The exhibition ‘Korean Lacquer Art – Aesthetic Perfection’ (‘Die Lackkunst Koreas – Ästhetik in Vollendung’; 28 October 2012-27 January 2013) will be the first such exhibition in the West. On display will be a selection of lacquerwork with mother-of-pearl inlay (najeon chilgi) dating from the Goryeo (918-1392) and the Joseon (1392-1910) dynasty. These masterpieces, from Korean, Japanese and European collections, illustrate the highly sophisticated decorative techniques used in Korean lacquerwork.

Only about twenty examples of Goryeo dynasty lacquer objects decorated with mother-of-pearl have survived to the present day. Most of these were manufactured for use in the practice of Buddhism – sutra chests, prayer bead boxes, incense containers and smaller boxes and receptacles presumably made for the royal house or members of the nobility.

On most of the objects, rounded corners and chamfered sides generate a simplicity of form that is an essential element of Goryeo lacquerwork. A further special feature is a decorative inlay technique known as daemo bokchaebeop, which uses wafer-thin pieces of tortoiseshell from the Hawksbill sea turtle (Eretmochelys imbricata), coloured on the underside with yellow, orange, red or dark red, in combination with the mother-of-pearl. A round case on display in the exhibition exemplifies this technique. Typically, the ornamentation extends over the entire surface, sometimes in an uninterrupted repeat, featuring intricate floral (chrysanthemum and peony) and geometric patterns, usually less than 1 centimetre in diameter, made up of hundreds of tiny pieces of mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell. Precious metal wire was also used in lacquer works of the period, both for purely decorative purposes and for strength.

Although most lacquers from the Goryeo-Joseon transition period still clearly belong to the tradition of the earlier dynasty, there is a perceptible move towards freer, more generously conceived decorative schemes, the predominantly stylized flowers and leaves of earlier times giving way to a more naturalistic expression, as seen in a 16th/17th century clothing box.

Goryeo techniques were further developed, two examples being finely engraved internal line-drawing (mojobeop) and decoration with extremely thinly cut pieces or strips of mother-of-pearl (kkeuneunyijil). The late 16th/early 17th century saw the introduction of motifs such as the ‘Four Gracious Plants’, flowers and birds (hwajo), and winding vine tendrils, as well as innovative application of Goryeo dynasty traditions, such as the use of tortoiseshell, and in the 17th and the 18th century, the tachalbeop technique was developed, in which larger, curved pieces of mother-of-pearl are hammered flat to achieve a crackle, or craquelure, effect.

By the end of the Joseon period, use of lacquer objects had become increasingly widespread, leading to the production of a correspondingly wide variety of items for everyday use. In addition to geometric patterns, landscapes and other figural scenes grew in popularity, as well as symbolic decoration, such as the ‘ten longevity symbols’ (sipjangsaeng), the ‘eight precious things’ (palbo), bats, cranes, dragons, and the characters for happiness (bok) and long life (su). Mother-of-pearl was frequently combined with materials such as sharkskin, tortoiseshell, corals and various metals.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue published in separate German and English editions (Munich, forthcoming). With contributions by internationally renowned scholars, it spans the beginnings of lacquerwork on the Korean peninsula to the popular wares of the 20th century.

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