

THE GOLDSMITHS' REVIEW



2023–2024

*CURVES,
WAVES
AND
FRAGMENTS*

*KOREAN
METALWORKING
PRACTICES*

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“To me, tradition is the transmission of human culture from the past to the present, whether from the ‘East’ or the ‘West’, and I am the beneficiary of that heritage. Of course, some metal-craft technologies that are specific to Korea are important to me, but the weight of their influence is minimal,” says metalsmith Yong-il Jeon.

AS WITH ANY CRAFT, FIELD OR discipline, Korean metalsmithing has been shaped over time by various factors. The traditions that have emerged have been interpreted by contemporary makers in a multitude of ways. For Jeon, formal and visual elements of Korean heritage have had a greater influence than technical processes. He explains: “Curves, the flow of lines and simplicity of form, which are commonly seen in my works, are not aesthetic tastes established in Western society, but rather in Korean traditional culture, such as in architecture and painting. These areas are, additionally, rooted in Buddhism, which dominated Korea’s spiritual culture, and Confucianism, which was prevalent during the Joseon Dynasty after the 15th century.”

Korean metalworking practices underwent a significant change in the 20th century. While objects from the Joseon period tended to be made for practical purposes, reflecting Confucian principles, the establishment of the modern Korean art movement in the 1960s and 70s created

an environment in which South Korean crafts (including metalwork, ceramics, textiles and woodwork) could be driven by aesthetic considerations. Approaches to making were further shaped by international exchange from the early 1980s. Korean metalwork artists, for instance, started to train overseas in the US and Europe, returning to South Korea to assume professorships at prominent universities. According to Jeon, their mediated international influence played a crucial role in driving artistic innovation.

Informed by his own studies at Seoul National University and Miami University, Jeon’s oeuvre consists of an eclectic mix of functional objects, sculptural pieces and accessories, including jewellery. Often working with silver and copper (alloy) sheets, the maker is ultimately interested in organic forms. But, as he observes, “if you look at my more recent work, the fluidity and dynamism of these organic forms have become increasingly simplified, standardised, and symmetrical. What is most important to me is to try to create two

contrasting elements – dynamic images and static compositions – sometimes in contrast and sometimes harmoniously.”

The curvaceous forms typical of Jeon’s creations, as well as his use of contrast, are paralleled in the practice of artist Hyun-ju Kim, who has been making waves internationally with her body of work inspired by the sea. Kim’s pieces combine metal with mother-of-pearl and lacquer, an approach that involves achieving “a harmony” between these materials. The artist notes: “I have my own philosophy regarding materials: every one of them is precious and it is all about balance. My work involves mixing mother-of-pearl – a beautiful gift from nature that, to me, reflects the light of the sea – with metals, like copper or brass, which have hard properties.” This material mix, moreover, is rooted in Kim’s sources of inspiration, including nature. Her most recent series *Golden Pearl* – presented at London Craft Week in May 2024 – fuses nickel and white mother-of-pearl to evoke sea waves reflecting sunlight and moonlight. As

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Previous *Sea Wave #1&2*,
Kim Hyun-ju, 2022, white
mother-of-pearl, copper, ottchil.
CESARE DE GIGLIO FOR LLOYD
CHOI GALLERY

Above *Pot*, Yong-il Jeon, 2011,
sterling silver, nickel silver.
KC STUDIO

beams of light fall on her vessels, the tiny fragments of material reveal themselves to the viewer as colourful geometric shapes and patterns.

Sound technical understanding has been key for Kim. Although she was able to experiment with different Korean craft processes during her time as an undergraduate at Chonnam National University, the artist was particularly fascinated by “the charm” of metal, which led her to major in metal crafts at the prestigious Seoul National University. However, she says: “I think it was my relationship with Dae Hyun Son, a lacquer maker and an Intangible Cultural Heritage asset in South Korea, that made my practice what it is today. Learning from Son made it possible for me to create with both metal and lacquer – because you can never work without fully understanding the properties of materials.” This training has since been continuously refined, a

practice that Kim observes is anchored in researching the technical excellence underpinning Korean traditional crafts and reinterpreting these methods for a contemporary audience.

Similarly bringing together various techniques is maker Misun Won. Now settled in Edinburgh with her partner, a glassmaker, Won’s practice brings together ideas related to *geumbu* (a Korean gilding method), *jogakbo* (Korean patchwork), and fractal geometry (a form of geometric repetition) to generate wonderfully intricate jewellery pieces. It was initially *jogakbo* that captured her imagination; she describes how sewing textile fragments together prompted her to think about constructing jewellery “in parts”.

When she was later introduced to fractal geometry, Won developed a painstaking making process. Holding fragile paper models of some of her creations, she describes how each of the metal fragments

are adjusted, one-by-one, until a suitable overall shape is achieved. She then applies gold to her usually sterling silver pieces, producing an array of complex forms that, like Kim’s works, catch the light in arresting ways.

The creations of Jeon, Kim and Won demonstrate how diverse contemporary metalsmithing practices can be: organic forms, references to nature and Korean making processes all collide to offer varying interpretations of historical concepts, methods and forms. As Kim summarises: “My work pays homage to Korean traditional craft processes that have been preserved throughout time. Rather than understanding these techniques as static or belonging to one era, my aim is to contribute to their constant evolution so that we can continue to live with Korean traditional crafts in the present.” ♦



Circular oval flower ring with a diamond, Misun Won, sterling silver, Keumboo (24ct gold), 18ct gold, diamond. MISUN WON



Pitcher, Yong-il Jeon, 2019,
sterling silver, maple.
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