

***Beyond Line: The Art of Korean Writing***

For centuries, calligraphy has been considered the highest art form in Korea. Calligraphy is not only an essential and beautiful means of communication, but it is also seen to reveal the inner spirit and moral integrity of the calligrapher in ways unmatched by any other art form. From ancient times until the present, almost all calligraphy in East Asia has also included a performative dimension, with writers engaging in impressive and daring displays of skill.

Beyond Line presents a narrative spanning nearly two millennia, exploring the role of calligraphy in different classes of Korean society by looking at the lives and legacies of writers from prehistory until the present day. This exhibition focuses on a wide range of people—rulers, officials, scholars, diplomats, painters, monks, and even slaves—who produced calligraphic works in such mediums as paper, silk, stone, ceramic, bamboo, wood, metal, lacquer, and textile. By examining the literary and formal qualities of each work, *Beyond Line* shows how these examples of Korean writing reflect the concerns of both calligraphers and their audiences.

Calligraphy in Korea can be divided into two broad categories: writings that use *hanja* (Chinese ideographic characters) and those composed with *hangeul* (the unique Korean phonetic script). Because of Korea's geographical proximity to China, Korean calligraphy evolved alongside Chinese calligraphy, yet at the same time has witnessed transformations that are uniquely Korean.

Los Angeles is home to the largest Korean population in the world outside of Korea. This exhibition presents a new window into Korean history, culture, and identity through the lens of calligraphy as both a conveyer of content and an abstract art of the highest degree of intellectual and artistic refinement.

**Prehistory**

Human beings have created rock-cut images since prehistoric times. Petroglyphs first appeared more than 40,000 years ago, but flourished in the Neolithic period (c. 10,200–2000 BCE). Nearly every human culture is known to have produced petroglyphs. These mysterious images are early manifestations of human beings' impulse to give visual form to their experiences of the world.

The Neolithic petroglyphs on the Bangudae cliff, situated near Korea's southeast coast, date from about 5500 to 4700 BCE. These carvings include small images of humans dominated by representations of animals, including gigantic whales.

## **Tools and Materials**

The tools used to create calligraphy in Korea—brushes, ink, inkstones, and paper—have not changed for nearly two millennia. Brushes are made of animal hair assembled with glue and set inside bamboo or wood handles, while inkstones are made of stone, ceramic, or earthenware. Ink sticks are generally made from soot and animal glue; to produce ink they are ground by hand with water on the surface of an inkstone. Korean handmade paper has long been a crucial material used for various purposes in daily life, and some scholars claim that Koreans used paper before the fourth century.

A number of stamped ceramic tiles are also shown here. Such tiles were embedded in the walls of underground tombs between the first century BCE and the seventh century CE, and were stamped with inscriptions that often include dates, wishes for good fortune, and entreaties for the preservation of the tomb. These inscriptions are examples of early writing on the Korean Peninsula, and they show that calligraphy can take many forms. In Korea, calligraphy appears not only on paper, silk, wood, and bamboo, but also on ceramics, metals, and lacquer.

## **Buddhist Calligraphy**

The Buddhist religion, which first emerged in India, reached China in the first century and Korea in the fourth century. Buddhism arrived in Korea with a sophisticated body of teachings regarding life, death, rebirth, suffering, compassion, transience, the illusory nature of perception, and enlightenment, expressed in sacred texts known as sutras (K. *gyeong*).

Most sutras were originally written in Sanskrit and later translated into Chinese. Because of their mastery of written *hanja* (Chinese characters), Buddhist monks were among the most literate members of Korean society. Chinese was the written language of Buddhism in East Asia, playing a role similar to that once played by Latin in the writings and rituals of the Catholic church.

Two categories of Buddhist calligraphy are shown here. The first comprises sacred Buddhist texts, among which the most glorious are illuminated sutras written and painted in gold on indigo-dyed paper. The second includes beautifully written texts honoring deceased monks and records of new and renovated temple buildings carved into the surfaces of stone steles.

### **Royal Calligraphy**

In Korea, as elsewhere in East Asia, a ruler's calligraphy was seen as a mirror of his or her moral character and authority. This section presents calligraphies and writings created by and for members of Korea's royal families starting in the Three Kingdoms period, ranging from stele inscriptions composed as statements of political power to calligraphic exercise books, guidelines for good governance, and a royal seal.

To show the common practice of appropriating calligraphic styles, this section also includes a contemporary work by artist Jung Do-Jun demonstrating the writing style of King Seonjo (r. 1567–1608).

### **Yangban Calligraphy**

The vast majority of calligraphic works in Korean history were created by and for members of the elite scholar-official (*yangban*) class. These works include poetry and prose inscribed on both two- and three-dimensional surfaces. Included here is a rare example of calligraphy by Sin Saimdang, the most famous Korean woman calligrapher and painter.

During the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, utilitarian objects were often inscribed with elegant calligraphy. The wide range of surfaces on which one finds calligraphy includes brush stands, padlocks, incense burners, porcelain, lacquer, and branding irons. This section ends with an exploration of the close traditional relationship between calligraphy and painting.

### **The Advent of *Hangeul***

Korean *hangeul* script was created at the court of King Sejong in the mid-fifteenth century. For centuries prior to the invention of *hangeul*, written communication in Korea was carried out in *hanja* (classical Chinese), which consists of thousands of written ideographic characters. *Hangeul* is a uniquely Korean script that comprises a far smaller group of phonetic symbols.

*Hangeul* was designed to encourage literacy throughout the country, and was first adopted by women and people in the middle and lower social classes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the use of *hangeul* spread to the upper classes, increasing in popularity as it came to symbolize a unique Korean intellectual and ethnic heritage, distinct from those of China and Japan. Today *hangeul* is the most widely used script in Korea.

## **Gim Jeonghui, A Calligraphic Master**

Gim Jeonghui (1786–1856), also known as Chusa (Autumn Scribe), is considered the greatest calligrapher of the Joseon dynasty, and was also a scholar-official, painter, epigrapher, and practicing Buddhist. In his youth Gim studied the history and stylistic lineages of classical Chinese calligraphy and traveled to Beijing as part of a diplomatic mission to the Qing dynasty court, where he met two of the greatest Chinese epigraphers of the day. This period in the early nineteenth century coincided with the growing Epigraphic Movement in Chinese calligraphy—the study of ancient bronze and stone inscriptions (K. *geumseokmun*; Ch. *jinshiwen*)—which had a lasting impact on Gim’s life and work.

Gim was a master of many calligraphic forms but is most famous for Chusache, the bold, freeform style he perfected while in exile on Jeju Island. In addition to illustrating the wide range of Gim’s calligraphic work, this section also includes examples of Gim’s letters written in *hangeul* script, and evidence of his activities as an archaeologist and epigrapher.

## **The Early Modern Period**

The Korean Empire was established in 1897, marking the end of a more than five-hundred-year dynasty. Although the empire lasted only four years, it jumpstarted rapid modernization guided by Western ideals, which continued while the country was colonized by Japan for more than three decades. During this time, Korean *hangeul* script became a beacon of nationalism, and was used in leading newspapers. Artists such as O Sechang and An Jungsik continued to explore archaic styles in new ways, making them relevant for the present. Despite the political instabilities of these decades, the period witnessed the beginnings of modernity as unique to Korea—an as-yet undivided peninsula.

## **Beyond the Modern**

Contemporary Korean calligraphers have used both *hanja* (classical Chinese characters) and *hangeul* (Korean phonetic characters) in their work, and have been influenced by traditional Korean and international styles. Up until the twentieth century, most artists adhered to centuries-old rules of how calligraphy should appear, but many contemporary artists, while trained in the established ways, have reinterpreted these rules.

Lee Kang-so’s *Emptiness 14010* explores the performative act of writing, while Kim Sun Wuk uses color in his work *Emptiness* to broadly interpret a single character. Yoon Kwang-cho’s *The Heart Sutra* harkens back to earlier periods when inscriptions

were regularly carved into stone and clay surfaces. Other artists in this section incorporate modern technologies, such as the camera and digital graphics, into their work, interrogating the structure and meaning of writing. These contemporary artists' pursuits are not designed to discard or repudiate the past, but to search for its continued power and sustainability in the present and into the future.

### **Five Forms of Calligraphy**

*Hanja* calligraphy, which uses Chinese ideographic characters, is generally divided into five basic forms: seal script (*jeonseo*), clerical script (*yeseo*), standard script (*haeseo*), semi-cursive script (*haengseo*, or “running script”), and cursive script (*choseo*, or “grass script”).

#### **전서 篆書**

#### **Seal script (*jeonseo*)**

Seal script is one of the most ancient calligraphic forms. It was first used for the inscriptions on ancient Chinese ritual bronze vessels of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–c. 1050 BCE). This script is still widely used for the legends (inscriptions) on seals.

#### **예서 隸書**

#### **Clerical script (*yeseo*)**

Devised by scribes of the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) court for the transcription of official records, clerical script was recognized for its elegant brush flourishes.

#### **해서 楷書**

#### **Standard script (*haeseo*)**

A script form in which each brushstroke is clearly visible and legible, and individual characters are neatly composed. Standard script is the form most widely used in *hanja* printing today.

#### **행서 行書**

#### **Semi-cursive (“running”) script (*haengseo*)**

An abbreviated form of standard script, semi-cursive script requires fewer brushstrokes to write a given character. It often features variations in the size of the characters, and the speed and momentum of the brush.

## 초서 草書

### **Cursive (“grass”) script (choseo)**

A highly abbreviated calligraphic form in which entire characters are sometimes written in a single brushstroke. Despite their wild appearance, the forms of cursive-script characters are governed by strict rules.

### **Korean Periods and Dynasties**

Gojoseon period (?–108 BCE)

Jin confederacy (4th century BCE–2nd century BCE)

Proto–Three Kingdoms (Wonsamguk) period (c. 1 BCE–300 CE)

Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668 CE)

    Goguryeo Kingdom (37 BCE–668 CE)

    Baekje Kingdom (18 BCE–660 CE)

    Silla Kingdom (57 BCE–935 CE)

    Gaya Confederacy (42–562)

North-South States period (698–926)

    Unified Silla dynasty (668–935)

    Balhae Kingdom (698–926)

Later Three Kingdoms period (892–936)

    Later Baekje Kingdom (892–936)

    Taebong Kingdom (901–18)

    Unified Silla dynasty (668–935)

Goryeo dynasty (918–1392)

Joseon dynasty (1392–1897)

Korean Empire (1897–1910)

Japanese Colonial period (1910–45)

Provisional Government (1919–48)

Division of Korea

    Military Governments (1945–48)

    North Korea (1948–present)

    South Korea (1948–present)