



Special Contribution



ㄱ

100 YEARS OF KOREAN MUSEUMS: HISTORY AND MEANING

Choe Kwang-shik, Director-General, National Museum of Korea

ㄱ

Originally presented at the International Forum held at the National Museum of Korea
in commemoration of the centenary of Korean museums in 2009, and
revised by the author to meet this journal's editorial criteria.

ㄱ

100 YEARS OF KOREAN MUSEUMS: HISTORY AND MEANING

Choe Kwang-shik, Director-General, National Museum of Korea

ㄱ

[ABSTRACT]

This paper presents an overview of the history of Korean museums, which spans over 100 years. In particular, it focuses on how Korean museums, over the years, have acted as 'places symbolizing the legitimacy of the nation' and suggests new directions in which museums and art museums may develop in the future. It also argues that museums in the 21st century must, in this century of culture, act as a treasure trove of the essential aspects of Korean culture. It is in doing so that Korean museums may thus develop into places symbolizing Korea's national brand, as well as into complex cultural spaces of Korean art and culture.

[KEYWORDS]

museum, National Museum of Korea, legitimacy of the nation, complex cultural space, century of culture

I INTRODUCTION

The history of museums in Korea may be traced back to 1 November

012

013

ㄱ

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
KOREAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

ㄱ

100 YEARS OF KOREAN MUSEUMS:
HISTORY AND MEANING

ㄱ

Choe Kwang-shik

1909 when the Imperial Museum of Korea (帝室博物館), founded in 1908 and located at Changgyeonggung, opened its doors to the general public. The centennial year, therefore, has provided an opportunity for looking back systematically at the history of museums in Korea, and also to prepare ourselves for the challenges of the next one hundred years. Museums in Korea have assumed greater substance and specificity, and require not only critical reflection on their past history but also fresh vision to sustain their future development.

Museums doubtless constitute a cultural space, but they also serve as the locus of the legitimacy of the state, because they assemble, preserve and display the symbols of its authority. It is apparent, therefore, that the centennial celebration of the history of museums in Korea cannot be confined to the commemoration of past achievements. We need to align our commemorative projects closely with the future path of museums and art galleries in Korea, and use this occasion imaginatively to determine their future trajectory. Indeed, a retrospective on the one hundred years of the history of museums in Korea reveals that their future direction has to be shaped as the symbol of Korea's brand image and a treasure-trove of the cultural heritage of the nation.

II THE DAEHAN EMPIRE ERA (1887-1910)

Obviously, the opening of the Imperial Museum of Korea marks the beginning of modern museums in Korea. The exhibition halls of the museum were created by partially remodeling several pavilions such as the Yanghwadang and Myeongjeongjeon and the adjoining corridors in Changgyeonggung. Halls, such as Yeongchunheon and Jibbokheon, were used as offices of the museum.

The *Daehan Daily* had earlier reported on 9 January 1908 that "The Bureau of Palace Affairs is planning to establish this year a museum, a zoo and a botanical garden." The *Hwangseong* newspaper shed light on the background of the foundation of the museum as follows: "We already reported about the establishment of the Imperial Museum of Korea. The objective of the museum is to collect works of fine arts and various artefacts from the past ages, and artworks and other objects from other civilizations of the modern world for the spread of enlightenment." This news item makes it obvious that the first museum in Korea was established with the same goals as those of other modern museums. It is, however, important to remember the reason given by Emperor Sunjong in opening the Imperial Museum of Korea to the general public. He used the words *yeominhaerak* (與民偕樂), which means "sharing joy with the people." Except on Thursdays, the day reserved for imperial visits, the museum, zoo and the botanical garden within the place were ordered by the Emperor to open their doors to the general public for their enjoyment and the

expansion of the horizon of their knowledge (*Daehan Minbo*, 3 November 1909).

In 1908 the Office of the Royal Garden had been established, and the Imperial Museum of Korea had also been founded, but the museum was out of bounds for the general public. The emperor's decision in the following year to fling the doors of the museum open wide so that the general public could share the joy of appreciating the works of art was historically a very meaningful act, because the culture over which the royalty and the aristocracy had until then enjoyed exclusive control, now became the common domain of all the people. This act may be interpreted as representing the initial spark of a civil society. One needs to be reminded that museums in the West, as is evident in the Louvre or the Palace of Versailles, originally royal palaces, were subsequently converted into national museums.

When the doors of the Imperial Museum of Korea opened for the general public, the Changgyeonggung where the museum was located, also became accessible to them. This decision was meaningful in yet another sense. By allowing the common people unhindered access to the palace, hitherto a preserve for royalty and officials, Emperor Sunjong perceived the common people not as a passive target of control but as a partner with a common stake in determining the destiny of the nation. This act may also be interpreted to mean that the people had now become modern citizens, bound by common goals and aspirations.

Korea at this juncture in history was faced with the serious crisis of the tightening stranglehold of Japanese imperialism, and the Korean people responded to this threat by displaying intense nationalist consciousness and launching patriotic enlightenment campaigns. On 26 October 1909 the Korean patriot An Jung-geun (安重根, 1879-1910) assassinated Ito Hirobumi (伊藤博文, 1841-1909), the architect of Japan's colonial policy in Korea, and on 15 October (3rd day of the 10th month in the

lunar calendar), the nation celebrated the birthday of Dangun (檀君) who is believed to be the progenitor of the Korean race. Patriotic associations in every nook and corner of the country waged the nationalist struggle to preserve Korean sovereignty. Indeed, the decision of the Emperor to open the doors of the palace and to share the enjoyment of the Imperial Museum of Korea together with the general public needs to be understood in conjunction with the spirit of the times and the general pattern of Korean history during this period.

At the time of its foundation the collection of the Imperial Museum of Korea contained approximately 8,600 items, including paintings and calligraphy, porcelain, metalwork, sedan chairs and banners. But in 1912 the collection had swelled to 12,230 items, with the acquisition of Buddhist sculptures of the Unified Silla period, numerous vases, metalwork and jades from the Goryeo period and various works of art and wood and lacquer crafts from the Joseon period. The Gilt-bronze Pensive Bodhisattva (金銅半跏思惟像), designated as National Treasure No. 83, is one of such treasures in the custody of the National Museum. If the invaluable relics which were scattered all over the country, had not been collected at that time, they could well have disappeared.

THE MUSEUM DURING THE JAPANESE COLONIAL PERIOD

The two representative museums in Korea during the Japanese colonial period were the Imperial Museum of Korea, and the Museum of the Government General of Joseon (朝鮮總督府博物館). After the Japanese annexation of Korea, the colonial administration opened the Museum of the Government General of Joseon within the premises of the Gyeongbokgung (景福宮) on 1 December 1915. The Imperial Museum of Korea was demoted by renaming it the Yi Royal-Family Museum (李王家博物館). Further demotion took place in 1938 when the Yi Royal-Family Museum was shifted to Deoksugung, and given the new name the Yi Royal-

014

015

吠

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
KOREAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

吠

100 YEARS OF KOREAN MUSEUMS:
HISTORY AND MEANING

吠

Choe Kwang-shik

Family Art Gallery (李王家美術館). After liberation it was called the Deoksugung Art Gallery (德壽宮美術館).

Since the Imperial Museum of Korea opened in 1909 in the remodeled building of Changgyeonggung, it was not only difficult to manage and care for the museum items, but there was also an additional problem of the fear of theft. In 1912 the colonial authorities built a new three-storey building, combining the architectural styles of Japan and the West, on the site of Jagyeongjeon (慈慶殿), and it was used as the main museum complex. The outer façade of the hall was a replica of the Phoenix Hall (鳳凰堂, *Hōōdō* [of Byōdō-in (平等院)]), located in Uji (宇治), Kyoto. This building, including its basement, covered the area of 220 pyeong (approx. 730 m²) and the display of museum items commenced on 20 August 1912.

Although the Imperial Museum of Korea was renamed on several occasions, it played a pioneering role in preserving the cultural heritage of Korea. The exhibits in the Fine Arts Gallery of the National Museum are mostly inherited from the Imperial Museum of Korea. If the Imperial Museum of Korea had not taken custody of the heritage from past eras, they would have become collectors' items in countries outside Korea.

In 1915 Japan held the "Products Fair (朝鮮物産共進會)" at Gyeongbokgung as propaganda for the first five years of the achievements of the colonial administration. On 1 December 1915 the colonial government inaugurated the Museum of the Government General of Joseon in the building that had once served as the venue for the fair, and used the fair exhibits as museum items. The museum's collection included antiques, artefacts from archaeological sites, rubbings of stelae and various art objects derived from excavation, acquisitions by various government departments, and donations. A large number of the exhibits now in the Archaeological Gallery and Historical Gallery of the National Museum were inherited from the Museum of the Government General of Joseon. It needs to be noted in this context that the Museum of the Government General of Joseon made an attempt to remove some precious exhibits from the Yi Royal-Family Art Gallery in order to increase its collection, but this plan failed because of protests.

Japan's colonial administration in Korea established provincial branches of the Museum of the Government General of Joseon in the cities of Gyeongju and Buyeo. The Gyeongju Historic Sites Preservation Society (慶州古蹟保存會) was formally inaugurated by community leaders in 1913, converting the government guest house of the Joseon period into an exhibition hall for displaying relics from the Silla period. In 1921 when a gold crown and many other relics were discovered during the excavation of a Silla royal tomb, subsequently named Geumgwanchong (金冠塚, Gold Crown Tomb), a Geumgwango (金冠庫, Gold Crown Hall) was built in order to display relics from the tomb. The museum established by the Gyeongju

Historic Sites Preservation Society was converted into the Gyeongju branch of the Museum of the Government General of Joseon in 1926.

On 27 September 1929 the colonial government established the Buyeo Historic Sites Preservation Society (夫餘古蹟保存會) which served as a foundation for the Buyeo Branch of the Museum of the Government General of Joseon, built on 1 April 1939. The colonial government also established Gaeseong City Museum (開城府立博物館) on 1 November 1931 and Pyeongyang City Museum (平壤府立博物館) on 7 October 1933 which contributed towards preserving the relics from the Goryeo period and various artefacts from the Nangnang(樂浪, Chinese: Lelang) area and its vicinity, respectively.

During this period various colleges established their own museums. Yeonhui College (延禧專門學校) established its museum in 1928, followed by Boseong College (普成專門學校) (precursor of Korea University) in 1934 and Ewha Woman's University in 1935. Private museums also emerged during this period. In 1938 Jeon Hyeongpil (全鏗弼, 1906-1962; sobriquet, Gansong) built a museum named Bohwagak (葆華閣) in Seongbuk-dong, Seoul. The museum, known today under the name of Gansong Art Museum, houses some of the rarest Korean antiquities. Its collection of national treasures includes the original edition of *Hunminjeongeum* (訓民正音, lit. Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People, designated as National Treasure No. 70), paintings of some of the foremost artists from the Joseon period and gilt-bronze Buddhist images.

IV THE MUSEUM IN THE POST-LIBERATION ERA

When the US army entered Korea in September 1945 in the wake of the country's liberation from Japanese colonial rule and established the US Army Military Government in Korea, it opened the National Museum, and appointed Dr. Kim Chewon (金

載元, 1909-1990) an art historian who had received his doctorate in Germany, as its first Director-General. It appears that the stimulus of establishing a National Museum in Seoul in 1945 came from Pyeongyang where the Soviet Army had established the Korean Central History Museum (). It is indeed remarkable that both South and North Korea established their respective national museums even before the two rival Korean regimes had been installed in these divided states. The mood of mutual competition, triggering the foundation of National Museums in two divided states across the Korean peninsula, is related to the question of legitimacy. Just as the Royal Jade Seal or Great State Seal served as the symbol of legitimacy for rulers in the pre-modern times, National Museums functioned in modern times as repositories and custodians of the symbols of state legitimacy. It was for this reason that both the US and the Soviet armies established National Museums in their respective occupation zones for collecting and displaying national treasures and other invaluable elements of the cultural heritage, and projecting them as the space of the national symbols of legitimacy. The two divided states channeled the power that their respective national museums symbolized so as to affirm their legitimacy and win recognition from their own national communities as well as from the world at large.

When the Republic of Korea was founded, the state museums of the colonial period were reorganized. Under the Presidential decree, dated 12 December 1949, the National Museum (國立博物館), headed by Dr. Kim Chewon, and the National Museum of Anthropology (國立民族博物館), headed by Song Seokha (宋錫夏, 1904-1948), were established as state-run institutions. The National Museum opened in Gyeongbokgung in September 1945, taking over the Museum of the Government General of Joseon. The National Museum of Anthropology, focusing on ethnology, was housed in Sijeong Memorial Hall (施政紀念館), located in Pil-dong, Seoul.

After the National Museum was formally established, the government continued the existing

016

017

吠

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
KOREAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

吠

100 YEARS OF KOREAN MUSEUMS:
HISTORY AND MEANING

吠

Choe Kwang-shik

policy of a central museum in Seoul and branch museums in provincial cities. During the colonial period museums existed in such provincial cities as Gyeongju, Buyeo, Gongju and Gaeseong. The major aims of the National Museum were to re-interpret and systematize the cultural relics of the country to conform to the new spirit of national liberation. These endeavors could well have been inspired by the agenda of the state, but more importantly, the National Museum itself realized the need to perform the original function of museums, i.e. to organize the relics inherited from the colonial authorities, publicize them and to carry out research on them.

However, just as the National Museum was in the process of finding stability, the Korean War broke out and inflicted immense damage. The lightning speed at which the war developed, made it difficult to relocate the museum collections immediately to safe places. In fact, when the North Korean forces were forced to retreat in the wake of the Incheon Landing of the US Army, they tried to take the precious treasures from the National Museum to Pyeongyang. However, the employees of the National Museum prevented the North Korean forces from taking the collections by packing them in the daytime and taking them out from packing at night. As the crisis of the Korean War worsened with the intervention of China, the museum employees moved a selection of valuable objects from the National Museum to Busan National University Museum and Gyeongju Museum, and some objects were relocated to Hawaii. After the armistice was signed in 1953, they were brought back to Seoul. This situation during the Korea War is resonant of the civil war in China when Chiang Kaishek (Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石, 1887-1975) fled with the precious treasures of the Palace Museum (故宮博物館). Chiang Kaishek lost the Chinese territory to Mao Zedong (毛澤東, 1893-1976), but he took along the treasures from the Chinese past, because he regarded them as the symbols of political legitimacy and sought to use them to legitimize his regime as the real China.

The museum objects taken to Hawaii were returned after they were exhibited in the "Overseas Exhibition of National Treasures" that toured eight cities of the United States for 18 months commencing from December 1957. Many other treasures that the National Museum lent for were brought back to Seoul. North Korea also organized a special exhibition of Korean relics and artworks in the Soviet Union at the same time. In 1961 South Korea organized special exhibitions of Korean art in five European cities, including Paris and London, while North Korea held exhibitions of Korean culture in Eastern Europe. It is apparent that museums were inextricably enmeshed with the claims of political legitimacy between the two rival regimes across the Military Demarcation Line (*Gunsa Bungye-seon*). The contest over legitimacy became manifest through the almost simultaneous establishment of National Museums in the capitals of North and South Korea in 1945 and through special exhibitions of artworks and historical relics, sponsored by the two Koreas in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

After the war ended and the National Museum's collections in the provinces were brought back to Seoul in August 1953, the National Museum was installed at its Namsan branch, and subsequently, it moved to Seokjojeon at Deoksugung in October 1954, where it resumed display. In 1969 the National Museum was amalgamated with Deoksugung Art Gallery. It is obvious that the first museum of Korea, the Imperial Museum of Korea had now been absorbed by the National Museum.

In 1972, the National Museum was relocated to a new museum building (currently National Folk Museum Building) at Gyeongbokgung. In the beginning the name "National General Museum of Korea (國立綜合博物館)" was suggested, because it covered archaeology (National Museum), history of art (Deoksugung Art Gallery) and anthropology (Korean Museum of Anthropology), but for some reason it was decided to call it Gungnip Jungang Bangmulgwan (國立中央博物館, National Museum of Korea). One may guess that this name was suggested because the central museum in North Korea was called Jungang Ryeonksa Bangmulgwan (Korea Central History Museum), and also to project as a central or pivotal (中央, *jungang*) museum, different from those in the provinces. In May 1972 a delegation from the Southern side visited the Central History Museum of Pyongyang during a visit to North Korea. It is significant that the word "*jungang*" was added to the name of National Museum (Gungnip bangmulgwan) on 19 July 1972, only a fortnight after the historic North-South Joint Declaration was issued on 4 July 1972. In the 1970s the government took steps to house such provincial museums as the Buyeo, Gongju and Gyeongju Museums in new buildings, and also followed the North Korean model of one branch museum in each province. The Gwangju National Museum was the first branch museum to open in this era, and currently South and North Korea have a combined total of fourteen local museums.

In 1986 when the National Museum of Korea (NMK) moved to Jungangcheong (中央廳, Capitol Building), the headquarters of the former Japanese colonial government, it achieved remarkable expansion.

The museum was organized into numerous galleries and began an era of vibrant activities. But in 1996 when the Jungangcheong was demolished in a bid to cleanse the vestiges of the Japanese colonial era and settle the past, the NMK was temporarily installed in the remodeled Social Education Building (present National Palace Museum of Korea). Finally, on 28 October 2005, the NMK re-opened in Yongsan where a new magnificent building was completed.

One hundred years have passed since the Imperial Museum of Korea (the precursor of the National Museum) opened its doors to the public in 1909, and more than sixty years have elapsed since the National Museum opened in Gyeongbokgung in 1945. During this period the National Museum was relocated on several occasions, witnessed numerous trials and tribulations, survived the ravages of time and was born afresh. Today eleven local museums, including the Gyeongju Museum, operate under the umbrella of the National Museum of Korea, and are playing the roles of preserving the cultural heritage of the nation and disseminating traditional culture.

On 1 April 1946, the Incheon City Museum was inaugurated in Songhwa-dong, Incheon as the first municipal museum in Korea. However, the museum building was destroyed during the Korean War in the course of the famous Incheon Landing. In 1995 a new building was created to house the Incheon Museum. In 2006 the building was remodeled and the museum re-opened under the new name Incheon Metropolitan Museum. Gwangju Provincial Museum opened in 1963, and in 1987 it was renamed Gwangju City Folk Museum, the name it bears today. Busan City Museum opened in 1978, and Gyeonggi Provincial Museum was established in 1996. In 2008 this museum became an affiliate of the Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation. Amongst local areas noted for museum culture, Yeongwol in Gangwon-do stands out. Because of the abundance of museums, this county is dubbed "Creative Yeongwol, A Roofless Museum." It strikes tourists as a complex cultural space, and some of its notable museums are: Comics Museum; Kim Satgat Culture Hall; Muksan Art Museum; Danjong Historic Hall;

018

019

吠

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
KOREAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

吠

100 YEARS OF KOREAN MUSEUMS:
HISTORY AND MEANING

吠

Choe Kwang-shik

Yeongwol Book Museum; Hoya Geography Museum; Insect Museum; Cheongjeon Pavilion Museum; Seogang Art Museum; Fossil Museum; International Modern Art Museum; Donggang Photography Museum; and Hoan Tea Utensils Museum.

Korea also has several museums set up by commercial companies, the first being Han-Dok Pharmaceutical Museum (韓獨藥史館), established on 27 April 1964. In 1974 it was renamed "Han-Dok Medico-Pharma Museum," and opened an exhibition complex, containing Korea Hall, International Hall and Han-Dok Material Room, in Eumseong, Chungcheongbuk-do.

Amongst private museums in Korea, the Ho-Am Art Museum (湖巖美術館) and Horim Museum (湖林博物館) are noteworthy for the range and richness of their collection. The Ho-Am Art Museum was based on the collection of the founder of the Samsung Group, the late Lee Byeong-cheol (sobriquet, Ho-Am). Located at Yongin, Gyeonggi-do, the museum is built over a total area of 4,300 sq. meters in the traditional Korean architectural style, and it has the added attraction of a traditional Korean garden of 66,000 square meters. The building was completed in 1978, and the museum opened in 1982. This museum spans Korean art and culture from pre-historic times to the present day, and it is indeed a great storehouse of Korean treasures. In 2004 Samsung Group opened another magnificent museum, called Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, which exhibits the essence of Korean culture, and which also displays fascinating works of modern art by Korean and foreign artists.

Horim Museum was founded by Chairman Yun Jangseop who established the Sungbo Cultural Foundation in 1981, contributing 835 antiquities. The Horim Museum opened in October 1982 at Daechi-dong, Gangnam-gu, and in May 1999 it built exhibition galleries in Sillim-dong, Gwanak-gu where numerous masterpieces of Korean art including porcelains and celadon are on display. The museum opened a branch in Sinsa-dong, Gangnam-gu, in June 2009.

In order to understand the history of Korean museums, it is necessary to examine related issues which may be summarized as follows:

1961: University Museum Association established

1976: Korean People Museum Association

(predecessor of the Korean Museums Association) established

1984: Museum Act passed

1991: Museum Promotion Act legislated by the Ministry of Culture (Reg. No. 51)

1998: Korean Museums Association established

1999: Museum Promotion Act partially amended (qualification system of curatorship implemented)

The fact that the University Museum Association was established in Korea fifteen years before the establishment of the Korean Museums Association clearly demonstrates the great importance of university museums in Korea. Another point which is worthy of note is the Museum Promotion Act legislated by the Ministry of Culture in 1991, and its amendment in 1999. The Museum Promotion Act of 1991 led to the rapid increase in the number of museums, reaching 600 to date, and when the act was amended and the qualifications of curatorship were firmly laid down, Korean museums were equipped with a foundation for their qualitative growth and sustained development.

V CENTENNIAL PROJECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The National Museum of Korea and the Korean Museums Association organized numerous programs on the occasion of the centenary of Korean museums in order to celebrate the achievements of the past one hundred years and to pave the way for their growth in the next one hundred years. All the major museums, art galleries and museum-related organizations helped to promote commemorative projects.

First of all, in order to discuss the idea of a 'museum complex' or an integrated cultural space with environment-friendly museums, galleries, and recreational facilities, the NMK organized an international conference on 22 May 2009 in which Korean and foreign museum specialists presented papers.

On 29 August the NMK organized Museum Fashion Show, which blended fashion with Korean cultural items such as porcelain, handicrafts, folk painting and sculpture. The Fashion Show shattered the stereotypical image of the museum and established its reputation as a place of innovation and imagination. The NMK also organized a concert on 12 September and a grand performance by 100 vocalists on 1 November, which served as an opportunity to forge and consolidate the bonds between the museum

and the national community. A small pavilion named Cheongjaeong, was newly built above the Reflecting Pond inside the museum, and unveiled as part of the centennial. A remarkable feature of the pavilion is the *cheongja* or blue porcelain, used for its roof-tiles. On 2 November, the day the formal centennial ceremony was held, a special Gojoseon Room was built to showcase the history of Korea's first state. On the following day an international conference was held at the NMK. The Chairperson of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the President of the World Federation of Friends of Museums (WFFM) and museum directors from all over the world, including the Directors of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., Tokyo National Museum, and the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg discussed strategies and visions for world museums in the 21st century. These events were organized with the goal of formulating a vision that could sustain the growth of museums in Korea in the future. The NMK used the occasion of the centenary year to consolidate its links with museums and art galleries all over the country, and organized special exhibitions in different parts of the country in cooperation with local museums. The NMK produced brochures in order to publicize various commemorative special exhibitions and a map which included road directions and details of all the museums in the country. These were the pioneering initiatives taken by the NMK, and proved very successful.

"Korean Museum, 100 Years in Remembrance," an exhibition of rare cultural heritages to reflect on the journey of the past 100 years and to nurture dreams for the next 100 years, was a blockbuster event as people lined up for several hours to get a ticket. The NMK also successfully hosted special exhibitions to show Egyptian Civilization Exhibition from April to August 2009 to local audiences, while Inca Civilization Exhibition commenced in December 2009. The exhibitions in the Historical Gallery were reorganized in order to provide a systematic understanding of Korean history from prehistoric times to the modern era in a chronological format. Gojoseon and Goryeo Rooms were built, and

020

021

ㄱ

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
KOREAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

ㄱ

100 YEARS OF KOREAN MUSEUMS:
HISTORY AND MEANING

ㄱ

Choe Kwang-shik

the Buyeo-Samhan, Unified Silla and Balhae Rooms were reorganized. The construction of the Joseon Room is currently under way, and when this project is completed this year, the NMK will be equipped with a solid infrastructure for the dissemination of knowledge of Korean history.

A grand Museum Festival, a museum expo and performance were organized by the NMK, Korean Museums Association, and Friends of the National Museum of Korea in October 2009. A book, *The 100th Anniversary of Korean Museums*, was published by the National Museum of Korea and Korean Museum Association. The NMK also made an adroit use of the centennial occasion by expanding its donation campaign at a national level through more active advertisement and holding two special exhibitions of donated items.

It is apparent that the centennial landmark provided a context within which Korean museums could consolidate their past achievements and develop strategies for their remarkable growth in the 21st century. In order to chalk out the plans of the commemorative events effectively the NMK constituted a commemoration project committee, chaired by Mr. Lee O-ryeong, the first Culture Minister of Korea, and in order to implement these plans an Organizing Committee chaired jointly by the Director of the NMK and the President of the Korean Museums Association was also formed. In this commemorative project all the national, public, private and university museums and art galleries took part. It is also remarkable that Association of the Directors of Korean Museums, an umbrella organization of museum chiefs in Korea, was established for the first time in the centennial year to serve as a forum for discussing the problems faced by public, private and university museums in the country and developing common strategies for their future expansion and enrichment.

VI CONCLUSION

Commemorative events to mark the centennial of museums in Korea have woven the museums in Korea into a cohesive web and transformed them into festival sites. The word *museum* is derived from *mouseion*, the seat of the Muses, the nine Greek goddesses who were the inspiration for cultural and literary accomplishments such as poetry, music, comedy, history and astronomy. Museums are the place to celebrate these achievements of national culture.

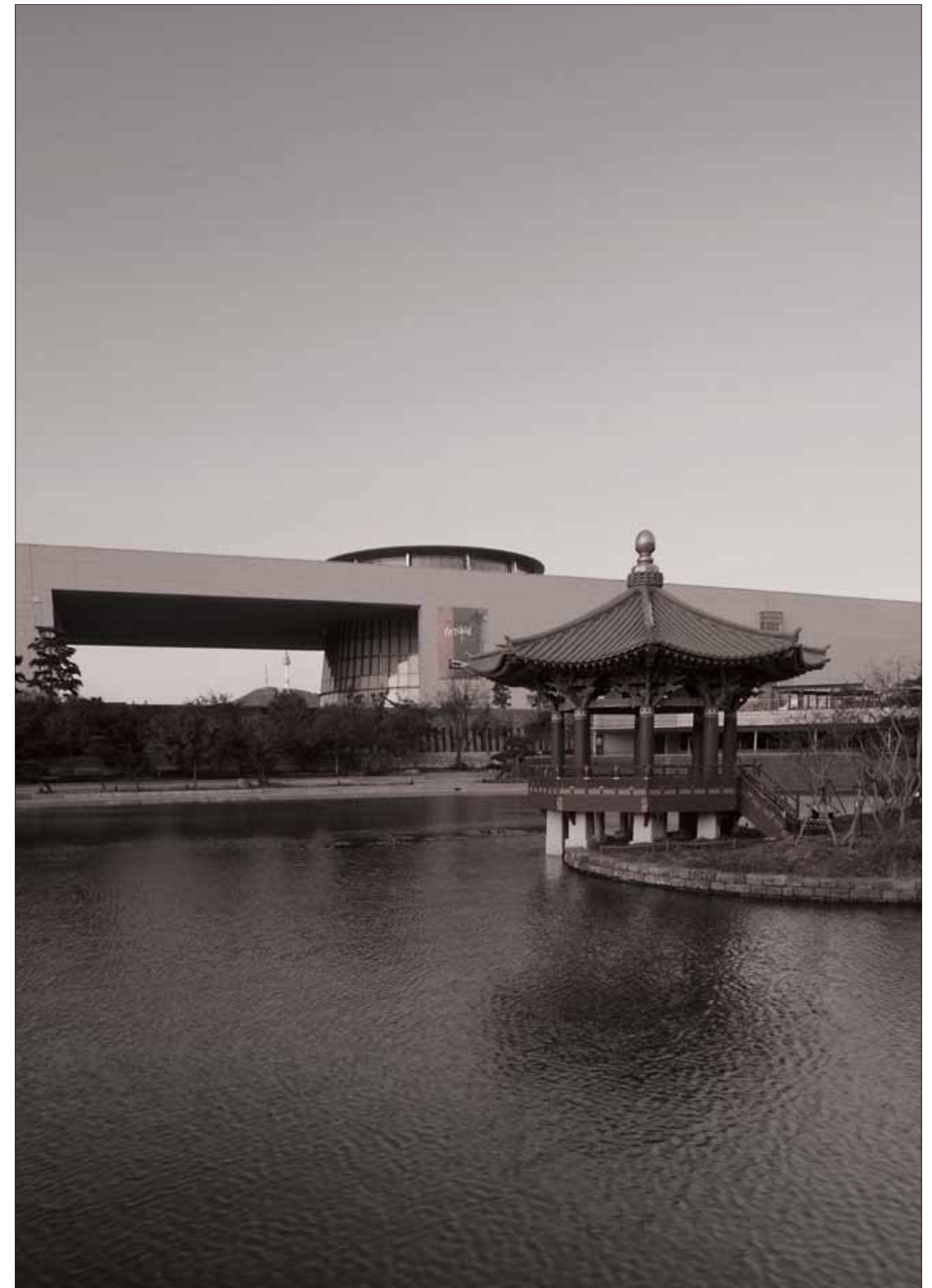
Directors and the other concerned officials of national, public, private and university museums and art galleries used the occasion of the centenary to unite their efforts and commit themselves to the new vision and goals. In the past century, museums served the purpose of consolidating national identity and conferring legitimacy to the state, but the 21st century has ushered in a

new concept. Museums have to play a pivotal role in promoting the "national brand" by providing abundant cultural content.

The Centennial landmark also provided a context within which museums in Korea reflected on the long and arduous path they traversed in the last one hundred years and explored ways and means to usher into the future with renewed strength for their ever-increasing pace of growth. Various museums in Korea combined their strength on this occasion and established their reputation domestically and internationally as a cultural powerhouse. The centennial celebration was organized not only by the NMK but also by over 600 museums and art galleries across the country which teamed up to promote various events and pledged to forge bonds with the spirit of the nation, increase contacts with the local community and develop greater relevance to the lives of the people. These commemorative events will doubtless serve as a strong foundation on which the new structure of museums and art galleries as a complex of Korean art and culture will be erected. "Korean Museum, 100 Years in Remembrance," a special exhibition held from 9 September to 8 November 2009 for *yeonminhaerak*, or "sharing joy with the people," to celebrate the centennial of Korea's museum system, is particularly noteworthy. It served as an occasion to reflect on the century of footprints with dispassionate objectivity and a moment to pledge ourselves to the challenging tasks of further development in the future.

The centennial commemorative project made Korean people feel much closer to museums and art galleries, and the media also gave rave reviews, and as a result the prestige of the museum system in Korea was considerably enhanced. Discussion about the vision and developmental strategies at the International Conference helped us evolve a policy framework for the future direction of museums in Korea in the 21st century. Presentation of learned papers and discussions on the plan of Yongsan Museum Complex helped us realize with keen acuteness that this envisioned landmark, a multi-

purpose space which will integrate and harmonize culture, art, science and nature, is an issue of crucial significance. It will determine the future shape and growth of the museum system in Korea. ≡



National Museum of Korea and Cheongjaejeong (靑瓷亭)