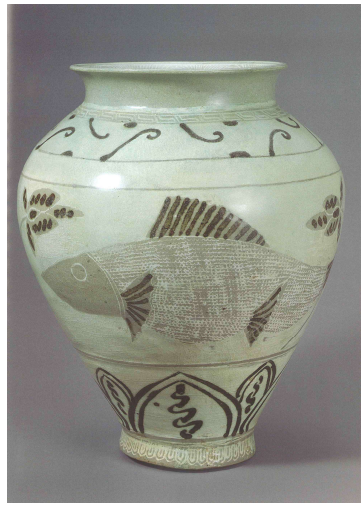
its profound significance. Revered as a deity of auspicious fortune, the Dragon embodied the power to harmonize all aspects of existence and exercise control over walls, guardianship and water. Dragons were associated primarily with the highest echelons of the ruling class that symbolized authority and sovereignty. Auxiliary patterns such as wave and cloud motifs often accompanied dragon patterns to reflect the Dragon's ability to soar through the sky and command the waters. The Xuanwu Gate located at the northern entrance of Pyongyang represents the Four Shindos, with the blue dragon positioned on the left, the white tiger on the right, the phoenix in the south and the hyeonmu in the north. These divine guardians ensure protection over their designated regions, each assigned a specific color based on their defensive roles.

2.3 Ceramic patterns of the Joseon Dynasty

The Joseon Dynasty characterized by the Policy of Worshipping Confucianism-Suppressing Buddhism as its foundational ideology witnessed a shift towards simplicity, frugality and plainness in pattern preferences. During the early Joseon Dynasty, Buncheong pottery renowned as grayish-blue porcelain dressed up in white clay emerged as a distinctive form of pottery. Unlike the delicate and refined aesthetics of Goryeo pottery, Buncheong pottery showcased a coarse and unadorned native texture. However, as time progressed, Buncheong pottery transformed into a vehicle for intense abstraction to evoke feelings of liberation, humor and sheer beauty through its unique form and patterns. This transformation can be attributed to the expression of the inherent sensibility and aesthetics embedded within the Korean psyche which found unrestricted manifestation in the realm of Buncheong pottery. Notably, the iron brushstroke technique with its swirling patterns captured momentarily with dark brown strokes leaves a profound impression to embody the essence of abstraction and humor.

As shown in [Fig. 4], Buncheong pottery cherished by the people of the Joseon era boasted a diverse array of simple and popular patterns. The fish pattern, epitomizing freedom and fertility, portrayed fish gracefully swimming in clear ponds that signify liberation from constraints and connoting abundance and prosperity. Peony patterns renowned for their beauty and allure embellished various artifacts including clothing and furniture crafts. Originating from the Unified Silla Period, these patterns became prevalent during the Joseon Dynasty, adorning flower vases, military accoutrements and large jars. The arabesque pattern characterized by intertwining vines symbolizing growth and prosperity enjoyed widespread popularity to adorn Buncheong pottery with its exuberant presence. The plantain pattern infused with the noble spirit and fresh essence of verdant foliage could be observed on white porcelain adorned with underglaze iron. While rooted in Buddhist origins, motifs such as the Lotus and female head designs

found resonance among the emotions and aspirations of ordinary individuals within Joseon society.



[Fig. 4] Josun Dynasty Ceramic Patterns

As the artistic legacy evolved from Buncheong pottery to white porcelain and subsequently blue and white porcelain, the patterns underwent a transformation, acquiring an elegant and refined quality. These patterns serve as a window into the cultural fabric of the Joseon Dynasty, distinct from the earlier styles characterized by simplicity and unadorned aesthetics. Vessels such as the Blue & White Porcelain Pot With Bamboo Design or the Blue & White Porcelain Pot With dragon and cloud showcased ten symbols of longevity known as bamboo, crane, cloud and dragons. Bamboo symbolizing unwavering integrity and loyalty became intertwined with the ideal human character to evoke admiration and reverence. Pine trees that represent resolute steadfastness, cranes that embody the nobility of spirit and clouds with their enigmatic and ever-changing nature were exquisite patterns that adorned blue and white porcelain to enhance the allure and aesthetic appeal of Joseon pottery.

3. Discussion

The rich and diverse history of ceramics in our country has left an indelible impact on the global ceramic art landscape. While our ceramic culture experienced a period of stagnation following the Japanese occupation, the absence of recognition in Edmund de Waal's influential work *20th Century Ceramics* emphasizes the need for a critical reassessment of Korean ceramics in the 20th century [10]. Nevertheless, history is a dynamic and evolving entity, and the remarkable ceramics bequeathed to us by

our ancestors serve as a testament to their artistic prowess and ingenuity. By drawing inspiration from the mystical elegance of Goryeo ceramics, the harmonious and open spirit of Joseon ceramics, and the refined grace inherent in our ceramic heritage, the paper suggests the potential to create masterpieces that will astonish the world.

Compared with the pottery traditions of South Korea with Japan and China, Korean pottery developed distinct styles with unique shapes, such as the moon jar or Buncheong porcelain, a form between earthenware and porcelain. Korean ceramics in the Neolithic period had unique geometric patterns of sunshine or were decorated with twists. Korean pottery also developed a minimalist style that represents Korean Joseon philosophers' ideas [3]. Looking forward to the 21st century, the pottery can be produced with the emergence of extraordinary works such as the iconic Moon Jar of the Joseon era. These masterpieces possess the ability to captivate audiences with their audacious refusal to conform to conventional norms and their unwavering openness to artistic exploration.

4. Conclusion

In this study, a chronologically organized study of Korean ceramic patterns was explored to highlight their transformation, inherent meanings, and the craftsmanship of South Korean ceramics. Through this comprehensive comparison, the remarkable diversity and excellence of Korean ceramics are illuminated. Further research will be directed to focus on more detailed analyses of the different ceramic patterns in each period. This paper expects to serve as a significant scholarly resource for those seeking to engage with the enduring legacy of Korean ceramics and embark on artistic endeavors that surpass conventional boundaries and transcend cultural limitations. By tapping into the wealth of our ceramic traditions and drawing inspiration from our rich heritage, artists are afforded the opportunity to shape the trajectory of ceramic art and make an indelible impact on the global artistic landscape.

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