One tends to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a culture through the close examination of its messages, visualized in the medium of art. This essay will identify several ways in which an investigation of the visual arts can help students explore the impact of past events and understand the influence of contemporary issues on the development of resources and methods of artistic production, using case studies of Korean artwork.

Access to this work in Korea, however, has often been limited due to the peninsula’s long history of isolation from the West and its internal turmoil over the past century. The destruction of Korean art and architecture during its colonial period, the subsequent Korean War, and the division of the country has forced its people to rebuild. Many of today’s Korean artists are incorporating traditional materials and techniques with contemporary global ideas, but until the 1970s and the true start of economic recovery in South Korea, however, art was not a priority. The fast-paced development and growth of the past several decades have led to a resurgence in Korean art, with both public and private investments being made in art and archaeological research to establish and reestablish collections. When examining the artistic development of South Korea over the past two decades, how can we best describe the creative culture that continues to develop in this peninsula and the impact that it has not only on its own citizens and visitors, but on the entire world?

**Purposeful Art**

While most people head off to a museum to view works of art, visitors to South Korea can take a different route of exploration. Although Korean museums are quite accessible and affordable, history has helped facilitate many unique opportunities to showcase public art at other venues, from cosmopolitan city centers to subways to the countryside. This public art is not only a reflection of the traditional beliefs and customs of the people but also the materials and messages of artists today. While some of these contemporary works reflect Korea’s rich and deep history of folk craft, many of the pieces incorporate modern design elements that reflect the avant-garde attitude that drives Korean pop culture and helps make the Korean voice one that is now heard around the world.

How did some of this ingenuity come about? By seizing opportunities rather than complaining about mistakes. One of the premier examples of how this has been seen in the country’s capital, where a highway has been repurposed into the now-famous Skygarden through the funding of chaebol’s. Much like the Ch’ŏnggyech’ŏn stream, which opened in 2005, the 2017 opening of Seoul’s Skygarden created a unique urban environment where visitors can experience botanical gardens mixed with modern art installations, enhanced even more by traditional dance and musical performances on Wednesday evenings throughout the summer. By examining both the process and product of this creative effort in the classroom, teachers can help future urban planners take note of the success of these projects as they participate in a simulation to identify areas in their own community that could, with the help of corporate sponsors, be transformed into places of beauty through the power of art.

Since many people may not consider the visual arts a soft power, how else could someone describe the impact of the public art seen as s/he walks down the streets of Seoul or the fishing village of Kyŏngsan? Almost everywhere one looks, murals, mosaics, statues, and paintings enhance the scenery, from the subway to the sidewalks. The detailed brass work of hanok homes and the stone sculptures of Buddhist temples may have been traditional outlets of creative expression for Korean artists, but a thriving economy has stimulated an outburst of visual art on all scenes. Much of the artwork that survived the chaos of the twentieth century was family folk art hidden in private home collections. Today’s art, therefore, takes on a much more vocal tone as it speaks to the crowds on the streets. Distinct in its harmony with nature and simplicity, these modern works also retain the traditional characteristics of spontaneity seen in much of Korea’s art. Creating works that can be seen by anyone passing by reflects the long-standing desire of the artist to be inspired by and accept nature as part of the creative process. A classroom discussion exploring the aesthetics of Asian art and how it is shaped by the concepts of yin-yang, religion, the five elements (earth, wood, water, metal, and fire), and geomancy (the art of auspiciously placing or arranging sites) can not only promote the development of a student’s visual literacy skills but, more importantly, may even help students see themselves in the work as they analyze the inspiration, message, and meaning of these objects.

The rapid development experienced in South Korea over the past two decades combined with its dense population centers (an average of over 500 people per square kilometer, more than ten times the global average, according to the World Population Review) have created both a desire and a demand for colorful expression. Most of today’s urbanites living in skyscrapers commute by foot and public transportation, allowing the streets to become natural galleries showcasing a vast variety of artwork that...
not only beautifies everyday travel but also, maybe more importantly, communicates a message. With a Confucian palette that seems to limit the hues of everything from homes to cars to everyday clothing, the contrasting colors of Korean artwork stand out from a neutral backdrop, just as Korean society is starting to stand out from its Asian neighbors today. For centuries, Korean artists adopted and adapted Buddhist and Confucian motifs, Chinese characters, ceramic techniques, and styles of landscape painting and architecture, but today’s work shows a complex blend of genre scenes, political references, and pop culture rooted in a long history of innovative craftsmanship.

Experiencing Art on Another Level

While touring around the Korean peninsula, visitors can plan to see some of the more traditional centers of art production, such as Icheon Ceramics Village outside of Seoul or the Hahoe Mask Museum in Andong Hahoe Village in the heart of the country. Exploring some of the eighty pottery factories in the center of traditional pottery at Ich’on-si, especially during the annual Ich’on-si Ceramics Festival held every April and May, visitors step back in time to the Chosôn dynasty as they watch some of the national treasures of Korea at work. While there are a number of well-known ceramics villages found throughout Korea, their specialties include the production of ch’oja (celadon), paekcha (white porcelain), and puch’ŏng (grayish blue-powdered celadon) pottery. Modern wares vary based upon the natural materials found at each site. Similarly, there are several places known for their production of traditional masks used for either ritual or theatrical purposes but today produced mostly for decoration. Among the most famous is Andong Hahoe Village, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its museum featuring over 1,000 masks from around the world. Made from wood, papier-mâché, gourds, and other materials to represent gods, demons, spirits, animals, or humans, these masks express a variety of traditions, allowing visitors to compare artworks along with their stories across time and place. Examining the works of either Ich’on-si or Hahoe provide art, language arts, and science teachers an opportunity to collaborate on STEAM projects exploring the intersection of materials and the stories behind the creation of these sculptural masterpieces.

As art becomes the visual story of a culture, the tales told by locations such as the Ich’on-si Art Platform and Ihwa Mural Village take on two very different forms. In Ich’on-si, visitors are invited to explore the modern transformation of Korean architecture from the late colonial and early independence eras of the twentieth century. One of the many goals of the renovations made at Ich’on-si is to attract artists with a desire to preserve history through redevelopment. The artists who transformed the dilapidated streets of Ihwa into a colorful landmark as part of a 2006 cultural project sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism have created more than just beauty, they have created a crowd. The benefits of this type of gentrification, which has spread to other fishing villages up and down the coastlines of the country, have come into question numerous times—what is the cost of beauty? If it is crowds of loud tourists who leave more than just their footprints behind, some villagers believe the cost is too high. In this case, art facilitates the opportunity for educators to capitalize on a teachable moment, opening up a conversation with others through the sharing of ideas on how to live the timeless neo-Confucian virtue of respect in line with modern etiquette.

Walking on the beaches along the East Sea (Sea of Japan), one is reminded of some of the less than positive aspects of modernization. One block away from the beach at Pusan stands Princess Cordelia Pet from Plastic Island, a sculpture that cries out to visitors, reminding them of their duty to respect the environment. Somewhat ironically, activists on the west side of the peninsula tossed hundreds of plastic propaganda bottles into
the sea off of Kanghwado, Ich’ŏn-si, this past May in the hopes that their food and messages would reach North Korea. Plucked out of the sea by fishermen, the messages found in these bottles are quite different from the messages portrayed in the art of North Korea, as art has for centuries been used as a vehicle for propaganda. In connecting these two ideas of using plastic and water to tell a persuasive tale, students in my high school sculpture class were challenged in their Message in a Bottle Cap project to use recycled materials to create an environmental message. Led by the motto “resources are limited, but creativity is unlimited” that hangs above the entrance gate to POSCO, the steel factory that became South Korea’s motto “resources are limited, but creativity is unlimited” that hangs above the entrance gate to POSCO, the steel factory that became South Korea’s temporary symbols of the region as decisions are made regarding the form and innovation. From architecture to wall murals, sky gardens to beachside sculptures, the art of South Korea is diverse and accessible. More importantly, however, these works tell the story of the people. To conclude with just two of many examples, an exploration of ceramics or mask-making can teach us about Korean culture across time and place. Not only have these artistic mediums been an integral part of a story that crosses social classes, but they are ways for artists to show the natural qualities of materials rather than demanding perfection. An asymmetrical vessel or blemish on the face of a mask is a truth told by the creator that life, like art, is not perfect. In a society that is often noted for either its century of challenges or the contemporary demands of its high-stakes educational system and rigorous work culture, such an important message cannot go unnoticed.

**Conclusion**

By examining the artistic development of South Korea over the past two decades, we are able to better understand the global impact of this creative culture. As both emerging and well-established artists continue to explore a variety of media, they are taking into account both the historic and contemporary symbols of the region as decisions are made regarding the form and function of each work. Beyond being an artist, these creators are the storytellers of their time, interpreting what is important to the people they represent.

Historically, art has often symbolized wealth and refinement, but Korean art is decidedly different, as it functions as a sign of both survival and innovation. From architecture to wall murals, sky gardens to beachside sculptures, the art of South Korea is diverse and accessible. More importantly, however, these works tell the story of the people. To conclude with just two of many examples, an exploration of ceramics or mask-making can teach us about Korean culture across time and place. Not only have these artistic mediums been an integral part of a story that crosses social classes, but they are ways for artists to show the natural qualities of materials rather than demanding perfection. An asymmetrical vessel or blemish on the face of a mask is a truth told by the creator that life, like art, is not perfect. In a society that is often noted for either its century of challenges or the contemporary demands of its high-stakes educational system and rigorous work culture, such an important message cannot go unnoticed.

**NOTES**

6. See the Hahoe-Dong Mask Museum’s website at [https://tinyurl.com/y9ejejcu](https://tinyurl.com/y9ejejcu).

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**KOREAN ART TOPIC** | **INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION**
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Seoul Skygarden | Exploration of engineering opportunities through a problem-solution simulation
| Cataloging native plants found along the Skywalk
| By the numbers mathematical comparison of the attendance and impact of visitors experiencing the artwork and creative performances seen during the summer along the Skywalk
Seoul Subway Mural Art | Comparison of capitals: investigating the psychology of color and the effects of a colorful Seoul subway vs. the gray Washington DC Metro
Gyeongbuk Fishing Village, Inch’ŏn Art Platform, and Ihwa Mural Village | Debate on the costs and benefits of gentrification
Ich’ŏn-si Ceramics Village | Comparison of the chemical composition of ceramic materials
| Investigation of the history of the ceramics trade along the Silk Road, which could include exploring the National Museum’s Sinan Undersea Relics
Hahoe Mask Museum | Research on the folktales behind the masks used in dramatic performances
| Mask analysis with identification of the unique materials used in the creation of these pieces
Princess Cordelia Pet from Plastic Island at Busan Beach | Discussion of the environmental impact of the plastics industry
| Creative challenge to design and build an artistic work that shares the POSCO theme: “resources are limited, but creativity is unlimited”