

# EARTH FIRE SOUL

THE MASTERPIECES  
OF KOREAN  
CERAMICS



260 x 220 mm; 240 pages; 300 pieces; all colour.

The ceramic art of Korea stretches back to prehistory when simple brown wares were made and decorated with geometrical incisions. Potters were influenced by ideas and techniques from China and go on to produce their own highly sought-after works, including grey stoneware, celadons or greenware, buncheong ware and white porcelain. Korean celadon and white porcelain even superseded those of China.

Korean ceramics are innovative in design and range from impossibly intricate incense burners to the sublime simplicity and elegance of the maebyeong vase. Korean pottery decoration typically employs plants, flowers, and wildlife, and reflects the country's religious heritage with Buddhist motifs and minimalist Confucian designs taking precedence.

The National Museum of Korea collection is world-famous and of great importance in the world of ceramic art. This book catalogues the best and most representative items in the collection.

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## THE MASTERPIECES OF KOREAN CERAMICS

by The National Museum of Korea

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Bowl, green ceramic, 19th century, Korea.



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Bowl, green ceramic, 19th century, Korea.



**110**  
Bowl, green ceramic, 19th century, Korea.



Other versions of the dragon and phoenix motifs can be seen on a round dish and a square dish, respectively. On both dishes, the cobalt blue pigment is very dark, and the designs are exquisitely rendered. The superb craftsmanship and thick application of glaze demonstrate that these are vessels of the highest quality.



**111**  
Dish, blue and white porcelain with dragon and phoenix motifs, 19th century, Korea.

All of these pieces of tableware are decorated with an alternating arrangement of a chrysanthemum motif and the Chinese characters for longevity (li) and fortune (li). Rendered with a fine brush in deep blue pigment, the criss-cross chrysanthemum flowers and stems harmonize well with the Chinese characters for an elegant look. Larger vessels feature two chrysanthemums, while smaller vessels have only one. Some pieces also have a stylized design based on the eight treasures arranged below the chrysanthemums or the characters.

**112**  
Bowl with cover, cup, dish, hexagonal bottle, octagonal bottle, cup, and saucer, blue and white porcelain with chrysanthemum and li characters, 19th century, Korea.



**113**  
Bowl with cover, cup, dish, hexagonal bottle, octagonal bottle, cup, and saucer, blue and white porcelain with chrysanthemum and li characters, 19th century, Korea.

Korean ceramic art through the ages has often astonished the viewer with its aesthetic sensitivity, its beauty of shape and form and the immense skill that has gone into its creation.

This collection is the finest in the world, presented in a book of the highest quality, every piece carefully described and catalogued.

This bottle shows the ample volume and curvilinear beauty that characterises early Joseon white porcelain. The flared mouth with a rounded rim narrows down into a short neck, before flowing out to form the voluptuous lower body. The low centre of gravity gives the bottle a firm sense of stability, enhanced by the relatively high and wide foot. The refined carving of the foot is indicative of high-quality white porcelain of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. After the glaze was wiped off the foot ring, it was placed on fine sand and fired. The purity of the plain white surface and the restrained yet majestic form demonstrate the aesthetics of the Joseon royal court and the literati.



**Bottle**

White porcelain; Joseon Dynasty,  
15th–16th century  
H. 34.0cm  
ssu 12371

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Throughout the entire world, ceramics are made using earth and fire, but the style and characteristics of ceramics in various regions are quite different. As you might anticipate, Korean ceramics embody the inimitable characteristics of Korea—the mind and spirit of the country—and thus occupy their own exclusive domain.

To mark the 130th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Paris and Seoul in 2016, the Grand Palais, Paris, and the Réunion des musées nationaux organised an exhibition of 300 of the finest masterpieces of Korean ceramics from the collection of the National Museum of Korea in Seoul. This book was born of that cooperation and represents a unique journey through a historical tradition dating from the first century AD. Many of the masterpieces reproduced and described in this book have been officially designated as 'Treasures' and 'National Treasures'. The superb reproduction and erudite texts allow readers to explore the full history of Korean ceramics while immersing themselves in the inherent spirit that it contains.

EARTH FIRE SOUL provides an inclusive overview of Korean ceramics, ranging from the ancient era of the Three Kingdoms Period, through the Goryeo Dynasty and the Joseon Dynasty, and even up to the contemporary era. For example, notable early works include elaborate vessels shaped like people and animals, which were often entombed with the deceased in order to guide the soul into the afterlife, thus reflecting funerary beliefs of the time. Meanwhile, the thriving aristocratic culture of the Goryeo period is evoked by celadon vessels with sumptuous forms and lavish coats of brilliant jade-coloured glaze, demonstrating the elevated tastes of the upper class. The optimism and energy of the early Joseon era can be felt in the free and creative designs of *buncheong* wares, while the austere beauty of pristine white porcelain conveys the Neo-Confucian principles promoted by Joseon society.

**Anyone with a love for and appreciation of the ceramic arts will want to add this volume to their library.**

Sep. 2018

### Bottle

Celadon with willow design in iron-brown underglaze  
Goryeo Dynasty, 13th century  
H. 31.4cm (bon 12419)  
National Treasure No. 113

This cylindrical bottle features a willow design, a motif that is more commonly found as one element of a waterside landscape scene. On two sides of the bottle, a single willow tree is depicted in iron-brown underglaze, with no supplementary patterns or borders. The simple yet striking expression of the willow trees, with drooping leaves and branches of varying thickness, exudes a splendid painterly quality, further highlighted by the refined composition. Overall, the glaze has a light-brown colour, the result of oxidation firing, but the lower part of the body shows the jade colour of celadon, which is characteristic of reduction firing. With this spectrum of colour, this bottle embodies the intricate and mysterious workings of fire.



**Ceramics are accompanied by erudite descriptions and full specifications..**

This incense burner has a straightwalled bowl resting on three legs and a lid decorated with a seated *qilin*, an imaginary creature. The *qilin* was a prominent animal in Taoist lore, capable of guiding people through the underworld and serving as an intermediary between the heavens and earth. This *qilin* has a curled mane, eyes rendered with dots of iron-brown pigment, and horns on its head, which is turned back. Capturing the essential characteristics and archetypal form of the *qilin*, the incense burner resonates with dignity and vitality. The smoke of the burning incense would waft out through the hole in the mouth of the *qilin*. According to

*Illustrated Record of the Chinese Embassy to the Goryeo Court During the Xuanhe Era (宣和奉使高麗圖經)*, metal incense burners with lids shaped like animals were used to burn incense during official events of the royal court.



**Qilin-shaped  
Incense Burner**  
Celadon; Goryeo  
Dynasty, 12th century;  
H. 17.6cm (duk 3063)