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CULTURAL & HISTORICAL IMAGE ON ART

BY

HAGJU LEE

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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HAGJU LEE

ABSTRACT

Where are you from? We as Individuals come from our native countries and we learn our own languages, cultures, and traditions while we grow up. Therefore, we are endowed with our own traditions and cultures in our souls. I am from Korea, the land of morning calm. I have special pride in my culture. Its history is over 5,000 years old. My country has a great number of cultural assets, even though some of them were destroyed during wars. The cultural value of Korea has received much recognition from countries all over the world. Nevertheless, some people don't understand the true cultural value of Korea, and that inspired me to inform the world of Korean culture and traditions.

"Just as a tree growing in a certain soil puts down deep roots and drinks its juices, so a person from the moment of his birth until he departs from this life is deeply and in every respect rooted in the system of his culture and nourished by the spirit of his own

people, their customs and morals, their sensory, emotional, intellectual and speech system of their culture. A person is also nourished by the specific type of natural landscape in which he lives and the memory of the people, its symbols and specific genetics. And if by force of circumstances a person is uprooted from the soil of his own culture and all its unique integrity, this is always a painful experience which may result in agonizing forms of nostalgia. Such experience has been vividly and fully reflected in literature and music, particularly by those artists who felt such pangs themselves. The innate relationship with the native culture can be traced even to certain genetic mechanisms, which carry a powerful life-long program, which is not only racial, national, but also family and even individual." [1]

Artists reveal their immanent consciousness through the imaging process whether they intend it or not. Their works are based upon the lives they have lived. What artists hear, observe, and feel from their birth is piled out of awareness and is reproduced by their hands. Accordingly, artists work based on the culture they have experienced and create new works in it. In the process, they also do a critical role to spread their culture to the world.

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[1] Spirkin, Alexander., Tanslated by Cymbala, Robert, "*Dialectical Materialism,*" Progress Publishers, (1983): Chap.5. Man and Culture.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES V

1. THE HISTORY OF KOREA 6

2. THE COLOR OF KOREA 9

3. THE COMPOSITION OF KOREAN COLOR 11

4. THE TIME – AN EFFORT TO CREATE SHAPES FROM HISTORICAL IMAGES 16

5. CIRCLE 21

6. CONCLUSION 26

BIBLIOGRAPHY 27

1. The History of Korea

Since its foundation more than 5000 years ago, Korea has retained its legitimacy as unitary state, and has protected itself from the neighboring countries' invasions. This was mainly caused by the sacrifices made by many Koreans as a result of their patriotism and nationality. Korea's peninsula is located between North and East Asia. Its character gave favor to retain cultural homogeneity and political unification.

Outside of Korea, there lies China. Due to this location, Korea had been under the influence of China for most of its history.

> "Our country is a small kingdom and a vassal State of China, to which the Emperor has shown his graciousness from time immemorial. Our Government was enabled to survive the political troubles of 1882 and 1883 through the assistance received from the Throne, which secured for our country peace and tranquility. Since His Majesty has been good enough to confer these favours upon us, we should make known to him whatever we desire; and whatever we wish we trust that he may allow, as to an infant

confiding in the tender mercies of its parents." [2]

Korea has also acted as a nation balancing powers among the counties around it. This geographical fact has caused the attacks from neighboring countries such as Su[3] and Dang[4]. In the Goryeo[5] dynasty, Korea successfully defended itself from the Kitan[6]'s attack and it has contributed to the balance of powers in Northeastern Asia.

The location of Korea would also provide a condition for battle between land and maritime nations. An instance of this was the Japanese invasion of Korea under the pretext of not having providing road to the Myung[7] dynasty in 1592. After the modernization of Korea, its had become an arena of struggle between land and maritime nations. Namely, England and Russia, China and Japan, and Japan and Russia competed over the Korean peninsula, causing the outbreak of the Geomundo incident[8], a China-Japan and Russia-Japan war. Due to its proximity, Korea was colonized by Japan which influenced its continental politics. However, after 36 years of colonization by Japan, Korea became an independent country. By this time, the nation had been

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[2] Curzon, George Nathaniel Curzon, "*Problems of the Far East,*" Longmans, Green, and co., (1896): 200.
[3] Su, 581-618 A.D. China.
[4] Dang, 618-907 A.D. China.
[5] Goryeo, 918-1393 A.D. Korea.
[6] Kitan, Mid 5th Century-Early 12th Century, Mongolia.
[7] Myong, 1368-1644 A.D. China.
[8] Geomundo incident, 1885.4-1887.2, English occupation of Geomundo-island to prevent the expansion of Russian power to the south.

deprived of its fundamental opportunities as a result of the Japanese economic exploitation. However, even before Korea pounded its heart with joy of liberation and, started to put its effort toward economic growth, it faced another sore ordeal: the June 25th -incident of Korea. Because of the war, it underwent horrible situations but it endured. Therefore, the history of Korea is often called "History of hardship." However, the hardship never seems to end and still Korea is surrounded by 3 large countries: Russia, China and Japan.

My work describes the courageous sprit and sentiment of Korea based on its historical background. The sentiment of Korea is intrepidity and tolerance. It was formed when Korea went through the process of frequent invasions and domestic chaos.

2. The Color of Korea

Color is based on visual experiences and gives sensuous impressions. The culture of a people in color tones shows the ideology, temperaments, and even the natural environment of the people; it has a complicated and delicate relationship with them. Korean people think of the acquainted and ideated image of a color when they first use a color, rather than genuinely recognize it with feelings and senses they receive from the color. What Koreans feel about a color has evolved into a unique feature which exhibits their cultural character. In other words, the associated value of a particular color has developed to provide a symbolized meaning for it. Korean paintings exude visual expression not only in color but also in shape. It is closely related to our distinctive cultural character.

Traditional Korean color has formed unique trends influenced by the cultural factors of each period. These trends, although vague, continue now. Korea is commonly introduced as a country which has four clearly distinguished seasons. As a matter of fact, not many countries on the earth have four distinctive seasons as Korea does. Because of its climate, Koreans witness rich colors from various plants and natural phenomena in each season. The seasons enormously affect to the colors which Koreans use in art.

Particularly, color is accompanied by associations. And those associations, carrying commonness in certain areas, relate to the traditions and create certain customs. These associations are fixed as a unique aspect of the region and the people.

> "Colors often have symbolic meanings or associations. ... color symbolism is culture dependent. That is, a symbolic color association in one culture may be entirely different in another culture." [9]

Purple is considered noble in many countries but means sorrow in Brazil and India. In Brazil, the arrangement of purple and yellow is considered to be unlucky. White is a holy color in India but is used in the occasion of mourning in China or in Korea. Green is the symbol of peace and youthfulness in most countries while green a marquee stands for funeral homes in the east coast of the United States.

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[9] Bennett, James Gordon, "*Design Fundamentals for New Media,*" Thomson Delmar Learning, (2004): 170-171.

3. The Composition of Korean Color

The Korean sentiments are well dissolved in the Korean artist's use of line and color. Korean line simultaneously has both rigidness and softness and is filled with lamentation. The best example of the Korean line is shown in architecture. Architecture is a formative art which has both practical and emotional functions. Therefore, the architecture itself should have a basic component such as space formation, in accordance with nature and aesthetic sense. It is regarded as a complicated art. Of the architecture elements, 'Dan-chung' (Definition: colors or a picture of many colors or design) is most important. It is a formative condition of art and expression of feelings. Koreans express immortality by using various symbols representing life after death. Accordingly, we could read past lives, religion, customs and notions by just looking at Dan-chung's symbol.

From ancient times, Korea has retained culture of colors based on the principle of Yin and Yang, and on the five elements of Chinese cosmogony. Traditional Korean colors have been used to pursue the beauty in everyday life. They have also been used to symbolically express the idea of Yin-Yang-Oh-Haeng. Basic colors are red, yellow, blue, white, and black and they are called 'oh-baang-saek', which in English means 'five-direction-color.' 'Oh-baang', which corresponds to five

directions, stands for the east, the west, the south, the north, and the center. The meaning of each direction applies to the corresponding color. Its logic is that everything in the universe exists based on 'Yin-Yang' and 'Oh-haeng'. The system maintains order when these elements are unified in a well-balanced way. 'Oh-haeng' stands for tree, fire, earth, iron, and water. It is a theory which states that there are 'oh-woon' (five fates) in the sky, 'oh-jae' (five fortunes) in the earth, and 'oh-seong' (five characters) in a person. The color system of the 'yin-yang-oh-haeng' theory is composed of 'oh-baang'. This 'oh-baang' has five 'jeong-saek' for each of the five directions and five 'gaan-saek' which lie between 'jeong-saek.'

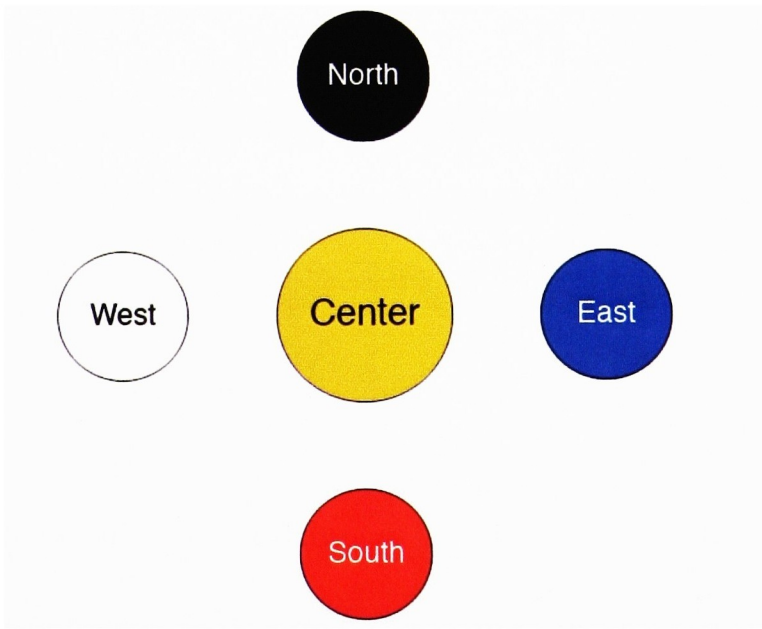

Figure 1 Oh-baang-saek

Yellow stands for the earth among Oh-haeng and is the center of Oh-bang-saek, and is considered to be the most precious color; only the king could wear yellow-colored clothes. Green stands for the east among Oh-haeng and is the color of the spring when everything is born. It means creation, life, and birth, and has been used to drive away treacherous ghost and to invoke blessing. White stands for the west among Oh-haeng and means innocence, truth, life, and purity. It is one of the reasons why Korean people like to wear white clothes. Red symbolizes the fire and the south among Oh-haeng. It means formation, creation, passion, affection, and positiveness, as in the Sun, fire, and blood. Black symbolizes the water among Oh-haeng and takes charge of the wisdom of humans.

A typical model of Korean art using Oh-bang-saek is Dan-chung. Dan-chung usually refers to the colorful painting and the patterns on buildings such as temples or palaces. This includes numerous styles of paintings such as Buddhist painting, frescoes, altar portraits of Buddha, and various portraits.

Dan-chung started to develop as Buddhism was introduced to Korea and has been demonstrated by artistic creativity for the country's 2,000-year history. It was also popular in China and Japan, which are in the same Buddhist cultural zone. However, Korea is the only country in

which the tradition of Dan-chung has succeeded to the present time. Various colors and patterns of Korean Dan-chung are harmoniously melted in architectures as humans and nature breathe and live together.

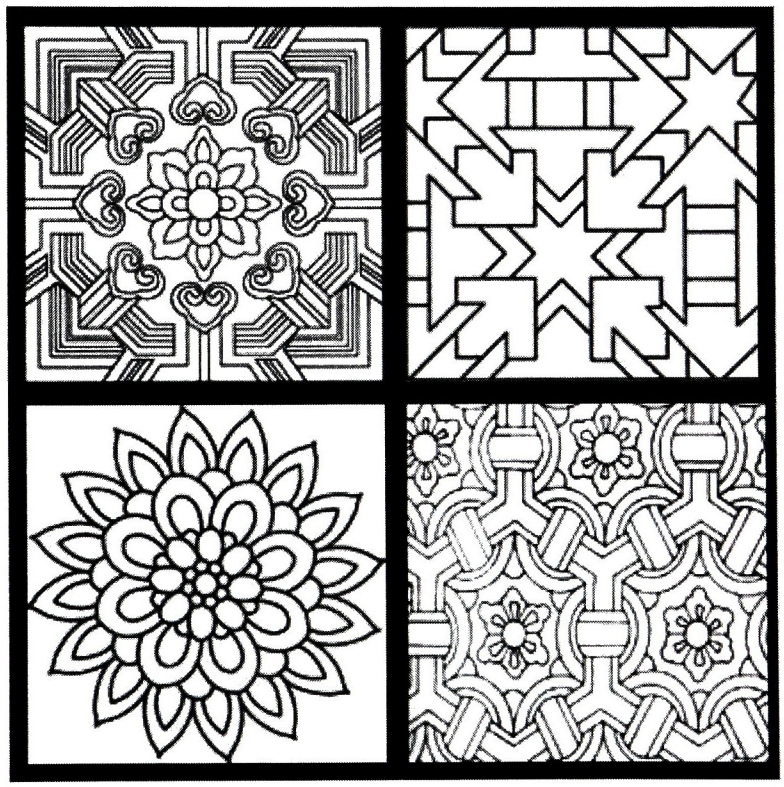

Figure 2 Pattern of Dan-chung

The most important factor of Dan-chung is harmony with its surroundings. The significance of Dan-chung is the pursuit of harmony with all things, and friendliness towards nature rather than the basic purpose to conserve architecture from the weather. Therefore, it could be said that Dan-chung is the essence of the color and art created by ancestors of Korea. In this manner, color is one of the essential elements of artistic value. Humans express and deliver their emotion through colors. It is also a basic element in the procedure of the development of culture which has an influence on human lives and a scale for the culture of a people or an era.

4. The Time - An effort to create shapes from historical images

We need to take pride in our work and not to forget the history we have been through to confer time to the present. Therefore, these works express strong will and power of Koreans, and endow the space of the present with the past times.

External shape of the work concurrently keeps sharpness and solidity by the intersection of smooth curved lines. Curved lines well display the generosity and mildness of Koreans and the fierce tension from the intersecting curves express their toughness.

These shapes are based on the shape of arms such as spears, swords, or bows. This implies the strength of the ancestors who have not surrendered their will through numerous wars throughout the history of Korea. And it also shows the grief in Korean history which still continues today.

Time 1 has stable trapezoidal composition and is symmetrical to express static stability and the feeling of nobleness and solemnity. The color used for this work is green which governs nature and the color of life. It is a revelation of the mind for those who think that the nature and humans are inseparable and of the reproducing power which has not given in despite of their painful history.

Figure 3 Time1, 14½″ x 5″ x 17½″, Lead Crystal, 2002

Time 2 and Time 3 are surrounded by trapezoidal compositions so they display affinity and unity. Time 2 uses gray to emphasize seriousness and maturity as well as to connote the depression of Korea's history. Time 3 uses purple color which is a mixture of red and blue. Purple has a mixed and mysterious image as a mixture of red and blue, which have opposite images. It is also a color which is in gear with the Korean political situation. North Korea has an image of red while South

Korea has that of blue. They still exist as two separate countries though they are comprised of single race. Perhaps in the future, the north and south will become a unified country with an image of one new color. Besides, purple is a splendid and elegant color which shows their legitimacy found in their livelong history.

Figure 4 Time2, 18½″ x 8″ x 35″, Lead Crystal, 2002

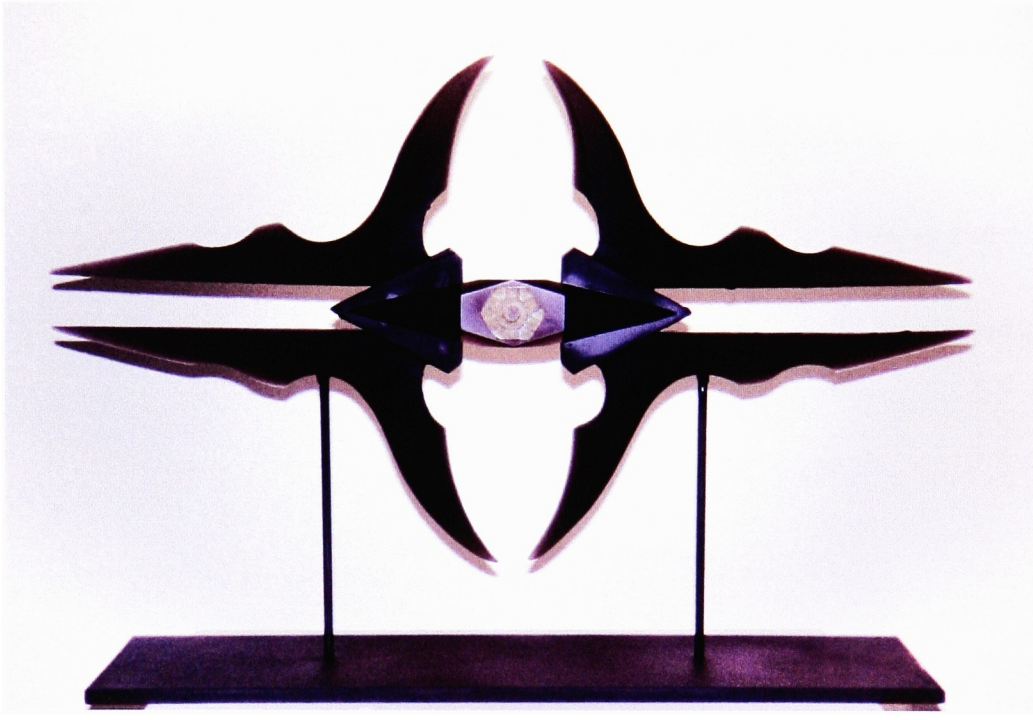

Figure 5 Time3, 33″ x 5″ x 22″, Lead Crystal, 2002

The old ceramics of Korea symbolize the calm mind of eastern people. They have fine lines along with gentle color and internal dignity. Korean ceramics have clear and unique qualities resulting from excellent materials, and possess healthy and lively shape. Korean ceramists have lived deep in the mountains and adapted to nature. They have created their own great pottery by finding beauty in simple colors and general shapes rather than expressing complex techniques and various colors. Korean culture is based on pottery and the spirit of Koreans dwells in clay, which is more than just a material.

The prototypes of this work are mostly made with clay to express the mind of Koreans. Smoothing the surface by hand-grinding it and varnishing it with oil were the finishing touches. The effect from this procedure has less transparency than the polished surface, but it shows a smoother change in color by the difference in thickness of the glass. It also maximizes the existence of the piece in space by giving the effect of depth and thickness.

5. Circle

This work uses the circle as its basic form and uses traditional Korean pattern of colors. The circle, among all shapes, has been regarded to have the meaning of holiness. It has the most beautiful form with perfect balance and harmony. The first characteristic of the circle is the beginning of life, seed, basic things, and creating the space. The second characteristic is that it rotates endlessly. It represents things that change and move. It also indicates the rhythm of the nature which can be represented by the four seasons, repeating periods, orbits of stars, regularity, vibration, and rhythm. The third characteristic of the circle is that it shows the most practical and efficient geometrical space among those created in nature or by humans.

The circle is a form which gives humans the feelings of familiarity, comfort, and stability. In Korea, it is believed that people are closely bound together and their lives and deaths are continuously repeated. Circle 1 is a work expressing Dan-chung based on the form of circle. Dan-chung is painted with three degrees of brightness in color: light color, intermediate color, and dark color. First, light colors are painted and are then followed by intermediate colors. And finally, dark colors are added to give a feeling of solidity. In addition to the colors, the patterns also play an important role in Dan-chung. Those patterns, like language and letters, have unique form which has been influenced by the environment of the people. These patterns are traditional, even though they

were somewhat influenced by other cultures. Traditional patterns clearly display the cultural entity of the people. It is a decorative art intentionally representing the values of the people. This work is a good example of the use of Korean patterns and Korean colors.

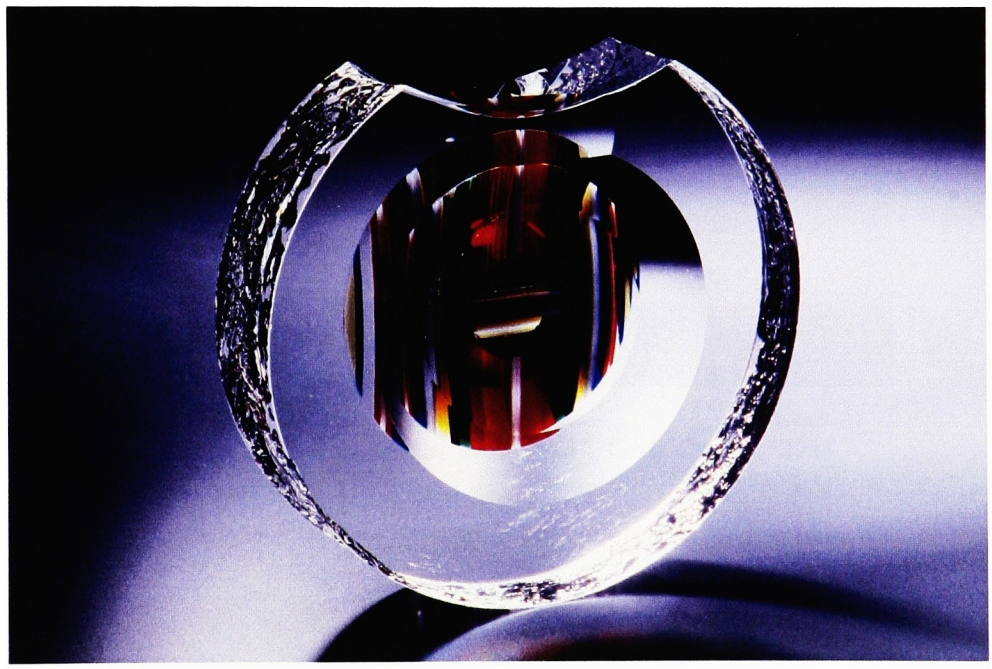

Figure 6 Dan-chung in Circle, Ø10″ X 3″, Lead Crystal and Plate Glass, 2004

Dan-chung in Circle has an array of straight lines using the color pattern of Dan-chung in red, yellow, blue, and green. It is then surrounded by a circle. Inside the circle, black and white color patterns locate vertically in the form of circle. It shows the repeating and continuous image of Dan-

chung's pattern by repeatedly placing circles in another circles. This gives the effect of various colors focused to one spot. Its color pattern consists of straight lines, and gives cold, silent, static impression and is a reminder of tranquility.

Figure 7 Red in Circle, Ø10″ X 3″, Lead Crystal, 2004

Figure 8 Red in Circle, Ø10″ X 3″, Lead Crystal, 2004

Red in Circle only uses red to emphasize the idea that red color bears. Red is considered to be a very important color, as it is used in the center of the Korean national flag. However, there have been times when it has been recognized as an antagonistic color because it is the color of communism. Likewise, the perception of red is different for each person. But now, it became a color representing Korea so that anyone can think of passionate red when he thinks of Korea. This piece has a smaller colored area than the previous works, but the power of the blank space shows the broad-mindedness of Koreans.

This piece was made through a procedure with several steps. First, I made a concave lens by grinding a circular mass of glass and reproduced the shape of the lens by filling it up with rubber. Next, a mold was made using the rubber lens. Then, the fused lump of glass was slumped into the mold and cast with lead crystal. The final step was gluing the two parts of glass using hxtal. During the procedure, it is very important to maintain the shiny surface of the glass. Otherwise, it is difficult to deliver the feeling of color because it seems like there is a thin film between the two parts of glass after they are glued together. By making several lenses on the piece after it is glued, the colors are confined by the reflection from the surface and display the character of the glass. The edge of the piece is roughly grinded and applied with glass chipping glue to express a variety of

textures. These textures are rough and irregular so a sense of change in time can be evoked from the piece.

6. Conclusion

Someone once asked me the reason why I was interested in Korean culture, although I was studying in the western society. I was born and raised in Korea, yet I neglected Korean culture. I did not realize the preciousness and beauty of the things which were always with me, as we do not know the importance of the air. If I continue to work without understanding Korean culture, I will make the mistake of looking away from the truth inside myself. The imaging process of artists is the expression of their immanent consciousness whether it is intentional or not. It is created from the lives they have lived and everything they have seen and heard from birth. These experiences are unconsciously reproduced through the hands of artists. The works created in this manner play important roles in spreading different cultures in which different artists have lived. This is something that artists must do. I feel a great deal of responsibility, as a Korean glass artist, to advertise Korean culture and history through this thesis. In common parlance, there have been insufficient attempts to make people recognize Korean culture because it was hidden by the cultures of Chinese or Japanese.

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