

THE EASIEST WAY TO CREATE NEWNESS



Fig.1
Hajok Lounge
2015
Aluminum and felt

As an artist, the question that I am asked most often about my work is “Why do you work with tradition as your subject?” Perhaps it strikes people as unusual. It seems they are thinking, “Why tradition, when there are so many other things to work with?”

Since I was a university student, I have had many opportunities to see handcraft and design exhibitions, but there was one that not only inspired me but actually shocked me. Titled *Copy*, it was a furniture exhibition on the theme of plagiarism that I saw when I was studying in Denmark. Danish chairs that are famous around the world and have an iconic place in the history of design were exhibited with dozens of copies. Among them, looking strangely out of place, was a Ming Dynasty chair. Right beside it was a piece called China Chair by the great designer Hans J. Wegner. As far as exhibition arrangement goes, it was placed where a copy might be, but the docent’s explanation cleared up this mistaken idea: “China Chair was inspired by the Ming Dynasty and many copies of it have been produced.” Unlike the copies of other chairs in the exhibition, Hans J. Wegner’s China Chair represented a “reflection of the times.” The rearrangement of proportions to suit contemporary life and infusion of modern sensibilities in the chair seemed, to exaggerate a little, like the transformation of Chinese tradition into something the designer’s own. To this day, I believe that the moment I saw the chair taught me much more than any formal education.

Apart from the realm of the gods, the only type of creation that humans are capable of is to take something that already exists and make it look new. Human beings do not have the ability to create something from nothing. Hence, rummaging through the past for subject matter is a natural part of creative activity. When even people like Hans J. Wegner look back to another country’s tradition, shouldn’t we start by taking Korean tradition as a subject?

Following that shocking exhibition experience, my work as an overseas student in Denmark was wholly focused on exploring the relationship between Korean tradition and the culture of other countries. [Figs.1, 4, and 5](#) I started to design furniture that would give Westerners the experience of getting up from their chairs and coming down to sit on the floor. A wonderful thing isn’t it, to give people a taste of Korea through a



Fig.2
Dining Table
Joseon Dynasty
Wood
H. 28.7 cm, D. 43.0 cm
National Museum of Korea

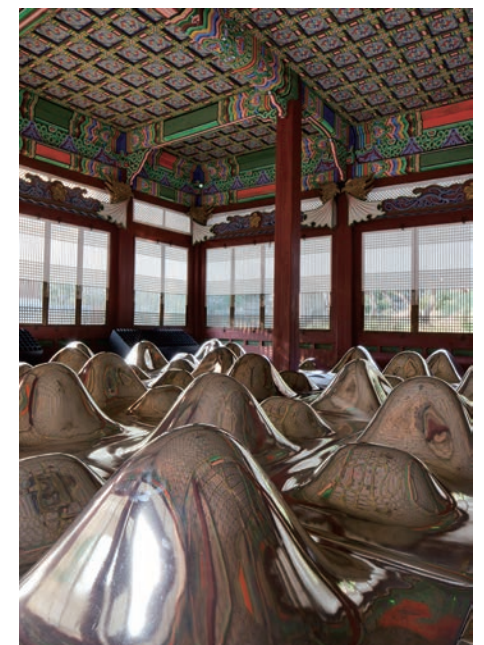


Fig.3
Deoksugung Project
2012
Chrome-plated ABS
Photo © Park Myungrae

single piece of furniture? [Fig.6](#)

Personally, the Korean traditional furniture item that I like best is the small portable dining table called *soban*. [Figs.2 and 9](#) Clearly different from the tables of other cultures, it is a table made for one (that is, one table per person) that varies in form according to region—for example, the Naju *soban* table, Tongyeong *soban* table, and Haeju *soban* table—and has a beauty that surpasses simple beauty of form.

So, when I finished my studies overseas the first person I sought out in Korea was the master craftsman Kim Chunsik, title holder of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage of *soban* making. As his son, Kim Yeongmin, who is training to succeed his father’s title, and I are both the same age so if we must make distinctions, the master is of my father’s generation. Unlike other tables of its kind, the Naju *soban* table is devoid of decoration and is exceptionally beautiful structurally. To ensure that the legs do not appear to be leaning inwards, they are carved to face outwards. Moreover, to enhance the strength of the table they are not made of several pieces joined together, as they appear, but are carved from a single piece of wood, a wonderful detail from today’s point of view.

When I cautiously explained my idea to the master craftsman, who had spent his life making traditional tables, the unexpected reply was, “Let’s give it a try. Tradition has to be put through new experiments according to the times.” So, replacing lacquered table top made of ginkgo wood with a metal one with laser-cut openwork decoration, we made what could appear to be an abnormally long *soban*. One by one, we completed such pieces that were the “future of the past.” [Fig.7](#)

Deoksugung first served as the royal palace of Joseon when King Seonjo, who had left the capital during Imjin War, returned in 1593 and adopted the palace as his residence. In later years, Queen Inmok was confined at the palace and King Injo was coronated there. However, the palace was not occupied for centuries until Emperor Gojong proclaimed the Korean Empire in 1897 and made Deoksugung the imperial palace. It was here that Emperor Gojong was forced by the Japanese to abdicate and where he lived until his death.

In 2012 “Deoksugung Project” was held with a series of contemporary art works that made use of the buildings and spaces of the palace, building on its rich heritage. I was

Fig.4
Three-tiered Bookcase
Joseon Dynasty
Wood
62.0 × 37.2 × 133.0 cm
National Museum of Korea



Fig.5
Gamjabi Cabinet
2016
Powdercoated steel and polycarbonate
35.0 × 90.0 × 150.0 cm



Fig.6
Jari
2000
Rattan
200.0 × 100.0 × 40.0 cm

Fig.7
Ban

2005
Ginkgo wood and aluminum
32.0 x 43.0 x 24.0 cm



commissioned to work with Deokheungjeon, the palace hall where Emperor Gojong received Japanese high officials and foreign envoys. Unlike other halls at the palace, such as Junghwajeon and Hamnyeongjeon, it was a richly decorated space with brilliant traditional painted patterns called *dancheong*. But considering Korea's circumstances at the time, it was a fancy showpiece for a powerless leader, nothing more and nothing less. In this building I placed on the floor lumpy forms covered in chrome. These chrome-plated seats showed distorted reflections of the paintwork on the ceiling, deconstructing and presenting an inner view of the patterns. Sitting on the seats, one's gaze naturally turns to the ceiling to appreciate the handicraft displayed there. Back in the old days, what would Emperor Gojong have been thinking as he looked up at the ceiling? Fig.3

The House of Woonkyung is a traditional tiled-roof house at the foot of Inwangsan Mountain where the statesman Lee Jaehyeong lived from 1953 until his death. *Borrowed Landscape* is an exhibition that is the combined work of the well-preserved old house and the will of Lee Mihye, granddaughter of Lee Jaehyeong, to go beyond preservation and explores changes according to the times. As the title suggests, it is about borrowing and enjoying for a while rather than taking possession. Depending on the season and one's state of mind, varied landscapes, living and vital, come inside the house. How beautiful is the thought of just borrowing, not owning them? Fig.8

In the process of exploring the past lived by Koreans, I was sorry that I failed to recognize its true value earlier and also felt a sense of guilt, as if I had picked and eaten a ripe fruit without permission. Tradition, a source for creation so readily available that one feels guilty about tapping into it, is right in front of our eyes. The problem is that it is so close we often fail to see it. ≡

Ha Jihoon

An artist who overlays traditional motifs with contemporary sensibilities, Ha Jihoon presents works that break the boundaries between art and industrial design. Graduating from the Department of Woodworking and Furniture Design at Hongik University and the Department of Furniture Design at the Royal Danish Academy of Arts, Ha was named a "Next Generation Design Leader" by the Ministry of Commerce Industry and Energy in 2009 and "Young Artist of the Year" by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism the same year. His works can be found in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum in England, Frankfurt Museum of Applied Arts in Germany, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea. As an active designer, Ha has worked on many experimental projects and held solo exhibitions and now teaches in the Department of Living Design at Kaywon University of Art and Design.

Fig.8
Borrowed Landscape

2019
Photo © Park Yuseon



Fig.9
Dining Table

Joseon Dynasty, 19th century
Wood
46.0 x 37.0 x 30.0 cm
Manufactured in Naju,
Jeollanam-do
National Museum of Korea

