

Korean Arts: Historical & Contemporary Practices

ASIA-3010 (3 credits)

South Korea: Society & Culture

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course explores the traditions and contemporary expressions of fine arts and crafts in Korea, from classical court painting and ceramics to applied arts, modern design and “K-Art”. Students analyze how artistic forms reflect cultural values, social change, and historical context, with attention to craftsmanship, symbolism, and aesthetic philosophies rooted in Confucianism, Buddhism, and shamanistic traditions. The course also considers the revitalization of traditional crafts such as pottery, lacquerware, *hanbok* design, *hanji*, and calligraphy, alongside their reinvention in modern creative industries. Case studies highlight both museum collections and contemporary artisans who bridge heritage and innovation. Field visits to museums, galleries, workshops, and craft villages provide students with firsthand experiences of Korea’s artistic legacy and its ongoing transformation in a global context.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Trace the evolution of Korean arts from classical court traditions to contemporary “K-Art,” identifying key shifts in medium, technique, and stylistic expression across different historical periods.
- Distinguish and categorize various forms of applied arts (including ceramics, lacquerware, hanbok and hanji) based on their material properties and historical production methods.
- Interpret the cultural values embedded in specific motifs and crafts, explaining how these objects functioned within their original social, religious, and ritual contexts.
- Analyze the role of modern creative industries in the global “K-Art” movement, exploring how traditional aesthetics are commodified and redefined for a 21st-century audience.
- Identify the tensions between cultural preservation and market-driven transformation, drawing on specific case studies of contemporary artisans to illustrate these dynamics.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English.

Instructional Methods

This course is designed around the principle that learning is an active, holistic process that extends well beyond the classroom. Seminars introduce key concepts and interpretive frameworks that are then examined, complicated, and enriched through direct engagement with people, places, and contexts — field visits, expert briefings, guided observation, and community-based learning. Field-based learning is integrated into course design rather than treated as enrichment: faculty prepare students for each engagement, guide interpretation on location, and facilitate the reflection that connects experience to course themes. Students move through cycles of experience, observation, and analysis, progressively taking greater ownership of their own inquiry. This process is not always linear, and that is by design — developing the capacity to learn from unpredictable, context-dependent situations is itself a transferable skill and a foundation for lifelong learning.

Required Texts

Journals and Texts as Assigned

Assignments and Evaluation

1. Participation (10%)

Active participation in class discussions, workshops, field visits, and experiential learning activities is essential to the course. Students are expected to complete assigned readings, contribute thoughtfully to discussions, engage respectfully with artists, artisans, and community members, and demonstrate curiosity and initiative during site visits and hands-on activities.

2. Visual Inquiry Portfolio (15%)

Three entries, 5% each

Throughout the semester, students will develop a Visual Inquiry Portfolio documenting encounters with Korean artistic and visual culture. The portfolio is designed to encourage careful observation, interpretation, and connection-making across course readings, discussions, field visits, workshops, and everyday experiences.

Students will complete three Visual Inquiry Entries, each focused on a different context:

- Artistic Heritage and Preservation (e.g., museum, palace collection, temple, cultural heritage site, traditional arts center)
- Contemporary Artistic Practice (e.g., gallery, design exhibition, artist workshop, craft studio, cultural center)
- Visual Culture in Everyday Life (e.g., neighborhoods, markets, public spaces, transit systems, commercial districts, street art, architecture, design, fashion, or other forms of everyday visual culture)

Each entry should include:

- **Visual Documentation**
 - 3–5 original photographs documenting the experience
- **Observation (150–200 words)**
 - What did you encounter? What artistic forms, objects, practices, or visual elements stood out?
- **Interpretation (150–200 words)**
 - What does this example reveal about Korean arts, culture, heritage, identity, craftsmanship, or visual expression?
- **Connection (100–150 words)**
 - Connect your observations to at least one course reading, concept, or discussion.
- **Question (50–100 words)**
 - What question, tension, or curiosity emerged from this experience?

The portfolio emphasizes inquiry rather than formal analysis. Students are encouraged to document what captures their attention, explore emerging questions, and consider how artistic expression operates across both formal cultural institutions and everyday life in contemporary Korea. Portfolio entries may serve as source material for later assignments.

3. Object Biography: Continuity and Change Project (20%)

Students will select a single artistic object, craft tradition, material, or artistic practice encountered during the program and investigate its evolution across time. Examples may include ceramics, celadon pottery, hanbok, hanji, calligraphy, lacquerware, textile arts, jewelry, or other artistic traditions.

Drawing on field visits, museum collections, artist interactions, course readings, and independent research, students will examine how the object or tradition has been produced, used, interpreted, preserved, and transformed across historical and contemporary contexts.

Students should address:

- Historical origins and cultural significance
- Materials, techniques, and artistic traditions associated with the object or practice
- Symbolic, religious, philosophical, or social meanings
- Changes in production, use, or audience over time
- Contemporary adaptations, reinterpretations, or revitalization efforts
- Questions of preservation, authenticity, commercialization, innovation, or globalization

Students will present their findings through a visual format such as a digital exhibit panel, illustrated timeline, visual essay, digital story, or similar medium accompanied by a brief analytical narrative.

The goal is to understand how a single object or artistic tradition can illuminate broader themes of continuity, change, cultural identity, and artistic expression in Korean society.

4. Crafting Culture: Artist Engagement Project (25%)

Students will participate in an artist- or artisan-led workshop focused on a Korean artistic tradition or creative practice. Workshops may include calligraphy, ceramics, hanji arts, textile arts, jewelry making, printmaking, or other artistic forms.

The workshop experience should include engagement with a practicing artist, artisan, or cultural practitioner through discussion, demonstration, and hands-on participation. Students are expected to consider the relationship between artistic practice, cultural transmission, innovation, preservation, and creative labor in contemporary Korea.

Students will produce:

- A creative artifact or artistic work developed through the workshop
- Documentation of the creative process
- A critical reflection connecting the experience to course themes and readings

The emphasis is not on artistic mastery or technical skill, but on understanding artistic practice as a form of cultural knowledge, expression, and transmission.

5. Curating Korean Tradition: Collaborative Digital Exhibition (30%)

Working in teams, students will design a digital exhibition exploring how Korean artistic traditions, crafts, aesthetics, or creative practices have been preserved, adapted, and reimagined in contemporary society.

Drawing on course readings, field visits, object biography projects, workshop experiences, photographs, and observations, teams will curate an exhibition intended for a public audience unfamiliar with Korean arts and culture.

Each exhibition should include:

- A central theme or interpretive question
- Curated visual and material evidence drawn from course experiences
- Exhibition labels and contextual information
- Analysis connecting historical traditions with contemporary expressions
- Consideration of themes such as preservation, innovation, authenticity, commercialization, globalization, identity, or everyday visual culture
- A concluding curatorial statement explaining the exhibition's overarching interpretation

Students are encouraged to incorporate examples from museums, galleries, workshops, public spaces, commercial environments, and everyday life to demonstrate the diverse ways artistic traditions continue to shape contemporary Korean society.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A	74-76%	C
90-93%	A-	70-73%	C-
87-89%	B+	67-69%	D+
84-86%	B	64-66%	D
80-83%	B-	Below 64	F
77-79%	C+		

Note on Attendance and Participation: Consistent participation in classes, site visits, and required program activities is essential to the academic experience. Students are expected to participate fully and may not opt out of required components, as these activities are integral to course learning and collective discussion. If circumstances such as illness affect attendance, students must communicate promptly with the Center Director or a designated staff member. Absences may affect academic performance and course grades, and repeated or unexcused absences may result in additional academic or programmatic consequences. When absences are unavoidable, alternative academic work may be required.

Program Expectations

To support a respectful, engaging, and academically rigorous learning environment, students are expected to approach this program with professionalism, preparation, and openness. Because this is an intensive, field-based program, individual conduct directly shapes the quality of the shared academic experience.

- **Learning Community:** Students are expected to engage respectfully with differing perspectives, including those of classmates, guest speakers, and local partners. Agreement is not required, but attentive listening, intellectual openness, and respectful dialogue are essential.
- **Content Considerations:** Course materials and activities may engage sensitive or challenging topics. The classroom is a space for thoughtful, respectful engagement with complex ideas. When possible, faculty will flag particularly intense content in advance. Students who find that course content affects their ability to participate or keep up with coursework are encouraged to communicate with faculty and seek appropriate support.
- **Participation and Engagement:** Students are expected to come prepared and to engage actively in classes, discussions, and site-based learning. This includes contributing thoughtfully to discussion, asking questions, and engaging respectfully with faculty, peers, and guest speakers. Meaningful participation supports collective learning and is an essential part of the program experience.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Because this is a multi-country, field-based program, schedules and activities may change in response to local conditions or logistical realities. Students are expected to approach such adjustments with flexibility and professionalism. Adaptability is considered part of meaningful engagement in the program.

- **Academic Integrity:** Students are expected to complete all work honestly and ethically, in accordance with academic integrity standards outlined in course and program policies.
- **Managing Academic Work:** Students are responsible for maintaining reliable access to their academic work by keeping multiple copies using secure storage methods (e.g., cloud-based platforms or the learning management system). Technical issues such as lost files or device failures do not excuse late or missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Personal devices may be used for note-taking and course-related activities. Off-task use is not acceptable, particularly during discussions, site visits, or guest presentations, as it detracts from collective engagement.
- **Course Communication:** Course materials, assignments, and updates will be posted on Canvas. While the course calendar provides a general structure, adjustments may occur based on program flow or site-based learning opportunities. Students are responsible for checking the course site regularly and communicating promptly about access issues.
- **Recording Policy:** To support open discussion, recording of classes or program activities is not permitted without prior written approval from the instructor. Approved recordings are for personal academic use only. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Credit Hours: SIT adheres to the standard that 1 credit hour equals no less than 45 hours of coursework. The calculation is based on the standard 50-minute academic hour. The number of credits each course carries determines how many total hours each course involves in a semester. Of the 45-hours for 1-credit hour, one third is designated for direct faculty instruction. Direct faculty instruction includes all learning activities led by the faculty whether in the classroom or in the field — lectures, guest speakers, site visits, hands-on field activities, etc.

Note on Late Assignments: Because this program integrates classroom learning with site visits and debriefs, assignments are designed to build on one another and connect directly to

learning on location. *Timely submission is therefore important for maintaining continuity and full participation in the academic experience.* Extensions may be granted *in limited circumstances and on a case-by-case basis* with approval from the Program Director or a designated staff member. Requests should be made in writing as early as possible and no later than 12 hours before the posted due date. Students are expected to communicate proactively if challenges arise. Work submitted after an approved extension period may receive a reduced or failing grade, depending on the circumstances.

Note on the Use of Generative AI Tools: In this course, students may use generative AI tools only in ways that support their own intellectual work. Acceptable uses may include brainstorming questions, organizing notes, clarifying concepts, or supporting revision at the sentence or structure level. Students may not use AI tools to generate substantive analysis, strategic arguments, written sections, or oral responses that are presented as their own work. Because assignments emphasize applied reasoning, comparative judgment, and place-based analysis, students are expected to remain the primary source of ideas, interpretation, and decision-making.

Expectations for AI use may vary by assignment and will be discussed explicitly with faculty. In some cases, students and faculty may collaboratively establish guidelines for appropriate AI use for a particular task. Students are responsible for following the agreed-upon expectations and for seeking clarification if boundaries are unclear.

When generative AI tools are used in the preparation of an assignment, students are expected to acknowledge their use clearly and transparently, noting the tool used and the nature of its contribution (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, or language revision). This acknowledgment supports academic transparency and does not, on its own, imply inappropriate use. Policies on AI use may differ across courses and instructors within the program. Students should attend carefully to course-specific guidance and understand that responsible AI use is defined at the course level.

Sample AI Acknowledgment Statement: I used [tool name] for [purpose, e.g., brainstorming or sentence-level revision]. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are my own.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Module 1

This opening module establishes the philosophical and spiritual frameworks that underpin Korean artistic traditions. Students examine how Shamanism, Buddhism, and Neo-Confucianism each generated distinct aesthetic philosophies, visual vocabularies, and craft practices that shaped Korean artistic production across centuries. These frameworks serve as the interpretive foundation for the entire course

Session 1: Introduction to Korean Aesthetics & the Spirit World

Possible topics covered:

- Course overview and introduction to Korean aesthetic philosophy
- Shamanistic traditions and folk art: gut rituals, mudang iconography, shamanist painting (musindo)
- How shamanism functions as a trope of national identity — and a site of suppression and revival

Required Readings:

Kim, M. (2020). Early paintings of Korea: Murals and craft decorations. In J. P. Park, J. Rhi, & B. Jungmann (Eds.), *A companion to Korean art*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Session 2: Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism & Their Material Worlds

Possible topics covered:

- Buddhist art and architecture: temple iconography, pagodas, stone lanterns, bronze bells
- Bodhisattva imagery and the aesthetics of enlightenment
- How religious and philosophical values are embedded in decorative motifs (pine, bamboo, crane, orchid)

Required Readings:

Kim, Y. (2020). Buddhist architecture, politics, and gender in the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla. In J. P. Park, J. Rhi, & B. Jungmann (Eds.), *A companion to Korean art*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Kim, S. (2020). Sculptures of the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla. In J. P. Park, J. Rhi, & B. Jungmann (Eds.), *A companion to Korean art*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Chong, Yang-Mo et al. (1998). Arts of Korea. Metropolitan Museum of Art. — Section on Buddhist sculpture and metalwork [available open-access via [metmuseum.org/art/metpublications](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications)]

MODULE 2: HISTORICAL ARC: FROM COURT TRADITIONS TO COLONIAL RUPTURE

This module traces the evolution of Korean artistic forms from the Joseon dynasty through the Japanese colonial period, examining how court patronage, political change, and colonial disruption shaped both the production and survival of Korean artistic traditions. Students analyze specific art forms as historical documents and consider how colonial-era interruptions continue to shape contemporary questions of authenticity and continuity.

Sessions 3 & 4: Court Arts, Technique Traditions & Colonial Legacy

Possible topics covered:

- Joseon court painting: genre painting, landscape, portrait, and ceremonial painting
- White porcelain (baekja) and celadon (cheongja): aesthetics, technique, and patronage — the two ceramic traditions as windows into Buddhist and Confucian values respectively
- Hanji (traditional paper) and calligraphy: the art of the brush as literati practice
- Metalwork, bronzeware, and ceremonial objects: technique and ritual function
- Survival of craft under colonialism: individual artisans, resistance, and selective revival

Required Readings:

Brandt, K. (2000). Objects of desire: Japanese collectors and colonial Korea. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 8(3), 711–746. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-8-3-711>

Yoku, Kikuchi (2008). Yanagi Sōetsu and Korean crafts within the Mingei movement. In *Korea: The past and the present: Selected papers from the British Association for Korean Studies* (pp. 23–38). Global Oriental.

MODULE 3: CONTEMPORARY K-ART: GLOBAL MARKETS & COMMODIFICATION

This module examines how Korean artistic traditions have been transformed, commodified, and reinvented in the context of globalization and the Korean Wave. Students critically analyze the “K-Art” phenomenon, exploring the tensions between cultural preservation and market-driven innovation, and the role of the creative industries in redefining Korean aesthetics for a 21st-century global audience.

Sessions 5 & 6: Contemporary K-Art, Global Markets & Commodification

Possible topics covered:

- The emergence of “K-Art” as a global brand: how hallyu created international markets for Korean visual culture
- Tansaekhwa (monochrome painting) as Korea’s first major abstract movement: origins in the 1960s–70s, relationship to authoritarianism, decolonization, and postwar internationalism
- Museum and gallery economies: how Korean art institutions curate and export national heritage
- Commodification debates: authenticity, mass production, and the artisan vs. the market
- Revitalization movements: government programs, Living National Treasures (intangible cultural heritage) designation and its controversies
- Digital art, webtoon aesthetics, and the question of what counts as “Korean” art today

Required Readings:

Park, Joseph Sung-Yul. (2026). "Commentary: Can the Korean Wave Save the World?" Signs and Society.

Aikawa-Faure, Noriko. (2014). "Excellence and Authenticity: Living National (Human) Treasures in Japan and Korea." International Journal of Intangible Heritage, 9, 37–51.

MODULE 4: TECHNIQUE IN DEPTH: OBJECT, MATERIAL & CRAFT

This module takes students into the material and technical dimensions of Korean craft traditions through hands-on engagement with specific art forms. Through field visits to workshops, artisan studios, and craft villages, students develop the close observation skills needed for the Object Biography and Evolutionary Thread assignments. Each session pairs conceptual analysis with direct material encounter.

Session 7: Ceramics, Textiles & Paper

Possible topics covered:

- Pottery and porcelain in depth: kiln technology, clay bodies, glaze chemistry, firing techniques
- From Goryŏ celadon to Joseon white porcelain to contemporary studio ceramics: an evolutionary arc
- Fabric and textile traditions: silk weaving, ramie, natural dyeing, contemporary hanbok designers
- Hanji papermaking: mulberry fiber, traditional production process, contemporary applications in art and conservation
- Field visit: pottery or textile workshop and/or craft market — students select objects for the Object Biography

Required Readings:

- Park, J.P., Rhi, Juhyung, & Jungmann, Burglind (Eds.). (2020). *A Companion to Korean Art*. Wiley-Blackwell. — Chapter on Goryŏ celadon and Joseon ceramics [see table of contents for exact chapter numbers in your edition]
- Steuber, Jason & Peyton, Allysa B. (Eds.). (2017). *Arts of Korea: Histories, Challenges, and Perspectives*. University of Florida Press. — Chapter on the rich heritage behind contemporary Korean ceramics and studio practice

Session 8: Metalwork, Architecture & the Built Environment

Possible topics covered:

- Metalwork and bronzeware: casting techniques, Buddhist bells, royal regalia, contemporary jewellery design
- Traditional Korean architecture: structural principles, spatial philosophy, the concept of madang (courtyard)
- The hanok as total artwork: integrating space, material, and philosophy

- Contemporary architecture in dialogue with tradition: case studies of Seoul urban design and the hanok revival

Required Readings:

Park, Nani & Fouser, Robert J. (2014). *Hanok: The Korean House*. Tuttle Publishing. — Selected sections on the structural principles, materials, and philosophy of the hanok; and the contemporary revival of hanok living in Seoul

MODULE 5: SYNTHESIS: CONTINUITY, CHANGE & THE EVIDENCE-BASED ARGUMENT

This final module brings together the course's central themes of continuity and transformation through two culminating activities. The Gallery Walk sessions provide structured space for students to share and critique each other's analytical work, while the final class synthesizes the course's core question: how do Korean artistic traditions survive, adapt, and assert themselves in a globalized world?

Session 9: Gallery Walks — Evolutionary Thread & Object Biography

Possible topics covered:

- Student presentations of Evolutionary Thread projects: tracing one craft form across time
- Peer critique and discussion: what do different art forms reveal about the continuity/change dynamic?
- Gallery Walk: students display and discuss Object Biographies — shared reflection on material encounters
- Discussion: what counts as “preservation” and what counts as “loss” in the context of craft revitalization?
- Connecting material evidence to broader arguments about Korean cultural identity

No new required readings — students draw on full course reading list for presentations.

Optional Background Reading:

- *Yang, Jongsung. (2003). Cultural Protection Policy in Korea: Intangible Cultural Properties and Living National Treasures. Jimoondang.* — Policy framework behind the Living National Treasures system; useful for students addressing heritage preservation in their Evolutionary Thread

Session 10: Course Synthesis & Final Portfolio

Possible topics covered:

- Synthesis discussion: How have the course's art forms collectively illuminated Korean cultural values, historical change, and contemporary tensions?

- The evidence-based argument: how to build a claim from material, observational, and textual evidence
- Student sharing of Final Portfolio arguments — structured peer discussion
- Looking outward: the future of Korean craft and K-Art in an era of AI, digital reproduction, and global commodification
- Course reflections: what does studying art teach us about society that other methods cannot?