

# Photographer's journey highlights beauty of Korean porcelains

December 18, 2018 | Shim Woo-hyun

## Photographer's journey highlights beauty of Korean porcelain

By Shim Woo-hyun

**P**hotographer Koo Bohn-chang is holding a solo exhibition featuring his photographs of traditional Korean porcelain at the newly opened Kukje Gallery's Busan branch located in factory-turned-cultural center F1936.

The photographer's journey tracing the nation's traditional porcelain spans some three decades. "One day, I came across this picture of a Korean moon jar and a foreigner sitting right next to it. I wondered how that beautiful Korean moon jar had traveled such a long distance," Koo said during a press conference at Kukje Gallery's exhibition space in Busan.

Koo later found out that it was a portrait of British potter Lucie Rie, dressed all in white, sitting next to the large Korean moon jar.

British potter Bernard Leach, who had been staying in Japan to work with Yanagi Muneyoshi, a pioneer of the folk craft movement in Japan, bought the moon jar at an antique shop in Seoul in 1935.

Leach brought the jar back to his atelier in central London. He later sent the piece to Rie's workshop in the outskirts of London, as the Germans bombed the city during World War II. Upon Rie's death, the moon jar was bequeathed to Janet Leach, and the British Museum acquired it from her estate in 1999.

In 2006, Koo visited the museum to take photographs of Korean ceramics, including the moon jar that had been owned by the two acclaimed British potters.

Koo says that taking photographs of Korean porcelain in distant lands was partly an attempt to reunite traditional craftworks scattered abroad.

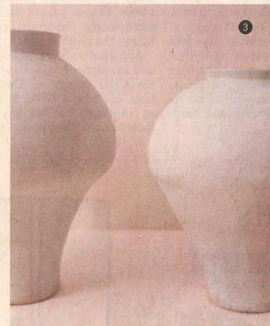
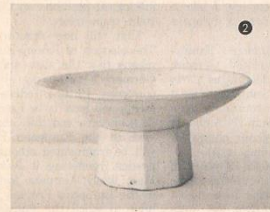
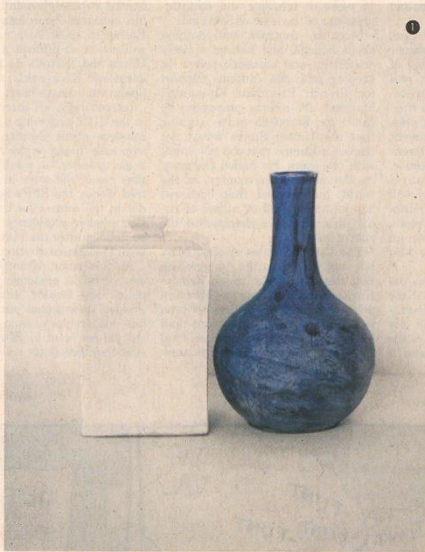
Since 1989, the year he encountered the portrait of Rie with the Korean moon jar, Koo has traveled to institutions around the world, taking photographs of dispersed traditional crafts. The institutions include the Guimet Museum in Paris, Museum of Oriental Ceramics in Osaka, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, British Museum in London and Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Koo's "Vessels" series is a result of the long journey.

The latest exhibition at Kukje Gallery's Busan branch comprises some 30 works, including white porcelain series "Vessels," as well as his recent series of blue-and-white porcelain.

"I started my 'Blue-and-White Porcelain Jar' series to show that they are stylistically different from those produced in China and Japan. The blue-and white-porcelain of Joseon is less exquisite in its expression, yet more austere and humorous," Koo said.

When taking photographs of Korean porcelain, Koo tries to frame the works in ways that reveal their characteristics naturally.

The porcelains stand against backdrops with soft and warm colors that do not interfere with the subject matter. They are



① "OM 17" by photographer Koo Bohn-chang  
Kukje Gallery

② "RH 01 BW"  
Courtesy of the artist

③ "HA 05-1"  
Courtesy of the artist

also portrayed against backgrounds with a line that adds a sense of time and space — similar to those that can be found in Giorgio Morandi's still life paintings.

A certain part of the porcelain is well-defined, while the rest is slightly out of focus. In addition, the light has not been directly projected onto the objects but on the space encapsulating the objects.

The overall mise-en-scene of Koo's works is subtly poetic. His images of porcelain seem to float, rather than appearing firmly fixed to the ground.

"I try to imagine when looking at porcelains or any other object. I watched a TV program that showed Itzhak Perlman's music program in China. It was not so long after the country had opened itself to the world. I still remember him carefully watching a student performing," Koo said.

Perlman suggested the young violin student use more imagination to picture the spring instead of going after the notes, which instantly changed the student's performance. I think I also learned a great deal from it," Koo continued.

"For many years, I have been trying to capture things that have been alienated or regarded as not so beautiful, or say mundane. It has been rewarding when I rehighlight them and bring to the surface new aspects. I think white porcelains are the same. White porcelains are not what would give you aesthetic pleasure at first glance," Koo said.

What intrigues Koo is the story and time that an object or a person bears, Koo says. "Someday, I want to ... no. I feel obliged to take portraits of North Korean defectors as a photographer. Just as Korean white porcelains have their own stories behind traveling to faraway lands, the defectors from North Korea would also carry their own stories as they traveled to China and finally to South Korea. Through my photographs, I hope to express the life that they have endured," Koo said.

The "Blue-and-White Porcelain Jar" series will travel in March to the Ivorypress gallery in Madrid, an interdisciplinary arts venue founded by Elena Ochoa Foster, the wife of architect Norman Foster.

Koo's exhibition at Kukje Gallery's Busan branch runs through Feb. 17.

(us@heraldcorp.com)



◀ Koo Bohn-chang  
Shim Woo-hyun/The Korea Herald