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Award-winning weaver Dahye Jeong's delicate horsehair vessels



Craft Nation

As pop culture's obsession with all things Korean approaches its boiling point, the international appreciation is just beginning for the work of the country's artisans, who are reinterpreting traditional crafts to stunning effect. By Emma Love

PHOTO COURTESY SOLUNA CRAFT GALLERY

Suddenly Korean cultural exports are everywhere.

For the younger generations there is K-pop, with groups BTS and Blackpink each boasting more than 55 million Instagram followers (the highest of any global bands). On the screen, *Parasite* won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2020 and *Squid Game* is Netflix's most-watched series of all time. Less heralded but perhaps longer lasting, the Korean Wave is also having a knock-on effect on other creative industries: most notably, the new generation of designers and makers who are part of the current craft zeitgeist.

Ceramics is the first point of call for Korean craft, and rightly so: President Yoon Suk-yeol's gift to Joe Biden when he visited the US this spring was a moon jar, which is a symbol of national identity – one that is increasingly being reimagined. “When I started curating exhibitions for the Korea Craft Design Foundation in London a decade ago, there was an expectation that the work was going to be traditional. But while makers respect heritage skills, they also have a contemporary language,” says Lloyd Choi, who set up her eponymous gallery in 2018. “Growth has happened organically; craft is a big word now so we have been lucky. It's great timing.” Among her roster of artists is Choi Bo-ram, who reinterprets the moon jar. “Korean ceramics are usually modest and functional but she wanted to do something different. Instead of glazes, she uses cobalt blue for decoration and leaves finger marks on the clay so it brings out the texture.”

From 4 to 10 September, Choi is curating *Moon Jar: The Untold Beauty*, a show at London's Cromwell Place, which aims to dispel any fixed notions around this iconic form. It will focus on three artists: ceramicist Kwak Hye-young, who uses rain to make surface patterns on porcelain; textile artist Lee So-ra who reimagines *jogakbo*, a Korean patchwork made from salvaged fabrics; and wood carver Mok-su. “For me, there is something spiritual and philosophical to the moon jar; it is an inspiration rather than a literal form,” continues Choi.



From top: modelled after a Chanel bag, a piece from Hyesook Choi's *Relics* collection of kilnformed and flame-worked glass objects; leather artisan Junsu Kim poses with one of his unique vegetable-tanned vessels



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– HyunJoo Kim

Of course, Korean craft is about much more than ceramics. When Seoul-based Victor Noh, CEO of the Soluna Art Group, was putting together the *Light of Weaving* exhibition at the Korean Cultural Centre in London, he decided to showcase artists working with diverse materials. “I am gobsmacked at the increased attention our culture is receiving but what’s important is the aesthetic, and that stems from the handmade objects of our ancestors, which the new generation seems to really appreciate,” he says. “Although these artists are working with materials used since ancient times, their approach is innovative, so it brings a fresh perspective.”

One such artist is Dahye Jeong, winner of the Spain-based Loewe Foundation Craft Prize 2022, who makes ethereal vessels from woven horsehair. During the Joseon dynasty, horsehair was used to make headwear, but today it’s a diminishing craft: there are only two places in Korea where artists still work with the medium, one of which is Jeong’s native Jeju Island. “As far as I am aware, I’m the only one applying the material in this way,” she says of her time-consuming process, which involves first choosing strands with the right amount of elasticity, then weaving over a wooden mould before steaming it to set. “Both horsehair and weaving are

authentically Korean, and to have that recognised on a global level means a lot.”

Other makers putting a modern spin on their material include HyunJoo Kim who launched a collection of *hanji* (Korean paper made from mulberry bark) fans last year. “Paper is a traditional material, and fans were used in the past in Asia, but now people have electric versions; I wanted to create a design that looks cool,” explains Kim, who has exhibited her work in Paris, New York and Frankfurt. Meanwhile, Hyesook Choi examines the concept of beauty through her kiln-formed glass *Relics* series of objects. “I record the present day as it might be seen in the future, imagining handbags, shoes and perfumes to be relics of our consumer society, and emphasising the fragility of the material by using glass frit and powder,” she says.

Up-and-coming Choi is represented by Gallery Sklo, the only gallery in Korea specialising in contemporary glass. “Traditionally, glass arts have not had a prominent place in the Korean craft scene,” explains founder Hyojung Kim. “It was only in the 1990s that we saw the beginning of the age of ‘Korean studio glass’ as artists returned from their glass studies in places like the Czech Republic and Japan. They



Above: Choi Boram’s intricate vessels inspired by the traditional moon jar; opposite and below: the delicate hanjipaper creations by HyunJoo Kim, pictured

established glass degree programmes at Korean universities, paving the way for this long-overlooked craft to be recognised.”

Another innovator pulling from the past is Junsu Kim, who makes vegetable-tanned leather vessels. “The way he coils differently hued strips of leather together is something we’ve never seen before,” says Jeannie H Lee, who founded the Seoul-based Siat Gallery in 2019 and showed Kim’s work at this year’s Collect Art Fair in London. “Every visitor at Collect had the same reaction: surprise that the vessel was leather because it looks like wood or ceramic.” Her goal is to introduce Korean craft to a wider public; next, the gallery, which focuses predominantly on art jewellery, will exhibit at the new Contemporania fair in Barcelona in September.

Interest is spilling over into products too, from Studio Word’s Fade collection of tableware produced in collaboration with The Conran Shop Korea to interior designer Young Huh, who has teamed up with Fromental on a soon-to-launch wallpaper themed around *minhwa* folk-art paintings. Lee also points to Korea as an emerging hub for the international art market. “Many renowned institutions such as Pace Gallery and Perrotin gallery have opened branches here, and the inaugural Frieze Seoul was held in 2022,” she says. “Although not as big as the fine-art market, the hype is affecting crafts. Just as the art world is finding success in Korea, so the country’s designers and makers are gaining ever-increasing global awareness.” The cultural love affair, it seems, is mutual.

