

Desirable commodities – unearthing and collecting Koryŏ celadon ceramics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

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Abstract

In Korea green-glazed celadon ceramics were manufactured during the Koryŏ kingdom (AD 918–1392), but by the end of the fourteenth century their manufacture ceased and they virtually disappeared from view until the 1880s when they began to be unearthed from tombs and other sites. This led to increased interest in them from Koreans, and especially the Japanese, Americans and Europeans. Focusing on British collections, this article outlines the collecting practices of Korean celadon wares from the time of their discovery in the 1880s to the market boom of the 1910s, culminating in the decrease in their availability in the 1930s. It will be argued that the desire for celadon wares was socially conditioned and that celadon were collected for a range of different, though not unrelated reasons, ranging from collectors' pursuit of unique Korean artworks, to their want of genuine antiquities and aesthetic perfection.

Keywords: Korea, Koryŏ, Colonial, Celadon, Collecting, Museum

Introduction

When the Japanese forced Hŭnsŏng Taewŏn'gun (1820–98) to sign the Kanghwa Treaty in 1876, the Chosŏn kingdom's (AD 1392–1910) policy of isolationism effectively ended as Korea was propelled into the international arena. Following the establishment of trade and diplomatic relations with Japan, similar treaties were established with Western nations. In 1882 a treaty was signed between Korea and the United States; it was soon followed by treaties with Britain, Germany and other European countries.¹

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Korean and Japanese names appear with surnames listed first, except in the case of authors with publications in English. Since many Korean surnames are identical, Korean names appear in full in all references. The Romanization follows the McCune-Reischauer system for Korean, and the Hepburn system for Japanese.

1 A Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Korea and the United States, known as "the Shufeldt Treaty", was signed in 1882. Treaties followed with Britain and Germany in November 1883, Italy and Russia in 1884, France in 1886 and subsequently with

The formation of trade and diplomatic relations between Korea and countries outside of East Asia brought about important and irreversible changes to Chosŏn Korea as it was no longer able to cocoon itself in the ways of the past, but was forced instead to respond to a changing world order. Until then, little was known about the “Hermit Kingdom”.² However, over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a growing number of Westerners lived in Seoul and elsewhere on the peninsula. Some took up positions at the Chosŏn royal court as government officials or physicians, while others worked as diplomats, missionaries, doctors and hoteliers, among other professions. Soon tourists began to choose the peninsula as an exciting travel destination and several published accounts of what they saw and experienced in the country. Their writings added to the rising number of contemporary volumes on Korean language, history and customs.³ Some of these volumes included discussions of Korean ceramics and other artefacts, which began to attract the attention of art collectors and museum curators and marked the beginning of the study and subsequent collecting of Korea’s cultural heritage.

During the 1880s and 1890s interest in Korean artefacts increased as more objects surfaced, were studied, and were better understood. It is a common misconception that only the Japanese were interested in Korean objects at this time. Diaries and other accounts from the late nineteenth century indicate that Americans and Europeans sourced many pieces, too. The interest of both the Japanese and Westerners focused primarily on celadon ceramics from the Koryŏ period (AD 918–1392), which became sought-after commodities over the course of the early twentieth century. Celadon ceramics began to be manufactured in Korea during the tenth century, but their production went into decline in the closing decades of the Koryŏ rule. As white porcelains were preferred by the elite of the new Chosŏn kingdom, the production of celadon was not revived until the Colonial period (1910–45), when the Japanese established so-called “new Koryŏ kilns” (Shin Koryŏso 新高麗燒) where contemporary interpretations of Koryŏ celadon were made.⁴

The preference for celadon ceramics remains to be studied in depth. Collecting as practice is often seen as “a basic urge”, but this does not explain the motives which lie behind the predilection for specific things over

Austria, Denmark and Belgium. Keith Pratt and Richard Rutt, *Korea, A Historical and Cultural Dictionary* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 496–7.

- 2 The name “Hermit Kingdom” first appeared in the article “Corea, last of the Hermit Nations”, *The Independent*, New York, May 1878. Since then it has frequently been used as a sobriquet for Korea, including in William Elliot Griffis, *Corea, the Hermit Nation* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1882). Pratt and Rutt, *Korea*, 232.
- 3 Writings on Korea by early travellers, diplomats and others are too numerous to list here. For a good summary, see Martin Uden, *Times Past in Korea* (London: Routledge, 2003). See also Brother Anthony’s list of “old books” on Korea: <http://hompi.sogang.ac.kr/anthony/BooksKorea.htm> [accessed 21 Jan. 2013]. For a discussion of early British writings on Korea, see Susan House Wade, “Representing colonial Korea in print and in visual imagery in England 1910–1939” (PhD thesis, University of Brighton, 2009).
- 4 Eum Sung-hee [Ŏm Sŏng-hŭi], “Ilche sigi chaehan ilbonin ūi ch’ŏngja chegak” (The production of Koryŏ celadon by Japanese residing in Korea during the colonial era), *Han’guk kŭndae misulshak* 13, 2004, 175–7.

others.⁵ Rather, the collecting of artefacts is driven by a range of different impetuses, some planned, others impulsive, but all framed by the particular social, historical and economic conditions of a specific time and place.⁶ It will here be argued that the avid collecting of Korean celadon ceramics was not a chance phenomenon. The objects were initially hard to come by, as it was illegal to desecrate the tombs in which they were found. Also, the study of Korean art was at its infancy, making information on ceramics difficult to access. Furthermore, when Japan and the West descended upon the peninsula, there were other artworks, which could be sourced more easily. However, by the 1910s, celadon ceramics had become desirable collectibles. Among other qualities they were celebrated for their beauty, their uniqueness and their antiquarian references. It will here be argued that such qualities are not exclusive to celadon but culturally manufactured and socially conditioned.⁷ The significance of the collecting of celadon lies in the aggregation of its related practices and outcomes. The interest in and acquisition of celadon among the Japanese, the Americans, the Europeans as well as the Koreans betray different and at times overlapping ideas of Korea, its past and present, and they in turn have come to shape later perceptions and understandings of Korean art and culture.

Questions concerning the date of the first discovery of celadon wares, the ways in which they surfaced and became collectors' items, and the identity of those who acquired them, have long been intertwined with narratives of colonial and post-colonial historiography, making it difficult to gain a clear picture of the parameters at play. The commercial, aesthetic and antiquarian values of celadon were appropriated through different, though not necessarily separate, channels, and it indicates a system of appreciation that was constantly in flux. This article outlines the collecting practices and art market trends of Koryŏ celadon from their discovery in the 1880s to the market boom in the 1910s, culminating in the decrease in availability in the 1930s. By then celadon were largely believed to be among the best, most beautiful and most uniquely Korean artworks to be found on the peninsula. Even today, celadon ceramics are regarded as one of the highlights of Korean cultural heritage both within and outside Korea.⁸ The following pages explore factors that directly and indirectly influenced the collecting

- 5 Sharon Macdonald, "Collecting practices", in Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 81.
- 6 Macdonald, "Collecting practices", 83; James Clifford, "On collecting art and culture", in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 94–107.
- 7 Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street, "Visualising 'otherness'", in *Cultural Encounters. Representing Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 29.
- 8 Celadon wares are always included in volumes published by the National Museum of Korea featuring highlights of the collection, such as *Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan 100-sŏn* (100 highlights from the National Museum of Korea) (Kyŏnggi-do P'aju-si: An Gŭrap'iksŭ, 2006). Displays of such wares have formed an important component of major international exhibitions of Korean cultural heritage sponsored by the South Korean government, such as *Masterpieces of Korean Art*, which toured the USA in 1957–58, *Korean Art Treasures*, which was shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1961, and *Treasures from Korea*, which opened at the British Museum in 1984. Charlotte Horlyck and Sascha Priewe, "Displaying Korean artefacts in the UK", *Museum & Society* (forthcoming).

practices of different groups of people, including the desire for unique Korean objects, the availability of ceramics and the value attached to objects from a bygone era. The discussion concentrates on British collections. However, since interest in and scholarship on Korean art developed along a similar trajectory in the USA, references to select American collectors and museums are also included.

In search of “Koreanness”

There are no records from late nineteenth-century collectors stating why they developed a liking for Korean celadon. Therefore, the motives behind their preference for what were, at the time, relatively unknown pieces of art are obscure. However, travelogues and articles by Americans and Europeans suggest that at around this time a major impetus lay in the search for “things Korean”. When foreigners arrived on the peninsula, they often wished to acquire mementos of their visit. However, many failed to find anything of interest, not least because they rarely knew what to look for. Volumes on Korean art were few as it was not until 1929 that the first study devoted exclusively to Korea’s cultural heritage was published in the West. Written by the Benedictine missionary Andreas Eckardt (1884–1974), it covered all aspects of art, from architecture to Buddhist sculpture, and also included a section on Koryŏ ceramics.⁹ Prior to this some authors had made mention of Korea’s cultural traditions, one of the earliest being Louise Jordan Miln (1864–1933), but their discussions tended to be vague and at times misguided.¹⁰

In many writings Korean artefacts were dismissed as lacking in artistic merit, leaving museum curators with the challenge of how to expand their Korean collections with good pieces of art. When Thomas Watters (1841–1901), who worked in the Consular Service in Seoul, donated an inlaid lacquer chest, tobacco boxes and items of embroidery to the Victoria and Albert Museum (hereafter V&A) in 1888, a museum official noted that: “The items are of little importance or value”. In an effort to expand the Museum’s Korean collection, the objects were nevertheless acquired.¹¹

9 Andreas Eckardt, *A History of Korean Art* (London and Leipzig: Edward Goldston and Karl W. Hiersemann, 1929).

10 In a chapter entitled “A glance at Korean art”, Miln examines typical Korean artefacts, including ceramics, lacquerwares and bronzes, and discusses characteristic patterns. Much of Miln’s text was drawn from Percival Lowell, *Chosŏn: the Land of the Morning Calm. A Sketch of Korea* (Boston: Tickner, 1886). Lowell wrote the book after spending the winter of 1883–84 in Korea. Miln also relied on notes given to her by her friend Mrs. Q. who, according to Miln, “had the unique experience of seeing Korea”. Louise Jordan Miln, *Quaint Korea* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1895), 9–10, 209–25. The Frenchman Maurice Courant’s (1865–1935) numerous works on Korea should also be mentioned here. Among his many publications relevant to this study is *Souvenir de Séoul, Corée* (Paris: Publisher unknown, 1900) in which he makes brief mention of Korean artworks. It is noteworthy that ceramics are the only pre-nineteenth-century artefacts that he includes in the volume. However, he only describes them in vague terms, indicating how little was known about them at this time. Courant, *Souvenir de Séoul*, v.

11 Liz Wilkinson, “Collecting Korean art at the Victoria and Albert Museum 1888–1938”, *Journal of the History of Collections* 15/2, 2003, 243.

The Scotswoman Constance J. D. Coulson (1868–1948), who travelled to Korea several times around the turn of the twentieth century, was one of few Westerners to be enamoured with Korean goods. She found that there were plenty of interesting purchases to be made: “The shops are full of silks and gauzes in the prettiest colours, of ribbons, of strings of coral and amber, which are used as hat-strings; of cabinets and boxes, in black lacquer, ornamented with mother-of-pearl, or covered with lacquer in brilliant green and red”.¹² Several such items were acquired by Western museums, including the V&A and the British Museum (hereafter BM), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often by individuals charged with the task of collecting typical local objects.¹³ In 1912, the growing interest in Korean arts led the V&A to send C. H. Wylde, a curator in the Ceramic Department, on a buying trip to Seoul, where he purchased several pieces of textiles, furniture as well as ceramics.¹⁴

The fact that few things seemed to be uniquely Korean in character is also crucial. Ink paintings were generally thought to look very similar to Chinese ones, although inferior in quality.¹⁵ Westerners, including Carles, often ended up buying contemporary iron tobacco boxes as they were, in Carles’ words, “[t]he only distinctly native article” available for purchase at this time.¹⁶ Other objects that were considered to be characteristically Korean and of reasonable quality were wooden cabinets and brassware, also of contemporary date.¹⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the V&A and the BM acquired several such artefacts, including wooden chests and a large number of brass articles, ranging from bowls to chopsticks and candlesticks.¹⁸ The challenge facing collectors and curators was that the majority of the artefacts available for purchase in Korea were of an ethnographic nature, leaving some curators to acquire them reluctantly.¹⁹ In contrast, celadon ceramics were singled out as genuinely Korean artworks on a par with anything produced in China and Japan, leading some to proclaim them as the sole great product in Korea and therefore worth collecting.

The problem was how to define “good art”. Initially Westerners relied on judgements made by the Japanese on what constituted good Korean art.

- 12 Constance J. D. Coulson, *Korea. Peeps at Many Lands* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910), 35–6.
- 13 Wade, “Representing colonial Korea”, 29.
- 14 Lisa Bailey and Liz Wilkinson, “Korean art in the Victoria and Albert Museum”, *Korean Culture* 18 (Spring 1997), 5.
- 15 H. S. Saunderson, “Korea and its people”, *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 24, 1895, 312; F. S. K., “Korean pottery”, *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 9, no. 54 (December 1911), 63.
- 16 He acquired one such box, which, along with paper samples and ginseng specimens, he donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in the late nineteenth century. William R. Carles, *Life in Corea* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), 37. See also Wilkinson, “Collecting Korean art”, 244.
- 17 George G. Gilmore, *Corea of Today* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1894), 107. See also Angus Hamilton, *Korea; Its History, Its People, and Its Commerce* (Boston and Tokyo: J. B. Millet Co., 1910), 29.
- 18 Wilkinson, “Collecting Korean art”, 244.
- 19 Wilkinson, “Collecting Korean art”, 244.

Several Western accounts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries make mention of how highly the Japanese valued celadon wares. The ornithologist Pierre Louis Jouy (1856–94) wrote that: “These pieces [Koryō celadon wares], to which a remote antiquity was ascribed, were held in high esteem by Japanese connoisseurs”.²⁰ Similarly, the American missionary, physician and later diplomat Horace N. Allen (1858–1932) stated that in the late nineteenth century celadon wares were in demand in Japan, where they were sold at high prices.²¹ This suggests that many Western scholars and collectors were well aware of Japanese collecting practices.²² The Japanese had for centuries taken a keen interest in Korean ceramics, largely due to their fondness for tea wares.²³ Their preference for Korean bowls dates back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when *punch’ōng* stonewares of the early Chosŏn kingdom became popular among the tea-drinking Japanese elite, leading to their export to Japan. The sixteenth-century invasions of the Korean peninsula led by the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98) have even been dubbed the “pottery wars” by contemporary art historians, due to the large numbers of potters who were forcibly brought to Japan to set up kilns there. It is therefore understandable that the Japanese developed an interest in celadon as soon as the wares began to surface.

Westerners’ appreciation of celadon wares was also informed by the taste of Koreans, especially after the opening of the Imperial Museum of Korea (Chesil pangmulgwan 帝室博物館) in 1909, which will be discussed further below. However, it is unclear to what extent Koreans took an active interest in the study and collecting of celadon and other local artworks in the late nineteenth century. A comment made by the scholar Yu Kil-chun 俞吉濬 (1856–1914) in *Observations on Travels in the West* (*Sōyugyōnmun* 西遊見聞) suggests that some Koreans took great pride in Koryō celadon ceramics. Yu wrote that “Koryō celadon are famous in the world” and likened them to other great

- 20 Pierre Louis Jouy, *The Collection of Korean Mortuary Pottery in the U.S. National Museum. Smithsonian Annual Report* (Washington: US National Museum, 1888), 589. Jouy was an employee of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. He collected several ceramics, religious objects, textiles and other artefacts for the museum when he visited Korea in the early 1880s. Chang-su Cho Houchins, *An Ethnography of the Hermit Kingdom. The J. B. Bernadou Korean Collection 1884–85* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2004), 18–9.
- 21 Horace Allen arrived in Korea in December 1884 as he had been summoned to care for those injured in the Kapsin Coup. Later he became US Minister and Consul General in Seoul. Horace N. Allen, *Things Korean. A Collection of Sketches and Anecdotes Missionary and Diplomatic* (London and New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 210–11.
- 22 For some the sharing of knowledge formed part of personal friendships. For example, the American collector and founder of the Freer Gallery of Art, Charles L. Freer (1854–1919) became a close friend of Hara Tomitarō (1868–1938) and Masuda Takashi (1848–1938), both of whom were keen collectors of Korean art. Godfrey St. G. M. Gompertz, “The study and appreciation of Koryo wares”, in Rhee Byung-chang (ed.), *Kankoku bijutsu shūsen* (Masterpieces of Korean art), Volume 2 (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1978), 422.
- 23 Itō Yasuburō and Nishimura Shōtarō, *Kōryū-shō* (Koryō celadon) (Tokyo: Itō Yasuburō and Nishimura Shōtarō, 1910), 4–5.

Korean achievements, such as the invention of metal movable type printing.²⁴ Whether Yu's statement was informed by the collecting practices of the Japanese and Westerners, or by Koreans, is not known. Around this time, Japanese collectors seem to have greatly outnumbered local collectors, but some Koreans from privileged backgrounds did acquire celadon pieces in the late nineteenth century. King Kojong (r. 1863–1907) offered a celadon dish to the above-mentioned Horace N. Allen in gratitude for having saved the life of Min Yŏng-ik 閔泳翊 (1860–1914), the queen's nephew, in 1885.²⁵ Allen later noted that this was the most highly prized article that the court could present to him, though he was himself not at first very fond of it. Yet, it seems to have spurred his interest in Korean ceramics and he eventually built up a substantial collection while he resided in Seoul.²⁶ It may have been the royal family that Louise Jordan Miln referred to when she wrote in 1895 that: "Koreans value highly all sorts of crackle ware [celadon ceramics], and have been excelled, I fancy, in its manufacture by no other".²⁷

By the 1910s Eastern as well as Western collectors had firmly established Koryŏ celadon as the best, most beautiful and most distinctively Korean product available on the peninsula, as stated in an article published in the *Boston Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* in 1911:

Like Korean painting, sculpture, and architecture, [Korean pottery] had its source in China and passed on its tradition to Japan; but unlike those greater arts, pottery making in Korea developed in its own way, growing into something rich and quite different from anything produced in China, and teaching Japan everything but its own beauty. In other words, we have in Korean pottery of the best period [Koryŏ] a distinctively Korean expression of taste and skill.²⁸

The view that Koryŏ celadon surpassed other types of Korean ceramic wares was shared by British collectors and museum officials. In 1918 the V&A curator Bernard Rackham stated that: "All the best pottery found in Corea dates from the period of the Kōrai dynasty".²⁹

24 Yu Kil-chun, annotated by Hō Kyōng-chin, *Sōyugyōnmun* (Observations on travels in the West) (Kyōnggi-do P'aju-si: Sōhae munjip, 2004), 402. Yu wrote *Sōyugyōnmun* around 1889, but the volume was not published until 1895.

25 Edward B. Adams, *Korea's Pottery Heritage*, Vol. II (Seoul: Seoul International Publishing House, 1990), 101–3. See also, Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Miguk, Han'guk misul ūl mannada* (Korean Art from the United States) (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2012), 2.

26 On first seeing the dish, Allen felt it looked like "quite ordinary chinaware". Allen, *Things Korean*, 211–2. The dish is likely to be the one illustrated in Walter Hough, who states that it was given by "the King of Korea to Dr. Allen". Walter Hough, *The Bernadou, Allen and Jouy Corean Collections in the United States National Museum. From the Report of the U.S. National Museum, 1891* (Washington: Government Printing, 1893), 437.

27 Miln, *Quaint Korea*, 212.

28 F. S. K., "Korean pottery", 63.

29 Bernard Rackham, *Catalogue of the Le Blond Collection of Corean Pottery* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1918), 4.

Looking for difference

As the quote from the *Boston Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* indicates, comparisons with Chinese and Japanese art were a crucial means to prove the uniqueness of Korean celadon. Over the course of the 1910s scholars became especially interested in differences between Korean and Chinese glazed stonewares. This shift was rooted in the changing tastes among Western collectors of Chinese ceramics. In 1929 the Japanese archaeologist and historian Fujita Ryōsaku 藤田亮策 (1892–1960) argued that for Europeans, tired of ostentatious Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) porcelains, Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) stonewares seemed “pure and immaculate” (청순하다). According to Fujita, Koryō celadon were also seen to possess such desirable qualities and were for this reason collected.³⁰ Fujita referred to the shift in interest towards Song and Yuan ceramics following a seminal exhibition of *Early Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, organized by the Burlington Fine Arts Club (hereafter BFAC) in London in 1910.³¹ The authors of the BFAC catalogue wrote of the pieces that “... their delicate restrained tints cannot fail to appeal to lovers of Chinese art”.³² By this time, eighteenth-century Chinese porcelains, popular with nineteenth-century collectors, were regarded as decadent and commercial in comparison to Song ceramics, which were associated with purity and therefore became collectable.³³ The shift in collectors’ interests coincides with the rising fascination with Koryō celadon during the 1910s among art collectors and museum curators based in Korea, Japan, the United States and Britain, suggesting that the new taste for Song and Yuan stonewares promoted appreciation of Koryō wares too, partially since comparisons with Song and Yuan celadon served as a way to pinpoint unique characteristics of Koryō wares. For example, in a description of Koryō celadon bowls, Raphael Petrucci noted that “the body ... seems to be different from that found in ... Sung [Song] and Yuan pieces, it is heavier in itself and more heavily modeled”.³⁴ Such comparative approaches helped to understand what made Koryō celadon beautiful, a point that will be explored later.

30 Fujita was professor at the Keijo [Seoul] Imperial University (Keijō Teikoku Daigaku 京城帝国大学) and became director of the Museum of the Government-General of Korea (Chosŏn Ch’ongdokpu pangmulgwan 朝鮮總督府博物館) in Seoul. Fujita Ryōsaku, “Ōbei no hakubutsukan to Chōsen (ge)” (Museums in Europe and America (part 2), *Chōsen* 164, 1929, 28. For a discussion of Fujita’s archaeological work on the Korean peninsula, see Hyung Il Pai, “The politics of Korea’s past: The legacy of Japanese colonial archaeology in the Korean peninsula”, *East Asian History* 7 (June 1994), 42–3.

31 Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums. The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain 1560–1960* (New York and Vienna: Peter Lang, 2007), 89–94.

32 Burlington Fine Arts Club, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Early Chinese Pottery and Porcelain* (London: Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1911), xviii, quoted in Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, 94.

33 Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, 97.

34 Raphael Petrucci, “Corean pottery”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 22, no. 116 (November 1912), 87.

Scholarship on Korean celadon ceramics also increased at this time.³⁵ For some Chinese art collectors studies of Korean celadon aided understanding of early Chinese ceramics. For this reason, wares from China and Korea were at times displayed alongside one another.³⁶ For example, an exhibition of Song and Yuan stonewares held in New York in 1914 also featured around fifty Korean celadon wares.³⁷ This approach led some collectors of Chinese art, including George Eumorfopoulos (1863–1939), to purchase Korean ceramics as well. His pieces of Koryŏ celadon were shown alongside early Chinese ceramics in the *Eumorfopoulos Exhibition of Chinese Art*, which opened at the V&A in 1936 (Figure 1).³⁸

In pursuit of antiquity

Koryŏ celadon were thus validated as being uniquely Korean products. However, it was their antiquarian references as “mortuary wares” that cemented their worth as *objets d’art* from the time when they were first discovered in Koryŏ tombs. It is through our interpretations of the past that artefacts are ascribed particular forms of cultural or artistic “authenticity”. Antiques are generally attributed a sense of temporal “depth” and, for this reason, the collecting of objects from ancient civilizations is widely regarded as being more rewarding than the collecting of contemporary things. Moreover it is typically objects of cultural or historical value that may be promoted to the status of fine art, as was the case of celadon.³⁹

Korea was recognized as an ancient nation with a long history: this was made apparent in writings published from the late nineteenth century onwards. Many were captivated by the notion of Korea as a country where time stood still and where past customs and ways of life had been preserved for centuries. This matched the widespread image of the “Hermit Kingdom” and fuelled a fascination with the peninsula.⁴⁰ A prominent characteristic of the Korean countryside were the numerous tomb mounds that dotted the hillsides. The peninsula was frequently described as a vast graveyard, with burial mounds and monuments of varying age and archaeological interest.⁴¹ From the time they were first

35 The bibliography in Rackham’s volume on the Le Blond collection of Korean ceramics offers a good indication of published scholarship on Korean ceramic history in the late 1910s. Rackham, *Catalogue of the Le Blond Collection*, vii–viii.

36 John Platt noted that: “The Korean tomb finds are worthy of the most careful study, and can help a great deal in our understanding of the early Chinese ware”. John Platt, “Korean pottery”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 36, no. 205 (April 1920), 203. See also John Platt, “Ancient Korean tomb wares”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 22, no. 116 (November 1912), 230.

37 R. L. Hobson, “Sung and Yüan wares in a New York exhibition”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 24, no. 132 (March 1914), 320–23.

38 Horlyck and Priewe, “Displaying Korean artefacts”.

39 Clifford, “On collecting art and culture”, 100.

40 This was noted by Walter Hough, who wrote that: “Great interest centers in Korea from the fact that we have there a human exemplification of the survival of the whole genera of industries and customs, while in surrounding regions these have been swept away or transformed.” Hough, *The Bernadou, Allen and Jouy Korean Collections*, 432.

41 Jouy, *Collection of Korean Mortuary Pottery*, 589. Jouy’s views were later reiterated by Randolph I. Geare in “The potter’s art in Korea”, *The Craftsman* VII, no. 3 (December 1904), 294–8.



Figure 1. Display of Koryŏ celadon in the *Eumorfopoulos Exhibition of Chinese Art*, at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1936. (After V&A Archive, Nominal File: Mr and Mrs George Eumorfopoulos.) © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

discovered and collected, celadon ceramics were known to have been unearthed from ancient graves and were referred to as "tomb" or "mortuary wares" in many early writings.⁴² The persistent use of such terms suggests that collectors attached great significance to the tomb origins of celadon wares. By referring to celadon as "mortuary wares", collectors branded them as antiques and in so doing separated them from lower quality artefacts of Chosŏn and contemporary times. In highlighting the historical value of celadon ceramics, they authenticated the wares as collectibles and by association labelled themselves as authentic and erstwhile collectors. The practice of referring to celadon as tomb wares was common until the 1940s but by the 1970s it had disappeared from scholarly writings, marking a significant shift towards the perception of celadon as art objects, rather than as mortuary wares.⁴³ By the 1970s celadon

42 A case in point is Platt, "Ancient Korean tomb wares".

43 In 1979, the South Korean government sent a large-scale exhibition entitled *5000 Years of Korean Art* on a tour of the United States. The exhibition catalogue made no mention

ceramics were established as desirable objects and it was no longer necessary to promote their antique connotations. They were largely seen and interpreted within museum contexts and, as a result, the historicities of celadon wares were reconfigured and their past roles as tomb goods became less important.

It is not known exactly when the first discoveries of celadon wares were made but written accounts suggest that it was in the 1880s. In 1888 the British Vice-Consul William R. Carles (1848–1928) published the first account of how celadon were removed from graves near Kaesŏng, where members of the Koryŏ royal family were buried. He writes: “In the winter after my return to S[e]oul [in 1884–85] I succeeded in purchasing a few pieces, part of a set of thirty-six, which were said to have been taken out of some large grave near Songdo [Kaesŏng]”.⁴⁴ The majority of the acquired pieces were celadon wares, some of which were decorated with *sanggam* inlay (Figure 2). The fact that they were largely unknown at the time is evidenced by Carles’ misguided belief that the inlaid motifs were made up of a “series of irregular white fragments of quartz or porcelain, which must have been imbedded in the clay before the baking”.⁴⁵ In reality, the inlaid patterns were created by filling the incised motif with slip.

The discoveries of Koryŏ tombs in the 1880s are also referred to by the British collector and amateur archaeologist William Gowland (1842–1922), who wrote that “cream-coloured glazed” wares – this being a frequently used term for Koryŏ celadon at this time – were being unearthed from tombs at Kaesŏng.⁴⁶ The speed at which these artefacts became collectible commodities is remarkable considering very little was known of Korea’s ceramic history when they were first discovered. It is telling that Gowland does not even attempt to date the glazed wares he saw, merely saying that “a great age is ascribed [to them] by the Koreans”.⁴⁷

Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a steadily increasing number of celadon wares were unearthed and sold within and outside Korea, culminating in the boom of the celadon art market in the 1910s. Many tomb goods surfaced following the end of the Russo-Japanese War of

of celadon having been used as tomb goods, nor did it refer to how or when they became collectors’ items. In contrast, the catalogue of an earlier travelling exhibition of Korean art, *Masterpieces of Korean Art*, also sponsored by South Korea, noted that “Koryŏ celadon was buried with its owners and recovered only in this century, mostly in a virtual hysteria of surreptitious digging in the ten thousand graves of the Kaesŏng area during the first decades of the 20th century”. National Gallery of Art, Washington, *Masterpieces of Korean Art: An Exhibition under the Auspices of the Government of the Republic of Korea* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art [et al.], 1957), 19. For comparison see, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, *5,000 Years of Korean Art* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 1979).

44 Carles, *Life in Corea*, 139. Carles purchased two ewers, a *meibyŏng* prunus vase, a bowl, a dish, two cups and two cup stands.

45 Carles, *Life in Corea*, 140–41.

46 Gowland resided in Japan between 1872 and 1888 and worked for the Imperial Japanese Mint. William Gowland, “Notes on the dolmens and other antiquities of Korea”, *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 24, 1895, 322.

47 Gowland, “Dolmens and other antiquities of Korea”, 322.



Figure 2. Celadon ceramics purchased by Carles. After William R. Carles, *Life in Corea* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), 140–1.

1904–05, when new roads and railways were constructed on the peninsula.⁴⁸ In the early twentieth century the Japanese acquired the partially constructed railway between Seoul and Sinūiju, located 40 km from the mouth of the Yalu River that borders Korea and China, from French and American companies: they completed it in 1905. The project was driven by the desire to secure a stronghold on the peninsula. Furthermore, the railway offered an effective means to gain access to Manchuria and Russia. The fact that the line ran through Kaesōng is not insignificant, as it seems to have led to accidental discoveries of the well-furnished royal and aristocratic tombs located there. By the 1910s it had become common knowledge that the richest graves with the “best goods” were those situated in the mountains surrounding Kaesōng.⁴⁹

Wares continued to surface into the 1930s and even the 1950s. In the summer of 1935 a considerable stir was caused among scholars and collectors when “freshly excavated” wares were said to have come from islands in Haeju Bay, near the city of Kaesōng.⁵⁰ Numerous Chinese porcelains of the Song period, including Ding wares, were reported as having been plundered from tombs in the area, particularly on Yongmaedo, the largest island in the group, and according to rumour at least one-hundred tombs from the Koryō period were found

48 Godfrey St. G. M. Gompertz, *Korean Celadon and Other Wares of the Koryō Period* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 14.

49 This is mentioned by Western and Japanese authors. See, for example, Platt, “Ancient Korean tomb wares”, 229; Rackham, *Catalogue of the Le Blond Collection*, 4; Itō and Nishimura, *Kōryū-shō*, 2.

50 Okudaira Takehiko, “Chōsen shutsudo no shina tōjiki zakken” (Miscellaneous findings of Chinese porcelain in Korea), *Tōji* IX, no. 2 (May 1937), 1–11; Godfrey St. G. M. Gompertz, “Gilded wares of Sung and Koryō. I. Gilded Sung wares”, *The Burlington Magazine* 98, no. 642 (September 1956), 300–03.

there. They were most likely built for the aristocrats and traders who lived in the region.⁵¹ However, by the time they surfaced, the colonial government had issued stringent preservation and export laws, as discussed further below, making it impossible to export the wares legally. Instead, it seems that the majority entered the collection of the Museum of the Government-General of Korea.⁵²

Appropriating the past

From the time when international scholarship on Korea's past and present began in the late nineteenth century, research developed into its past kingdoms and rulers, as well as significant historical events and cultural sites. By the 1910s an increasingly detailed picture of Korea's history had emerged. However, not all past eras were assigned equal worth, with some being valued more highly than others. William Gowland was one of the few collectors who paid attention to prehistoric Korean artefacts.⁵³ His archaeological interest in Japan and his belief that Korea was "the point of departure from the mainland of the Japanese race"⁵⁴ led him to travel to the peninsula, and in 1884 he journeyed from Seoul to Pusan. He was interested mainly in stonewares of the Three Kingdoms period (trad. 57 BC–AD 668), several of which he excavated and collected. They were later acquired by S. W. Franks, who donated them to the British Museum where he was a Keeper of Antiquities.⁵⁵ Another early collector of Three Kingdoms ceramics was Edward Sylvester Morse (1838–1925) who, like Gowland, was interested in making connections between prehistoric Japan and Korea.⁵⁶ However, they were exceptions. Most collectors of Korean art only had eyes for celadon ceramics. Though Three Kingdoms stonewares pre-date Koryŏ celadon and therefore were in principle of higher historical value, most collectors did not value them in such a manner.

Writings by early Western and Japanese collectors suggest that the Koryŏ kingdom represented a bygone, once glorious, era. Many writers lamented the state of the Korean peninsula in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, criticizing its lazy population, the lack of progress in manufacturing and the absence of originality in the arts, among other faults. Chosŏn Korea was widely regarded as a drowsy backwater that was slipping into decline because of its inability to modernize.⁵⁷ The 500 years of Chosŏn rule offered little that was

51 Okudaira, "Chŏsen shutsudo no shina tōjiki zakken", 1–11; Charlotte Horlyck, "Gilded celadon wares of the Koryŏ kingdom (918–1392 CE)", *Artibus Asiae* LXXII, no. 1, 2012, 118.

52 Several of the objects are illustrated in Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Chungguk toja* (Chinese ceramics) (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2007).

53 Jane Portal, "Korean ceramics in the British Museum – a century of collecting", *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 60, 1995–96, 50–53.

54 Gowland, "Dolmens and other antiquities of Korea", 317.

55 Portal, "Korean ceramics in the British Museum", 53. See also Jane Portal, "The origins of the British Museum's Korean collection", *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch* 70, 1995, 42–4.

56 Morse's Korean ceramics are now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Han'guk misul ūl mannada*, 14.

57 This view reflected the trope of colonial writings about non-Western civilizations.

worth celebrating and its art was therefore largely overlooked by Westerners.⁵⁸ In contrast, the Koryŏ kingdom was heralded as the best period of pottery making in Korea.⁵⁹ Therefore, celadon came to represent a lost art that could not be revived (given the poor state of the country), but could only be preserved through appropriation. The antiquarian merits of the wares were reinforced through a romanticized image of a once-glorious kingdom that perished along with its art, much like Atlantis. The fact that they had stayed secret and underground for hundreds of years enhanced their appeal.

The notion that Korean society went into decline after the fall of Koryŏ was particularly popular among Japanese scholars, as it fitted the colonial argument of the impossibility of independent Korean development. Central to the colonial view of Korea was the belief that Korean people were by nature subordinate to other, more powerful, nations. Historians supported these theories through references to historical events, highlighting that Korea had never invaded another country but had repeatedly been invaded as well as colonized by more dominant states. Japan's colonization of Korea was therefore seen as a normal and inevitable outcome of Korean identity, its history and geography.⁶⁰ In emphasizing the successes of earlier periods, including the arts, past achievements were thus juxtaposed with current failures. This served to reinforce Japan's colonial role as the protector of Korean art and the ultimate saviour of the peninsula.⁶¹ This view is reiterated in one of the earliest published Japanese exhibition catalogues of Koryŏ celadon, in which the authors state that: "It goes without saying that the Korean social situation is deteriorating. It is surprising that the ancestors of this Korean race successfully produced the finest art objects [Koryŏ celadon]. We Japanese have to introduce such a hidden beauty actively".⁶²

Defining beauty

The collecting of artefacts is often driven by a pursuit of particular notions of beauty and, in addition to their uniquely Korean characteristics and their antique references, Korean celadon presented an aesthetic appeal that gained them popularity. In a discussion of his Chinese ceramics, George Eumorfopoulos summed up his collecting attitude as follows: "Archaeological appeal alone, however, has

58 For example, in 1884 the Smithsonian attaché John Baptiste Bernadou wrote to Spencer F. Baird, Director of the National Museum, Washington D.C., that many paintings of the Chosŏn period were coarse and that "there are no living artists of note in Corea". Houchins, *Ethnography of the Hermit Kingdom*, 144–5.

59 F. S. K.'s statement that the "best period of pottery-making in Korea began under Korai [Koryŏ] kings ... and ended with them" was common in writings of the 1910s and 1920s. F. S. K., "Korean pottery", 63. For similar views, see also Lorraine d'O Warner, "Korean grave pottery of the Korai dynasty", *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 6/3 (April 1919), 460; and Eckardt, *History of Korean Art*, 169.

60 Kim Brandt, "Objects of desire: Japanese collectors and colonial Korea", *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 8/3 (Winter 2000), 736.

61 Park So-hyŏn, "Koryŏ chagi nŭn ōt'ŏk'e 'misul' i toeŏnna – shingminji sidae 'Koryŏ chagi yŏlgwang' kwa Yi wangga pangmulgwan ūi chŏngjihak" (How 'Koryŏ celadon' became 'Art': Koryŏ celadon mania and politics of the Yiwanga Museum in the Colonial period), *Sahoe yŏn'gu* 11, 2006, 18.

62 Itō and Nishimura, *Kōryū-shō*, 5.

never induced me to acquire an object: to enter my collection it was indispensable that it should at the same time appeal to me aesthetically in some way or another".⁶³ There is little doubt that collectors of Korean art shared his views.

While the grouping of artefacts into typologies presupposes some notion of permanence, the definitions of those typologies are temporal. In the same way, although the object of beauty may remain the same, definitions of how that beauty should be interpreted may differ between groups of people. In the case of Korean celadon, definitions of what made them beautiful were formed in the 1880s and had by the 1910s become standardized. However, by the 1930s interpretations of what constituted that beauty differed among Western and Japanese collectors. For Westerners, comparisons with Song wares often provided a means to demonstrate the unique beauty of Korean celadon. Decorative features that are typically not seen on Song celadon tended to be highlighted and were often seen as significant contributing factors to the beauty of Koryō celadon. They included qualities such as the soft tinge of their clear glazes, their exquisitely carved designs and their inlaid decorations.⁶⁴

However, Japanese ideas of what constituted the beauty of Korean celadon were firmly embedded within colonial readings of past and present Korean society. The theories espoused by Yanagi Sōetsu 柳宗悦 (1889–1961), one of Japan's most famous collectors and scholars of Korean art, were particularly influential. In a seminal essay published in 1922, Yanagi characterized Korean history as unstable and the Koreans as subservient to foreign powers, leading to the "essence" of Korea being lonely, sorrowful and spiritual. This national trait was manifested in the arts, as reflected in form, colour and line. Korean art, he argued, was characterized by long and narrow lines, denoting fragility, in contrast to Chinese art which was exemplified by stable forms, signifying power, and Japanese art, represented by bright colours, typifying pleasure. In a similar vein, the paucity of colour in Korean works of art signalled an "absence of pleasure in life".⁶⁵

Not all scholars subscribed to this analysis of Korean art. The British collector and scholar Sir Godfrey Gompertz (1904–92) criticized heavily the argument that the aesthetics of Korean ceramics bore the effects of the so-called sadness and suffering of the Korean people. He claimed that the Koryō period was "just as full of light as well as shade as most other human eras".⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Yanagi's theories had an enormous impact on Japanese and later Korean interpretations of the beauty of Korean ceramics. Many Japanese scholars and collectors, such as Koyama Fujio 小山富士夫 (1900–75) and Uchiyama Shōzō 内山尚三 (1920–2002), reiterated Yanagi's views in their

63 George Eumorfopoulos, Preface to *The Eumorfopoulos Collection*, Vol. I, by R. L. Hobson (London: E. Benn Ltd., 1925), quoted in Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, 91.

64 F. S. K., "Korean pottery", 64; Hobson, "Sung and Yüan wares", 322–3.

65 Yanagi Sōetsu, *Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū* (Collected works of Yanagi Sōetsu) Vol. 6 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1980–92), 89–109, quoted in Brandt, "Objects of desire", 734–6.

66 Godfrey St. G. M. Gompertz, "The appeal of Korean celadon", *Oriental Art* XXIII, no. 1, (Spring 1977), 63–4.

appraisals of Korean pottery. For them a quietness of spirit and sense of loneliness formed the beauty and essence of Koryō celadon.⁶⁷

Acquiring the illicit

The perception that celadon ceramics had lain undisturbed for centuries before being discovered was in principle correct, irrespective of its romantic connotations. Following the demise of Koryō rule in 1392, the kings of Chosōn had maintained the Koryō royal tombs, since Confucian codes of conduct called for them to visit and maintain the graves of previous rulers.⁶⁸ The tombs were built in the form of stone chambers, covered by a small earthen mound in front of which stone figures of officials and tigers were placed. However, these tombs could be looted relatively easily by breaking through the stone walls of their underground chambers, as indicated in a drawing of the interior of the tomb of King Myōngjong (r. 1170–97) in which the grave robbers' entry points are clearly marked (Figure 3).⁶⁹

Despite the fact that the tomb interiors could be accessed without much difficulty, they were left untouched until the late nineteenth century. By 1916, however, when Japanese archaeologists working for the Government-General of Chōsen (Chōsen Sōtokufu 朝鮮總督府) surveyed the tombs, they had all been fully or partially emptied of burial artefacts.⁷⁰ One of the main reasons why they remained intact was the severe punishments meted out to those who desecrated a grave. In Chosōn Korea this was seen as a moral violation against Confucian filial sentiments and was therefore one of the most serious crimes in the Korean penal code.⁷¹ Westerners, too, knew that it was a capital offence to loot tombs, making it initially “very hard to obtain specimens”, as H. S. Saunderson noted in 1895.⁷² With the weakening of Chosōn at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, these laws lapsed, leading to increased plundering of grave sites.

John Platt provides a good summary of the situation on the peninsula during these years:

Any desecration of the tombs being a capital offence, and always accomplished at much risk, very few specimens were obtained in this manner, the great scarcity of fine early examples [of Koryō celadon] continuing till we

67 Fujio Koyama, “Koryo celadon”, in Byung-chang Rhee (ed.), *Kankoku bijutsu Shūsen*, 412; Gompertz, *Korean Celadon and Other Wares*, 3–4.

68 Platt, “Ancient Korean tomb wares”, 229.

69 The chamber contained twelve pieces of celadon, a gilt-bronze hairpin and three bronze coins, now housed in the National Museum of Korea. Chōsen Sōtokufu, *Taishō 5-nendo koseki chōsa hōkoku* (1916 Report on investigations of historic remains) (Keijō [Seoul]: Chōsen Sōtokufu 1916), 512–6. For a discussion of the tomb and its contents, see Charlotte Horlyck, “Burial offerings to objets d’art: Celadon wares of the Koryō kingdom (AD 918–1392)”, *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 73, 2008–09, 84.

70 The findings were published in Chōsen Sōtokufu, *Koseki chōsa hōkoku*.

71 Homer B. Hulbert, *The Passing of Korea* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906), 568.

72 Saunderson, “Korea and its people”, 312.

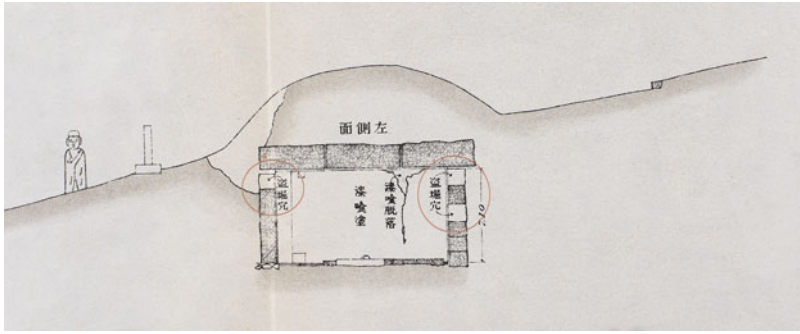


Figure 3. Interior of the tomb of King Myōngjong (r. 1170–97), located near Kaesōng. Looters' entry points are circled. (After Chōsen Sōtokufu, *Taishō 5-Nendo Koseki Chōsa Hōkoku* (1916 Report on investigations of historic remains) (Keijō [Seoul]: Chōsen Sōtokufu, 1916), 507.) (colour online)

come to the time of the Russo-Japanese war, when the Japanese army made its headquarters in Korea. This was too good an opportunity to be lost, and Japanese and Koreans, who knew what was likely to be found in the tombs, systematically robbed them and obtained a large number of most valuable specimens. The most important excavations were made in the vicinity of Song-do [Kaesōng] where the graves of the early kings and nobility of the Koryu [Koryō] dynasty were to be found. To-day most of the graves in this neighborhood have been plundered.⁷³

Artefacts continued to be stolen from tombs even after Korea became a protectorate of Japan in 1905. Gompertz went so far as to describe the situation in Korea as a “veritable orgy of pillaging”.⁷⁴ Shimokōriyama Seiichi 下郡山誠一 (b. 1883), who worked as a government advisor to the Imperial Museum of Korea in 1908, wrote that after having taken up his position in Seoul, he visited the official residence of Komiya Mihomatsu 小宮三保松 (1859–1935), a cabinet secretary, where he was surprised to see a room full of boxes with artefacts raided from Koryō tombs. To avoid being seen by the police, looters would bring their goods during the night to dealers in Seoul, who would sell them on to interested buyers the following morning. Dealers visited Komiya, who would assess and purchase such pieces virtually every day. Following the visit, Shimokōriyama himself also began to frequent the dealers.⁷⁵

News of the plundering of tombs and the subsequent availability of cheap mortuary ceramics also reached art collectors in Britain. In an article published in *Burlington Magazine* in 1912, John Platt explained in detail how pit tombs and their contents were discovered by grave robbers:

73 Platt, “Ancient Korean tomb wares”, 229.

74 Gompertz, “The study and appreciation of Koryo wares”, 420.

75 Park So-hyōn, “Koryō chagi”, 13.

In order to locate the tombs heavy sticks and pointed iron rods were used. By knocking on the ground it was often possible to tell that there was a hollow place beneath, and when the pointed iron rod was bored into the ground and went through into space it was known that a tomb would be found in this spot.⁷⁶

Rumours of the many antique ceramics that could be found in Seoul, often at cheap rates, led some Western collectors to travel to the peninsula in search of bargains. One such individual was Aubrey Le Blond (1869–1937), a British collector who donated and sold many of his Korean pieces to the V&A.⁷⁷ In 1913 Le Blond and his wife met Professor Archibald H. Sayce, who recommended that they travel to Korea to purchase antiques for their collection, since good quality objects could be acquired for reasonable prices.⁷⁸

By the 1920s the “orgy” was over, as the Japanese took measures to preserve Korea’s cultural heritage. In 1916, the colonial government drew up the first of several articles to enforce the safeguarding of cultural sites and historic artefacts. Titled “Regulations on the Preservation of Ancient Rites and Relics of Chōsen” (*Koseki oyobi ibutsu hōson kitei* 古蹟及遺物保存規則), the article clarified how ancient monuments (*koseki* 古蹟) and ancient remains (*ibutsu* 遺物) should be defined, and stated that if such ancient monuments or remains were disturbed, the perpetrator should be reported to the police. It also stipulated that official permission was needed from the government for the removal, repair and preservation of remains.⁷⁹ Although the regulation did not stop the looting of tombs altogether, it did have some impact.

As celadon wares became scarcer on the art market, their prices inflated, much to the frustration of private collectors and museum institutions. In 1920, Reverend A. S. Hewlett wrote to the V&A, inquiring whether it had a possible interest in purchasing a number of Korean antiques, including celadon ceramics, in his possession. He explained that he had difficulties in pricing the objects, “since Corean things have been at a fabulous price since the rifling of the tombs has been stopped by the Government in compliance with the Coreans protectorate and the Japanese [...] ask an exorbitant price both in Coreia and Japan”.⁸⁰ The regulation of 1916 was replaced in 1933 by the “Treasures,

76 Platt, “Ancient Korean tomb wares”, 229. In contrast to the royal family and high-ranking aristocrats, lesser-ranking members of Koryō society were interred in pit tombs that were marked with a small earthen mound. For a discussion of different methods of burial in Koryō, see Charlotte Horlyck, “Ways of burial in Koryō times”, in Charlotte Horlyck and Michael Pettid (eds), *Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea: Critical Aspects of Death from Ancient to Contemporary Times* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, forthcoming).

77 A substantial part of Le Blond’s Korean objects came into the V&A permanently in 1918. In 1937 the V&A further acquired from him a smaller number of Koryō and Chosōn ceramics. Wilkinson, “Collecting Korean art”, 248–50. For the 1937 acquisitions, see V&A Archive, MA/1/L594, nominal file: Le Blond, Mr & Mrs Aubrey.

78 Le Blond purchased his objects through a Korean dealer in Seoul, who apparently spoke English well. Mrs Aubrey Le Blond, *Day In, Day Out* (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head Limited, 1928), 162–4.

79 Pai, “The politics of Korea’s past”, 32–3.

80 V&A Archive, MA/1/H1842, nominal File: Hewlett A S (Rev).

Ancient Sites, Famous Places, and Natural Monuments Act” (*Hōmotsu koseki meisshō kinnenbutsu hōzonrei* 寶物古蹟名勝記念物保存令), which was put in place to reinforce the 1916 regulation and to monitor private institutions and individuals who possessed national treasures.⁸¹ It effectively put an end to the export of antiques and from this time onwards Western collectors and curators had to source Korean artefacts from already-established collections outside the peninsula.⁸²

Appropriating celadon through museum displays

There is no doubt that the illegality of plundering tombs initially deterred many Koreans from desecrating graves. Yet, it should also be taken into account that until the late nineteenth century there was no local interest in the archaeological remains from past Korean kingdoms. Fujita Ryōsaku attributed this to the Confucian scholars’ penchant for written documents.⁸³ The Chosŏn elite did collect Chinese paintings, ancient Chinese bronzes and contemporary ceramics. In this respect, they followed the practices of contemporary and earlier Chinese emperors, who built up substantial collections of Chinese artworks.⁸⁴ However, the Korean elite did not covet local artefacts from tombs, partially due to the prevailing belief in the sacredness of the bodies of ancestors and their tomb sites. The non-Korean heritage of artefacts from mainland China may have made it easier for the Confucians of Chosŏn to ignore the original tomb contexts of Chinese antiques. The reluctance to acquire Korean mortuary goods seems to have persisted even after the fall of Chosŏn. Lorraine D’O Warner wrote in 1930 that “the Koreans have a strong religious dislike of using objects that were buried with the dead, and for this reason they place no great value on pottery that was so used”.⁸⁵

However, attitudes did begin to change in the 1880s, as members of the royal family started to acquire celadon ceramics, as demonstrated by King Kojong’s gift of a celadon dish to Horace Allen mentioned earlier. It is not known whether the dish formed part of a larger collection of ceramics, but it signals a shift in attitude towards local mortuary goods. It is not known which impetus lay behind the royal family’s acquisitions of Korean antiques. Perhaps they were a reactionary countermeasure against the Westerners and the Japanese, who were buying up Korean antiques in increasingly large numbers around this time.

81 Hyung Il Pai, “The creation of national treasures and monuments: the 1916 Japanese laws on the preservation of Korean remains and relics and their colonial legacies”, *Korean Studies* 25/1, 2001, 78–9.

82 For example, it led Bernard Rackham to urge the V&A to purchase Aubrey Le Blond’s collection of Chosŏn porcelains, arguing that it was “difficult nowadays to obtain [it] elsewhere, owing to official restrictions of exports from Korea”. V&A Archive, MA/1/L594, nominal file: Le Blond.

83 Pai, “The politics of Korea’s past”, 28–9.

84 Rosemary E. Scott, “The Chinese imperial collections”, in Stacey Pierson (ed.), *Collecting Chinese Art: Interpretation and Display* (London: Percival David Foundation, 2000), 19–32.

85 Lorraine D’O Warner, “Kōrai celadon in America”, *Eastern Art. An Annual* II, 1930, 65.

The official endorsement of the collecting of mortuary goods culminated in the founding of the Imperial Museum of Korea.⁸⁶ Questions abound as to whether it was the Koreans or the Japanese who initiated the establishment of the museum. Komiya Mihomatsu was in charge of the renovation of Ch'angdök Palace in 1907, a project that had been necessitated by the move of Emperor Kojong's⁸⁷ residence from Töksu Palace to Ch'angdök Palace. According to him, the Cabinet Prime Minister Yi Wan-yong 李完用 (1858–1926) and Supreme Officer Yi Yun-yong 李允用 (1854–?) were concerned that Kojong would be bored in Ch'angdök Palace, and asked whether entertainment of some form could be arranged for him. This led Komiya to propose the building of a zoo, a botanical garden and a museum within the precincts of Ch'anggyöng Palace, located immediately south of Ch'angdök Palace.⁸⁸

After having amassed 17,000 objects of various materials, the Museum opened to the public in 1909.⁸⁹ The royal family's endorsement of it was signalled by Emperor Sunjong's (r. 1907–10) declaration that the museum would "share pleasure with people" (더불어 즐거움을 나누고자).⁹⁰ Inside the galleries, celadon ceramics were displayed alongside archaeological artefacts, Buddhist sculptures and Chosön ink paintings (Figure 4). The Museum is significant as it allowed the Korean people to encounter their cultural heritage for the first time, but its impact went beyond Korea's borders. By the 1920s travel guides to Seoul, published in English, recommended that tourists visit the museum as a way to study "the ancient arts of the country".⁹¹ From the time of its opening, the museum publicly validated celadon ceramics as collectible commodities that formed an integral part of Korea's cultural heritage. An inlaid celadon ewer and basin set with underglaze copper-red decoration from the thirteenth century was among the first pieces to be acquired in 1908 (Figure 5). It was purchased from Kondo Sagoro 近藤佐五郎, a Japanese antiques dealer based in Seoul, for the significant sum of 950 *wön*. For the sake of comparison, it may be noted that the entry fee to the museum was initially set at ten *chön* for adults and that in the same year Kondo sold an inlaid celadon bottle from the thirteenth century to the Museum for only 150 *wön* (Figure 6).⁹² The cultural and archaeological significance of Koryö celadon was further strengthened when the Japanese opened the Museum of the Government-General of Korea in Seoul in 1915.⁹³ Founded as a means to store and display the large body

86 It was renamed the Museum of the Yi Royal Family (*Yi wangga pangmulgwan* 李王家博物館) in 1911, following the annexation of Korea.

87 Kojong proclaimed the Korean Empire in 1897, but was in 1907 forced to abdicate by the Japanese.

88 Komiya included this anecdote in the introduction to the first illustrated catalogue of the Museum of the Yi Royal Family, published in 1912. Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Han'guk pangmulgwan kaegwan 100 chun'yön kinyöm t'ükpyö'chön* (Korean Museums' 100 year celebration) (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2009), 38.

89 Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Han'guk pangmulgwan kaegwan*, 25.

90 Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Han'guk pangmulgwan kaegwan*, 28.

91 Thomas Cook and Son, *Cook's Guide to Peking, North China, South Manchuria, Korea* (Peking: The North-China Daily News & Herald, Ltd., 1924), 134.

92 Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Han'guk pangmulgwan kaegwan*, 31–3.

93 The museum was renamed the National Museum of Korea (Kungnip pangmulgwan 국립 박물관) in 1945. It took its present name of Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, likewise



Figure 4. Ceramic galleries in the Museum of the Yi Royal Family. (After Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Han'guk pangmulgwan kaegwan 100 chunyŏn kinyŏm t'ŭkpyŏlchŏn* (Korean museums 100 year celebration) (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2009), 42.)

of artefacts that Japanese archaeologists were excavating on the peninsula, the museum firmly placed celadon within Korea's past cultural heritage and highlighted their antiquarian references.

Prior to the opening of these museums in Seoul, ceramics had already been displayed in museums and galleries outside Korea. In October 1885, the first overseas exhibition of Korean ceramics was shown in New York at a gallery owned by Edward Greedy (1835–88), a well-known dealer of Japanese and Chinese art. Greedy offered for sale the East Asian ceramic collection of Captain Francis Brinkley (1841–1912), an Irish newspaper owner, editor and scholar, who resided in Japan. Among Brinkley's pieces were thirteen Korean ceramics, including a few which appear to be Korean celadon wares.⁹⁴

In Japan, the first major exhibition of celadon ceramics was held in Tokyo in the autumn of 1909. It featured pieces owned by Japanese collectors in Tokyo,

translated as National Museum of Korea, in 1972. During the colonial period branch museums were opened in Kyŏngju (in 1926), Pyŏngyang (in 1931), Kaesŏng (in 1933) and Puyŏ (in 1939). Kungnip chung'ang pangmulgwan, *Han'guk pangmulgwan kaegwan*, 47.

94 Brinkley himself wrote the catalogue: *Description of "the Brinkley collection" of antique Japanese, Chinese and Korean Porcelain, Pottery and Faience* (New York: E. Greedy, 1885). See also Horlyck, "Burial offerings", 81–3.



Figure 5. Double gourd wine ewer and basin inlaid with grapes and boys and painted with underglaze copper-red, thirteenth century, Koryō period (AD 918–1392). Ewer H. 34.2 cm, D. of body 14.6 cm, of base 8.5 cm; Basin H. 7.4 cm, D. of rim 17.9 cm, of base 11.2 cm. National Museum of Korea, Seoul. (colour online)

Osaka, Kyoto as well as in Seoul. Several of the collectors were from aristocratic and high-class families, including Marquess Matsukata 侯爵松方 and Baron Takahashi 男爵高橋, signalling the fact that the collecting of celadon was mainly a high-class pursuit at this time (Figure 7). Around one-hundred pieces were exhibited, among them black glazed Ding wares of the Song period which had been popular among the Koryō aristocracy (Figure 8). According to the authors of the catalogue, the significance of the exhibition lay in its display of artefacts which could not normally be seen above ground. They urged the Japanese to “penetrate into Korea and excavate the rest of the tombs if objects remain there”, thus supporting the view that the Japanese were the protectors of



Figure 6. Vase inlaid with peony and chrysanthemum, thirteenth century, Koryŏ period (AD 918–1392). H. 25.6 cm, National Museum of Korea, Seoul. National treasure no. 114. (colour online)

Korea's cultural heritage.⁹⁵ Over the course of the twentieth century, these exhibitions were followed by several others within and outside Korea and they served to establish celadon wares as suitable for display within high-class government institutions.

Conclusion

Celadon ceramics began to be unearthed in the late nineteenth century and by the 1910s had become desirable commodities for the Koreans, the Japanese, the Americans and the British, among other Westerners. During the first decades

95 Itō and Nishimura, *Kōryū-shō*, 3–12.

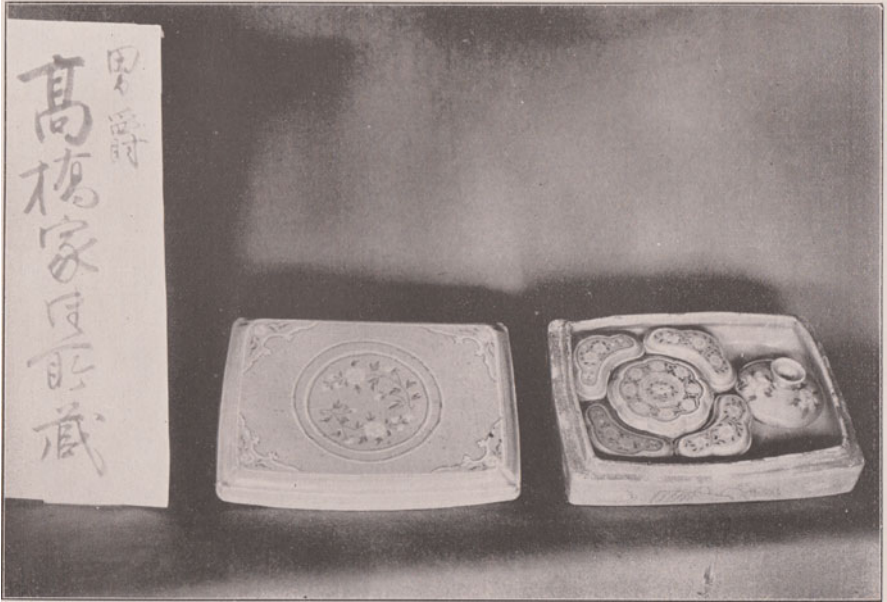


Figure 7. Set of celadon cosmetics boxes and an oil bottle in the collection of Baron Takahashi. (After Itō Yasuburō and Nishimura Shōtarō, *Kōryū-shō* (Koryō celadon) (Tokyo: Itō Yasuburō and Nishimura Shōtarō, 1910), no page number) (colour online)



Figure 8. Ceramics from Ding kilns in the collection of Nishimura Shōtarō (After Itō Yasuburō and Nishimura Shōtarō, *Kōryū-shō* (Koryō celadon) (Tokyo: Itō Yasuburō and Nishimura Shōtarō, 1910), no page number) (colour online)

of the twentieth century, interest in celadon caused a veritable collecting frenzy and hundreds of ceramics changed hands. However, by the 1930s the boom was over. The richest tombs had been looted and the stringent export laws issued by the Japanese in 1933 meant that what had already been unearthed could no longer be sold to overseas buyers. Nevertheless, by then, substantial collections of ceramics had already been formed in Korea, Japan and the West.

It is clear that different groups of people collected Korean celadon for a variety of reasons. For Westerners, celadon wares initially presented a positive image of what was different and unique about Korea and served as markers to position Korea's cultural heritage within a broader East Asian context. Another strong impetus behind the collecting of celadon lay in their antiquarian references. Among Western and Japanese collectors, the Koryŏ kingdom came to be associated with a long-lost heyday of which the only trace remaining was celadon. This idea was particularly influential among Japanese collectors and scholars, whose visions of Korea's past conformed to a colonial reading of Japan's role as the saviour of the peninsula.

The fact that celadon ceramics accorded well with prevailing perceptions of beauty served to enhance their appeal. For Westerners, Korean celadon stonewares were unlike Ming and Qing porcelains that, by the 1910s, had been branded as decadent and ugly. Instead, they bore similarities to the restrained and simple forms typical of Song and Yuan celadon that had begun to attract the attention of collectors. For the Japanese, Korean celadon were more different than akin to Song and Yuan celadon. To them, the beauty of Korean celadon was rooted in the qualities of quietness, spirituality, nothingness and sadness; characteristics that, according to them, formed the essence of Korea.

By the 1910s celadon ceramics had been appropriated through institutional practices and scholarly writings that served to validate them as antiques, treasured for their "Korean", historic and aesthetic qualities. Some celadon had even been canonized as "the best" of Korean art. Since their first discovery celadon ceramics have shifted from being obscure things in the ground to being prized exhibits coveted by an increasingly large and diverse group of individuals and institutions. Their temporal connotations have also changed. During the early twentieth century celadon signified the highlights of a bygone era for Japanese and Western collectors alike, but after the 1950s they became national symbols of Korea's past as well as present achievements. This concept has continued until today and was recently reiterated by Kim Young-na, Director of the National Museum of Korea, who stated that Koryŏ celadon pieces "represent the very essence of art and craftsmanship at its finest".⁹⁶

96 Kim Young-na, foreword to Park Hae-hoon and Jang Sung-wook (eds), *Ch'ŏnha cheil pisaek ch'ŏngja* (The best under heaven, the celadons of Korea) (Seoul: Kungnip chun-g'ang pangmulwan, 2012), 4.