

Message in a Bottle Cap

Stories for All Classes as Told by Korean Art

By Angie Stokes

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

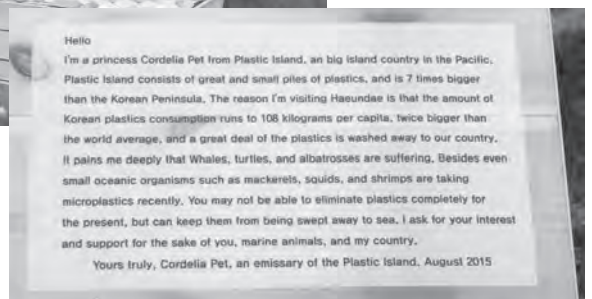
While most people head off to a museum to view works of art, visitors to South Korea can take a different route of exploration. Although Korean museums are quite accessible and affordable, history has helped facilitate many unique opportunities to showcase public art at other venues, from cosmopolitan city centers to subways to the countryside.¹ 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 this can be seen in the country's capital, where a highway has been repurposed into the now-famous Skygarden through the funding of chaeböls and the help of Dutch architects.² Much like the Ch'onggyech'on 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 Kyöngsang? Almost everywhere one looks, murals, mosaics, statues, and paintings enhance the scenery, from

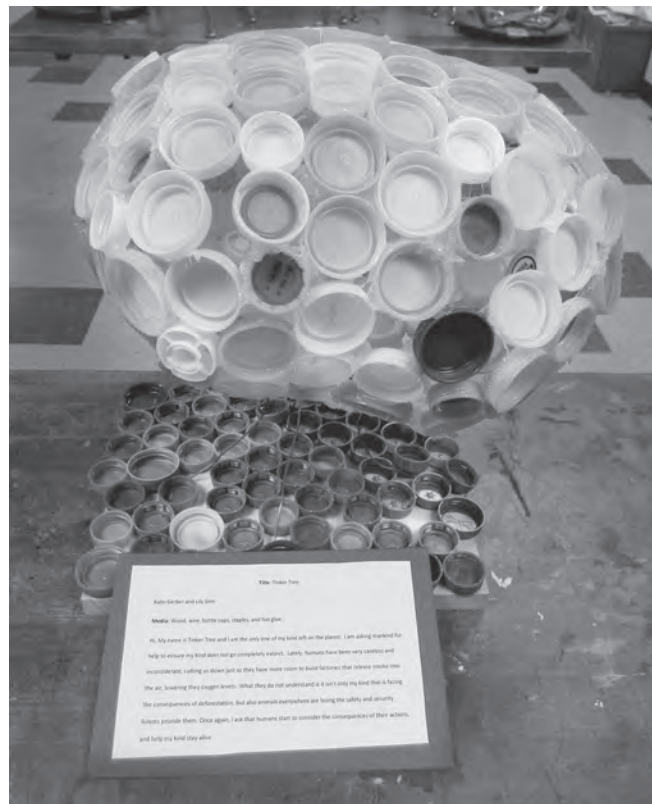


Princess Cordelia Pet from Plastic Island. Artist unknown. Pusan, South Korea. 2015. Photo taken 2017. Source: Photos courtesy of the author.



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.³ 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



Student work. Wayne Trace Junior/Senior High School, 2018.
Source: Photos courtesy of the author.

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'ŏn-si, especially during the annual Ich'ŏn-si Ceramics Festival held every April and May, visitors step back in time to the Chosŏn dynasty as they watch some of the national treasures of Korea at work.⁴ While there are a number of well-known ceramics villages found throughout Korea, their specialties include the production of *ch'ŏja* (celadon), *paekcha* (white porcelain), and *punch'ŏng* (grayish blue-powdered celadon) pottery. Modern wares vary based upon the natural materials found at each site.⁵ 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.⁶ 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'ŏn-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'ŏn-si Art Platform and Ihwa Mural Village take on two very different forms. In Ich'ŏn-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'ŏn-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.⁷ 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

KOREAN ART TOPIC	INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION
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, Inchön Art Platform, and Ihwa Mural Village	Debate on the costs and benefits of gentrification
Ich'ön-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"

Chart by Angie Stokes.

the sea off of Kanghwado, Ich'ön-si, this past May in the hopes that their food and messages would reach North Korea.⁸ 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 inspirational story, students quickly went to work testing materials and defining their messages.⁹ These projects were designed to be a team effort that kicked off our semester-long 3-D course, but they became some of the most powerful works produced in the classroom this year, inspiring a deeper level of collaboration, investigation, and discussion that carried into other projects as well.

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 materi-

als 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

1. Zach Williams, "Understated: Seoul Subway Art," *Mutzine*, November 21, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yakxyaqa>.
2. Rowan Moore, "A Garden Bridge that Works: How Seoul Succeeded Where London Failed," *The Guardian*, May 19, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/kbkw426>.
3. "South Korea Population 2018," *World Population Review*, accessed June 1, 2018, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/south-korea-population/>.
4. "Icheon Ceramics Village," *Imagine Your Korea*, accessed June 1, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y7afhg6k>.
5. Chu-hwan Son, Park Seung-u, and Julie Pickering, *Korean Cultural Heritage, Fine Arts*, vol. 1 (Seoul: Yeong & Yeong Book Company, 1994).
6. See the Hahoe-Dong Mask Museum's website at <https://tinyurl.com/y9ejepcu>.
7. Julie Jackson, "Ihwa Mural Village Continues Its Struggle with Noisy Tourists," *The Korea Herald*, May 22, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/yat7ec6d>.
8. "Activists Defy Agreement to Stop Sending Propaganda to N. Korea," *The Chosunilbo*, May 2, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ydajz9sq>.
9. See the English POSCO homepage at <https://tinyurl.com/yd8mybme>.



ANGIE STOKES has a background in museum education, as well as teaching both history and art. She enjoys exploring ways to incorporate these disciplines into her studio art and art history courses at Wayne Trace Junior/Senior High School, a rural school in northwest Ohio. She continues to work with the University of Pittsburgh NCTA program, where she currently serves on the NCTA Teacher Board of Advisors, as well as with the NCTA program at Indiana University, which sponsored her recent trip to South Korea.