A Companion to Korean Art
These invigorating reference volumes chart the influence of key ideas, discourses, and theories on art, and the way that it is taught, thought of, and talked about throughout the English-speaking world. Each volume brings together a team of respected international scholars to debate the state of research within traditional subfields of art history as well as in more innovative, thematic configurations. Representing the best of the scholarship governing the field and pointing toward future trends and across disciplines, the Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History series provides a magisterial, state-of-the-art synthesis of art history.

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A Companion to Korean Art

Edited by

J.P. Park, Burglind Jungmann, and Juhyung Rhi

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Korean pop culture has recently become an international phenomenon. Millions of fans across borders cheer for pop songs, TV shows, and films from Korea. Newspapers and journals compete to generate frenzy over Korean pop culture as academic research investigates the reasons behind the ever-increasing popularization of cultural products from Korea. Major academic conferences on art and the humanities nowadays offer dozens of sessions on Korean art and culture. It is impressive that a country whose recent history has been marked by a series of disasters—thirty-six years of colonization by the Japanese empire, the Korean War, and a military dictatorship that lasted into the late 1980s—has risen to command the spotlight not only in its economic standing but also in cultural production. Going from one of the world’s poorest states in the 1950s to the thirteenth largest economy in the world today, Korea remains small geographically, commanding only one percent of the area of the United States or China. Nonetheless, it has become a major player in the international culture industry and a trendsetter in producing contents and technology.

Even with all the fervor over ‘contemporary’ Korean culture, there exist serious challenges regarding the presentation and understanding of ‘traditional’ Korean culture: genuine interest in pre-modern and modern Korean art and culture has been marginal. The neglect and lack of knowledge about Korean art and visual culture is due to the late arrival of international scholarship and public exhibitions with a focus on special aspects of Korean art. Until the turn of the millennium, with only a few exceptions, exhibitions of Korean art in the United States and Europe were conceived as general overviews of “5000 Years of Korean Art,” presenting a canon of ‘masterpieces,’ and often showing the same objects repeatedly.
with little variation. However, such a generic and unimaginative approach, rather than exploring the specificity of its visual culture, confirmed the age-old prejudice that Korean art and culture was little more than a smaller (and therefore a less interesting) copy of Chinese styles and traditions. Only when more specialized exhibitions started to be held and scholarly investigations into certain aspects of Korean art were published in the early 2000s, did it become clear that the peninsula’s heritage had its own distinct history and character, and that a blind spot on the map of East Asian culture needed to be filled.

Although Korean studies were well established at some of the most prestigious research universities in the United States and Europe, courses on Korean art were extremely rare. Similarly, Asian art courses rarely mentioned the contribution of the peninsula. In contrast dozens of schools in the United States currently offer courses on Korean art and leading research universities have established a regular curriculum. In addition, major museums, including the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Museum of Asian Art in Cologne, have designated exhibition spaces for Korean art. The significance of Korean art and culture is attracting increased attention across academia, but in the absence of any up-to-date college-level materials on this subject, teaching and learning about Korean art remains a challenge. Of course, articles on the topic have been featured in exhibition catalogues and in short handbooks from commercial presses, and commentaries and essays by non-professionals have appeared on websites, but few specialized research pieces have been published in peer-reviewed journals. In our experience of teaching Korean art history, we often had to assign reading materials we would never have considered for any other art history course.

Due to the dearth of Western experts in the field, most available texts on Korean art history in English are outdated, either because they do not reflect the latest research published in Korean, or because they do not answer questions of recent theoretical frameworks employed in the West. This lack of core teaching materials has been unanimously recognized as the biggest obstacle to conveying reliable update information on Korean art history outside Korea. Thus, this book will be the first professionally researched academic anthology on the history of Korean art in English, as it takes the latest Korean scholarly publications on the largest possible spectrum of Korean art and archeology into account and responds to the demands of a Western audience who sees Korean culture in the context of Asian and world history.

Furthermore, this volume can motivate instructors and scholars of Asian art history to incorporate the visual arts of Korea into their research and teaching. The

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1 The last two such exhibitions were *Arts of Korea* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1998) and *Korea: die alten Königreiche* at the Villa Hügel in Essen, Germany (1999). Rare exceptions were *The Story of a Painting, A Korean Buddhist Treasure from the Mary and Jackson Burke Collection* (1991) and *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor and Simplicity* (1993), both held at the Asia Society Gallery in New York.
geographic location of the Korean peninsula itself suggests its importance in pan-East Asian culture. Throughout its history the peninsula has been a much-contested region, due to its strategic geographical position. In the twentieth century it became, and still is, a battleground for superpowers. Starting with its forced opening in the late nineteenth century, the country has been frequently referred to as the ‘hermit kingdom.’ This idea is essentially wrong. It was conceived at a time when European powers, the United States, and Japan started to conquer, divide, and colonize East Asia. Within the Asian sphere the peninsula was always well-connected. Korea was an indispensable partner in the diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchange within East Asia. Receiving inspiration from diverse cultures on the Chinese mainland throughout history and exporting its own regional techniques, styles, and aesthetic ideas to its neighbors both in China and Japan, Korea was a most important player in the cultural exchange among the three countries for centuries. Thus, understanding its art is an important asset for historians of Chinese and Japanese art. Cultural exchange will be a pivotal topic throughout the entire volume. Just as studying Korean art without reference to Chinese art would be meaningless, the study of Japanese art definitely benefits from a sound understanding of Korea’s art and culture.

This volume covers the history of visual culture of the Korean peninsula from earliest historic times to the present. Followed by an introductory historical survey discussing major political, socio-economic, and cultural developments, this volume is divided into four parts: Ancient to Medieval Cultures on the Korean Peninsula, The Koryŏ Dynasty, The Chosŏn Dynasty, and Modern and Contemporary Developments. The essays in each part explore major aspects of the visual culture in a certain period while throwing light on the political, social, and religious contexts. In spite of the editors’ efforts to cover as many facets as possible, some themes were left out, partly for lack of extant materials and partly because little research has been done so far into important fields, which include architecture, calligraphy, and the history of print media. Research on historic sites and scholarship in North Korea are less accessible and therefore the chapters on the historic periods when the center of power was in the north, particularly during the Koryŏ dynasty, concentrate more on materials in South Korea and Japan. Despite such minor issues, this book aims to maintain theoretical and interpretive balance without falling into any regional prejudice and academic hegemony. Furthermore, contributors discuss visual and material artifacts of Korean art housed in various archives and collections around the globe. In sum, this book is the first successful collaboration among major scholars of Korean art in the Asia, North America and Europe that will enjoy a longer shelf life not only within the academic community, but also among the general public.

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2 In the field of calligraphy, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently premiered Beyond Line: The Art of Korean Writing, the first major exhibition of Korean calligraphy in the United States (June 2019). For an important Korean contribution to print history in East Asia, see Lothar Ledderose’s Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art, published by Princeton University Press (2000).
The Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History is a series of edited collections designed to cover the discipline of art history in all its complexities. Each volume is edited by specialists who lead a team of essayists, representing the best of leading scholarship, in mapping the state of research within the sub-field under review, as well as pointing toward future trends and lines of enquiry.

*A Companion to Korean Art* aims to rebalance and expand knowledge of the art of the Korean peninsular across a broad chronological sweep and in a cross-cultural context. The volume comprises newly commissioned essays that draw on the collections of Korean art in museums and galleries, in Korea and across the world. Supported by a introductory historical survey that sets historical, socio-economic and cultural developments into context, the essays cover Korean art from early beginnings to contemporary developments in art and cinema.

Together, these essays combine to provide an exciting and challenging revision of our conception and understanding of Korean art that will be essential reading for students, researchers and teachers across a broad spectrum of interests.

*A Companion to Korean Art* is a very timely and welcome addition to the series.

Dana Arnold, 2020
Readers interested in Korea’s past will frequently encounter the statement that Korea has five thousand years of history. It is beyond dispute that Korea has a very long history. However, the figure of five thousand years should not be taken literally. If Korean history is defined as the length of time there have been human settlements on the geographic region we now call Korea, then Korean history stretches back at least eight thousand years. It reaches back much farther than that, to forty thousand or fifty thousand years ago, if we want to say that any Homo sapiens on what is now a peninsula, even wandering bands of hunter-gatherers, counts as history. However, pushing that far into the past makes it awkward to use the term “Korea” since as recently as the last Ice Age, which ended about ten thousand years ago, what is now the Korean peninsula was connected by land to what is now China’s Shandong peninsula as well as through a land bridge to what is now Japan. If, however, we use the distinction historians often make between pre-history (meaning the period before written records) and history (the time period for which there are written records), then there are only around two thousand years of Korean history, since it is only within the last two thousand years that we have found written records produced on or near the Korean peninsula.

Moreover, it is anachronistic to use the term “Korean” for cultures and peoples who would not have defined themselves as living in the country of Korea or even as members of a Korean ethnic group thousands of years ago. In pre-historic times, people would, if asked, have given their kinship group, their village, or their tribe as the primary identity. There was no Korea they could identify with back then. When kingdoms first began to emerge in and around the Korean peninsula about two thousand years ago, people may have identified themselves as belonging to the kingdoms within which borders they lived but they definitely did not yet have a larger Korean identity, since
Korea had not yet emerged from the merging of those various kingdoms. Most historians argue that it has been only within the last thousand years, when most of the peninsula fell under the control of one government for the first time, that peoples living on the Korean peninsula have come to see themselves as one people, comprising a single cultural and political group. Nevertheless, in order to avoid the confusion a number of different names for different groups may cause, we will use the term “Korean” in this chapter [and the rest of the volume] for earlier periods as well, except when we want to highlight differences among the various groups that have contributed over the centuries to the formation of Korean civilization.

Besides, in discussing the evolution of Korean civilization over the centuries, it is important to remember that what people see as their history is more important than what their history actually was. Because Koreans in more recent centuries have come to believe that peoples in and around the peninsula millennia ago are their ancestors and therefore should be called “Koreans” as well, the belief that Korean history and culture forms an unbroken line stretching several millennia into the past has shaped their self-identity and therefore has played an important role in their continuing cultural production. In other words, Koreans, like people all over the world, have produced art, music, and literature partially on the basis of who they think they are, and who they think they are is significantly determined by who they think their ancestors were. Therefore, in order to more accurately reflect the cultural environment in which Koreans in recent centuries have constructed Korean culture, we need to take into consideration their assumption that they are building on a foundation of Korean civilization thousands of years old. One way to ensure we do that is to use the term “Korean” for people and cultural developments on the peninsula thousands of years ago even when we feel that is not technically accurate.

We can also justify our use of the term “Korean” before the peoples we are writing about would have used that term because it is clear that the various early cultures on the peninsula and stretching into Manchuria, as well as the kingdoms that appeared later, shared some distinctive characteristics that separate them from the Chinese cultural sphere and therefore constitute a separate cultural zone. One distinctive characteristic is language. Although it is highly unlikely that the various peoples on and around the peninsula spoke the same language two thousand or more years ago, it is highly likely that the languages they spoke were members of the same language family. And that language family is separate and distinct from the Chinese language family. Unlike Chinese, Korean is an agglutinative language (that means it sticks ['glues'] syllables to nouns and verbs to represent various grammatical functions such as tense and number, degrees of certainty and probability, and even levels of respect for the person spoken to and the person spoken about). Moreover, because it uses attached syllables to identify such grammatical distinctions as subject and object, it does not need to follow the strict subject-verb-object order we see in Chinese. Korean also has its own distinct sound system. Not only does it not have the tones we see in Chinese, it distinguishes three different k, p, and t sounds, and two different s sounds, in a way we do not see in Chinese. Even though it was not until the fifteenth century that Koreans had a phonetic script they could use to write the way they spoke (han’gül), they were clearly speaking a different language from Chinese for millennia before that.
Language is not the only cultural characteristic that separates Korea from its neighbors. The geography of Korea, the fact that it is a peninsula jutting off a part of Northeast Asia which was culturally and politically distinct from China until the last couple of centuries, means that it was close enough to China to borrow elements of Chinese culture but distant enough to adapt those borrowed elements to meet Korean needs and Korean aesthetic tastes and make them their own. The fact that it usually required either a walk of several days or a trip by ship across often rough seas to reach Chinese settlements allowed Korea to maintain not only its political but also its cultural independence. It also was separated by sea from the Japanese islands, guaranteeing that, until modern nautical technology shrunk distances in the late nineteenth century, Korea could maintain its political and cultural independence from Japan as well.

That is why we can find evidence of Korea’s cultural distinctiveness from ancient times up to the present day, from its early burial patterns and its housing styles to its cuisine (kimchi is a distinctly Korean form of fermented vegetables such as cabbages or radishes) and its religious culture (a unique mixture of imported and indigenous religions). And, of course, we also see evidence of Korea’s cultural distinctiveness in its art.

Prehistoric Korea

The first clear evidence of Homo sapiens on what is now the Korean peninsula dates back to around fifty thousand years ago (Bae 2012). This is the Paleolithic age, meaning the age of crude stone tools. By crude stone tools, we primarily mean hand axes. We know those hand axes are man-made because they all appear to have been hammered by other rocks to reduce their size until they can be held by one hand. They are also shaped through pounding to give them a pointed end on top of a round base so that they can be used for tasks such as hunting, skinning the results of a successful hunt, or digging up plants. The hand axes used in Paleolithic Korea are somewhat similar in appearance to the hand axes we find in Paleolithic sites in Europe and north China. But that doesn’t mean that the people in Korea were Europeans or Chinese, or that the people in Europe or China were Koreans! Technological similarities does not necessarily mean ethnic similarities. Rather people in Europe, people in China, and people in Korea independently discovered how to make the same sort of simple tool.

When we move into examining Neolithic culture in Korea, it is important to remember that not only does technological similarity not necessarily imply ethnic similarity, but technological and cultural distinctions do not necessarily mean ethnic differences. The Neolithic age in Korea, from about ten thousand years ago to about three thousand years ago, refers to progress in stone technology that results in the production of sharpened stone tools, such as arrowheads, spears, and even daggers made of stone. The Neolithic age in Korea is characterized by the emergence not only of polished stone tools but also of settled communities along with the appearance of various styles of pottery and different types of burials. Archeologists give different names to various Neolithic cultures to highlight diversities in their burial practices and pottery styles. However, we do not know if the different burial practices and pottery styles we find in Korea over the seven thousand years of the Neolithic period represent multiple ethnic groups or simply local variations caused when some members of one tribe moved to a new site and
adapted to slightly changed environments. We cannot tell from the archeological record if new groups of people moved onto the Korean peninsula, bringing with them new customs, or if the people already there simply changed the way they did things.

For example, although all the pottery during the Neolithic era is simple earthenware, meaning that it has not been fired at a temperature higher than about 1000º Celsius and therefore is not as hard as later ceramics, we find pottery with strips of clay applied to it for decoration and we find pottery decorated by markings that looks as though a comb has been run across the surface of the clay. We find earthenware jars with pointed bottoms and earthenware jars with flat bottoms. Then, about three thousand years ago, about the time Koreans started acquiring bronze artifacts, we find pottery with no decorations on the clay body. Instead it is colored either red or black instead of the brownish coloring of earlier jars. Do these different styles of pottery represent different ethnic groups or are they all the products of the same Korean ingenuity? We do not yet, and may never, have a definitive answer to that question.

We have the same problem with burial practices. There are said to be 30,000 to 40,000 dolmens on the Korean peninsula, all dating from the Bronze Age (1500 BCE–300 BCE) into the early Iron Age (300 BCE–100 BCE). Dolmens are large boulders placed on top of graves, sometimes placed directly on the ground above the burial pit and sometimes placed like an altar on perpendicular stones surrounding the burial pit (Lee Young-moon 2007). They can weigh several tons, so the fact that a lot of manpower was imperative to move them into place suggests that they were used to mark the grave of someone politically powerful. However, we find simple stone cist tombs dating from the same time period. A stone cist tomb is one in which the sides of a pit are lined with stone, the coffin is placed inside, and it is then covered with more stones and dirt. Normally, that simpler form of burial would imply a lower social status. However, though both dolmens and stone cist tombs are used during the Korea’s Bronze Age, if we excavate the graves under dolmens in most cases we find only stone artifacts, including stone daggers (the later dolmens found along the southern coast are a conspicuous exception). We are much more likely to find bronze daggers and other bronze artifacts in simple stone cist tombs. Yet we would expect that, since bronze daggers are more difficult to produce than stone daggers, being buried with bronze daggers would be a mark of higher status. Are we then dealing with two different burial customs, implying two different ethnic groups, living in Korea at the same time, or does the difference in burial goods imply different types of high social status? Might it be that dolmens were for the politically powerful, such as tribal chiefs, and stone cist tombs were for those with special status as leaders of religious rituals, since bronze artifacts are often associated with religious rituals? (See Bale and Ko 2006 on the rise of elites during the Bronze Age.) We have no way of answering that question unless we can invent a time machine and go back three thousand years in time to ask the people living then why they did what they did.

No matter what sort of graves they provided for their dead, one thing the people of Neolithic Korea came to share was the shift from hunting and gathering to the intensive cultivation of crops. It took a while to make that transition but before the Bronze Age began around 1500 BCE Koreans were already relying heavily on cultivated crops. They probably began to cultivate millet and soybeans around five thousand
years ago, in the middle of the Neolithic period. A thousand or so years later they began to grow rice as well (Lee Gyoung-Ah 2011; Norton 2007).

At the same time, however, Koreans were also mining the seas for food. Outside of the city of Ulsan, along Korea’s southeastern coast at a site called Pan’gudae, there is a cliff on which you can see rock drawings made by Koreans during the late Neolithic period and into the Bronze Age. Those drawings clearly show large sea animals, such as whales, sharks, and turtles, and show human beings hunting them. It is highly unlikely that the people who made those drawings were simply using their imagination. It is more likely that they made those drawings as a sort of magic to help them catch the animals they depicted using methods they were familiar with (Bangudae Petroglyphs Institute 2013).

The people on the peninsula had begun importing bronze artifacts around three thousand and five hundred or so years ago. By 800 BCE they were making their own bronze artifacts. Seven hundred years later they began making iron artifacts as well. Bronze and iron production implies craft specialization, which in turn implies large enough communities to support occupational specialists. However, archeological data tells us that people at this time were still living in pit-dwellings in small villages. Groups of those villages may have come under the political leadership of tribal chiefs, but no archeological evidence has yet been found for the existence of large towns or cities at this time, or for kingdoms, though histories written centuries later claim that kingdoms had already emerged before the Common Era.

The Chinese Stimulus

The earliest datable archeological evidence for a concentration of people sizable enough to be called urban is the result of Chinese intervention in Korea. Chinese records tell us that in 109 BCE China’s Han dynasty (208 BCE–220 CE) launched an attack on a political entity it called Chosŏn (we now call it Old Chosŏn to distinguish it from the dynasty that ruled Korea from 1392 to 1910). What that entity called Chosŏn was is not clear. Some later records call it a kingdom but we have not yet found any archeological or textual evidence testifying that there was a king who exercised any sort of centralized administration (a requirement for a kingdom to be a real kingdom), appointed local officials, and collected taxes (Barnes 2001: 9–15). However, it was strong enough to resist the Han for a year. It most likely was a tribal federation.

Chosŏn eventually was defeated in 108 BCE and the Han dynasty proceeded to establish an outpost on the site of what is now the city of P’yŏngyang, which they called Lelang (K. Nangnang). It established three other such outposts in and around the peninsula as well, but the others didn’t last long (Byington 2013). Lelang, however, lasted for over four centuries, until 313, and had a significant impact of the development of Korean culture. It is important to keep in mind that Han China did not make Korea a colony. Lelang was nothing more than an outpost with responsibility for acquiring goods from the inhabitants of the Korean peninsula through trade. There was no attempt to turn the people who were already on the peninsula when Lelang was established into Chinese either politically or culturally. Nevertheless, it is likely that it was through Lelang that the peoples on the peninsula were exposed for the first time to
organized government, to writing, and to urban life. For example, the oldest example of writing found in Korea comes from Lelang (Kim Chang-seok 2014: 200–203). Koreans also began to build brick-chamber tombs because of the influence of Lelang (Byington 2013: 126).

Map 1  Lelang and its neighbors. Drawn by Sanghwan Lee & mastered by Ina Jungmann.
It also may have been the market provided by Lelang, with its more than two hundred thousand inhabitants, and its connection to China proper that inspired the southeastern corner of the peninsula, an area later called Kaya, to become a leading producer of iron artifacts, which it sold both to Lelang and to Japan (Byington 2013: 172). The most important influence Lelang had on the peninsula, however, was the model of organized government it provided. It was only after Lelang had been established that Korea’s tribes began slowly organizing into larger tribal federations which evolved into kingdoms (Pai 1992). The traditional chronology, based on histories written centuries after the fact, has Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla as full-blown kingdoms in the first century BCE. The traditional dates for their birth as kingdoms are 57 BCE for Silla, 37 BCE for Koguryo, and 18 BCE for Paekche. That sounds far too early. Reports by a Chinese traveler suggest that most peoples in and around the Korean peninsula were still in the tribal federation stage as late as the second century. The largest political entity that Chinese traveler noticed was Puyŏ in the northern reaches of Manchuria, far from the peninsula, which he tells us had a king ruling over about eighty thousand households, meaning probably at most three hundred to four hundred thousand people, about twice the size of Lelang. Koguryo had only thirty thousand households at that time. Those are the only groups said to have any sort of strong central authority (Lee et al. 1993: 15–24). Moreover, the south, where Paekche and Silla were supposed to have emerged as kingdoms two thousand years ago, was much less politically centralized than even Puyŏ and Koguryo were (Byington 2009).

The Three Kingdoms and Kaya

Of the traditional three kingdoms of Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla, Koguryo emerged as a full-fledged kingdom first, but it was probably not until the early third century that Koguryo had a government with enough centralized authority to be considered a real kingdom. A century later, in 313, Koguryo was strong enough to conquer Lelang, which had limped along for almost a century after the Han dynasty had ended back in China. Despite its reach deep down into the peninsula, Koguryo remained primarily a Manchurian kingdom. Koreans often point to the stele of the Koguryo king Kwanggaet’o (r. 391–413) as the oldest example of writing by Koreans, but that stone monument to Kwanggaet’o’s martial accomplishments was erected on what is now the Chinese side of the Amnok (C. Yalu) River in what was then the capital of Koguryo. Its capital remained north of the Amnok River until 427 when pressure from the north pushed it southward onto the peninsula.

Paekche appears as one of many tribal federations in the southwestern quarter of the peninsula as far back as the third century but did not emerge as a real kingdom until the second half of the fourth century. It then engaged in struggles with Koguryo, forcing it to move its capital from the Seoul area to more secure sites farther south in the late fifth century (Best 2006). The last of the three kingdoms to emerge was Silla. The tribal federations in the southeastern corner of the peninsula did not begin to merge into a true kingdom until late in the fifth century. That kingdom then began to struggle with both Paekche and Koguryo. The wars among Silla, Paekche, and Koguryo lasted until the 660s, suggesting that the peoples of those three kingdoms did not see themselves as one people any more than the peoples of Europe, who have fought wars against each other in recent centuries, saw themselves as one people. The wars of the
Three Kingdoms were not a civil war. They were wars of one state against another. The eventual winner, with help from Tang China (618–907), was Silla, in 668.

Before Silla defeated Paekche and Koguryō, it had already absorbed the various city-states of Kaya (42–562 CE) in the southeastern corner of the peninsula. Kaya was a group of cities grown rich on trade with Lelang and with Japan. It was never able to coalesce into a unified kingdom with centralized authority before the last of those cities was absorbed by Silla in 562 (Byington 2012). Compared to the Three Kingdoms, Kaya had particularly close relations with the peoples living in southern Japan. We can trace the origins of pottery, armor, and horse trappings in Japan to earlier examples in Kaya. The exact nature
of the Kaya-Japan relationship, however, is not clear, though archeological evidence disproves early Japanese historical records claiming that Kaya was its colony.

Though, as already noted, the Three Kingdoms and Kaya coalesced at different rates and were as a result separate and distinct political entities, they shared certain political and cultural characteristics that differentiate that part of East Asia from its neighbors. First of all, with the exception of trade-oriented Kaya, their leaders, both kings and officials, were a hereditary military elite. They were warriors more than they were administrators. In determining elite status, both paternal and maternal ancestry were important, a trait we continue to see in Korea up through the nineteenth century. Moreover, family background and land ownership were more significant than official government titles in determining a person’s position in the social hierarchy. In addition, since those kingdoms evolved from tribal federations, the power of kings was limited by councils formed from representatives of the leading families. For example, the king of Silla could not go to war without the unanimous approval of the members of the Council of Notables (Hwabaek). It also took unanimous approval by the Council for Silla to officially accept Buddhism early in the sixth century.

**Buddhism and Culture**

Before Silla accepted Buddhism, it had already been accepted by Koguryo and Paekche in the second half of the fourth century. Buddhism was the first truly organized religion in Korea. Before Buddhism, religion was local, focusing on ritual interactions with neighborhood deities (often animated natural objects such as mountains and rivers) and ancestral deities. Bronze rattles found in tombs from two thousand years ago suggest the probable existence of shamans, ritual specialists who claim a special ability to interact with spiritual beings such as ancestors or long-dead heroes. However, neither animism nor shamanism established a pan-regional network nor did they promote the erection of impressive statues or worship halls.

Buddhism, on the other hand, brought with it from China not just the teachings of the Indian sage Śākyamuni Buddha (ca. 563 BCE–483 BCE) but also new forms of art, including statues of the many different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, paintings with religious themes, and monumental architecture. The Buddhism that entered Korea was Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahāyāna Buddhists emphasize that the Buddha took many different forms, appearing not only as the historical individual Śākyamuni but also as Maitreyā (the Buddha of the future) and Amitābha (the Buddha who presides over the Western Paradise). They also expressed in art their devotion to specific Buddhas as well as to Bodhisattvas, supernatural beings who had earned the right to enter nirvana but stayed behind in this world in order to help other sentient beings reach nirvana as well. Different Buddhists define nirvana differently but basically it means a state in which you are free from the frustrations and disappointments that are an unavoidable part of life in this world. Mahāyāna Buddhists produced wood and metal statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and also erected buildings to house and engage in ritual homage to them. In addition, they painted scenes inside and on the outside walls of worship halls to illustrate Buddhist teachings. Buddhism, therefore, was a significant stimulus pushing Korean art and architecture in new directions.
Buddhism began as a religion for the elite. Kings promoted it in the belief that if they showed devotion to Buddha, he would support their grip on power. That is why, for example, the magnificent temple Pulguksa was built in the Silla capital of Kyŏngju in the mid-eighth century. Pulguksa literally means “Temple for Buddha’s Realm.” However, the name does not imply that Buddhism was the religion of everyone in Silla. The second syllable in that temple’s name refers primarily to the ruling elite, so it would be best understood as “a temple asking the Buddha’s protection for the ruling elite in this country.” Nonetheless, before too long Buddhism began to extend beyond the court to the general population. It did not replace animism and shamanism but instead came to co-exist with them.

Mature Silla

By the time Pulguksa was built, Silla had eliminated Paekche and Koguryŏ and was in sole control of the lower two-thirds of the Korean peninsula, almost up to where the North Korean capital of P’yŏngyang is now. South Korean historians generally call this period in which Silla reigned supreme over most of the peninsula “Unified Silla” (668–935). North Korean historians, however, point out that Silla did not bring the territories of all three kingdoms under one government, since most of Koguryŏ’s territory fell under the control of the Manchurian-based kingdom of Parhae (698–926). They therefore insist that to call Silla after 680 “Unified Silla” is misleading. There is some merit in their suggestion, so recently some historians outside of North Korea have started using the term “Mature Silla” instead.

Mature Silla lasted until 935. In contrast to the constant military conflicts of the sixth and seventh centuries, it had a much more civilian air. Even ḥwarang, the young men from aristocratic families who provided much of the leadership on the battlefield during the wars against Paekche and Koguryŏ, faded into the background (Tihonov 1998; Rutt 1961). Rather than climbing on their horses to go forth and fight an enemy, the elite enjoyed sitting around Anapchi Pond in the capital city of Kyŏngju, exchanging poems, discussing Buddhist philosophy, and promoting art more in line with Chinese practice. When Silla was still a young kingdom, it produced art with a playful air. For example, there is a jar from the fifth or sixth century that has animal and human figures on it, with one of the human figures playing the kayagŭm (Korean zither). During that same period, Silla also produced a drinking cup in the shape of a warrior riding a horse. In the eighth and ninth centuries, however, Silla art became more serious, and more Buddhist (Rhi 2013). China was the dominant cultural force in East Asia at the time, providing the model for what an advanced civilization should look like. Silla wanted to be known as advanced as well, so it began to produce art that was more in line with the type of art, Buddhist and otherwise, that China was producing at the time. That transformation in art styles does not mean that Silla tried to imitate China in every way. Neither Daoism nor Confucianism, both important components of Tang Chinese culture, had much visibility in Silla. Nor did Silla abandon its hereditary caste system, including the important role maternal ancestors played in social class that China itself was beginning to question. Despite some emulation of