

**Curating Korea: Interpretation Strategies for the Representation of Korean Art & Culture
in U.S. Art Museums Using Permanent Korean Art Collections**

A RESEARCH THESIS

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by
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Abstract

The majority of Korean art collection holdings in the U.S. art museums are pre-20th century in nature, raising questions about their alignment with contemporary culture and the breadth of Korean cultural representation in Western art museums. Since curatorial and interpretive decisions shape how knowledge is communicated to visitors in exhibitions, this collective case study design examines curatorial and interpretive strategies used in the exhibition of Korean art in permanent galleries in U.S. art museums. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with curators and interpretation specialists at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Peabody Essex Museum, all of which recently opened or redesigned permanent Korean art galleries. Findings reveal that museum professionals actively address the historic limitations in their collections by employing thoughtful and innovative curatorial and interpretive approaches in order to present Korean culture in balanced and nuanced ways. By highlighting practical strategies currently used in the field, this study offers museum practitioners examples for designing exhibitions of Korean art that enhance visitor engagement and foster deeper cross-cultural understanding, and supplements discourse on the continued relevant, innovative and dynamic interpretation of non-Western collections.

Introduction

The last thirty years have seen a dramatic rise in domestic and international interest in South Korean popular culture, a phenomenon commonly referred to as *한류* (*hallyu*), which translates to ‘Korean wave’. This wave began in East Asia in the late nineties and, fueled by the global reach of technology and the Korean government's active, strategic investment in and support of its cultural production industries, quickly spread across the world (Jang & Paik, 2012; Kim, B.R., 2015; Kim, Y.N., 2021). *Hallyu* is often used to refer to elements of Korean culture such as film, television, music and food, but can also be extended to the country's art production, which has taken the global art market (The Korea Society, 2024; Movius, 2025; Sotheby's, 2024) and the museum sector by a storm (Carollo, 2024; Isbara et al, 2025; Kim, S.L, 2024; National Museum of Korea, 2007).

In museums, heightened attention to Korean art and cultural objects developed concurrently with waves of interest associated with other forms of Korean popular culture. With the extensive support of the Korean government and affiliated organizations, the 1990s and early 2000s saw “the first major wave of permanent Korean galleries opened across museums in the United States” (Park, H.S., 2025 Nov 14). Since then, there has been a slow, but steady expansion and diversification of Korean art holdings in museum collections (Choi, 2007; Ercums, 2023; Hong, 2024; Salgado Alvarez, 2024); a rise in research on the nature of collections of Korean art (Ercums, 2023; Kim, I.S., 2000; Kim, S.J., 2024; Park, J.Y., 2024; Paul, 2018); and heightened interest from the general public in exhibitions of Korean art which span various mediums and periods of production (Loos, 2023; National Museum of Asian Art, 2024; Panero, 2014).

Looking closely at art museums in particular, we can see that in the last five years alone, over twenty special exhibitions of Korean art have been mounted across the country (Appendix A, Table 1); new permanent galleries devoted exclusively to Korean art have been unveiled (Art Institute of Chicago, 2024; Fahey, 2024; PEM, 2025); and displays of permanent collections of Korean Art across the country have seen, or are slated to see, significant redesign or reevaluation (Fahey, 2024; KF Newsletter, 2009; National Museum of Asian Art, 2024). Most of these opportunities have occurred, in part, thanks to the generous support of Korean organizations such as the National Museum of Korea (NMK) and the Korea Foundation (KF). This support has included everything from object loans to conservation, financial, operational and research support, and has been carried out in collaboration with institutions in the United States who have expressed both a “willingness”¹ and a desire to further “promote an accurate and proper understanding of Korean history and culture.”² This highlights the fact that, “now, more than ever, museums are very conscious of what’s happening in Korea” and are “broaden[ing] the direction of their Korean exhibitions to reflect and further build upon the public attraction to contemporary culture” (Park, H.S., 2025 Nov 14).

Despite this deep proliferation of Korean art and culture in the Western museum sector, it has received limited attention as a subject of museological inquiry, especially as it relates to curatorial or interpretive practice. Existing scholarship has tended to concentrate more on critical analyses of the difficulty of cultural translation and its effect on the presentation of special exhibitions or objects in foreign institutions (Orr, 2023; Park, J.Y., 2024), issues of national image and cultural diplomacy related to the exhibition of cultural heritage in foreign institutions, including the impact this may or may not have on curatorial integrity and exhibition narratives

¹ Changshik Yoon, Director, Korea Foundation L.A. Offices, personal communication, November 25, 2025.

² Overseas Korean Galleries Support Program Team at National Museum of Korea, personal communication, December 8, 2025

(Kim, S.M., 2020; Min & Jin, 2017; Orr, 2023; Roe, J.R., 1995) and, as previously noted, the acquisition histories and general nature of Korean art collections in the U.S. museums. Though there has been a concerted effort to build out and enhance institutional infrastructure for Korean art in U.S. museums (Kwon, M.Y. and Pyo K.M., 2025 Nov 29), little has been done to bridge the gap between public interest and curatorial or interpretive resources for practice, and there remains much to learn about and be gained from looking more closely at how curatorial practices and interpretive methodologies for long-term exhibitions are shaping the way Korean art is presented to the public, and how this might inform best practices moving forward.

Whether museum visitors are conscious of it or not, curatorial and interpretive practice play a significant role in shaping public understanding of the art and cultures shared in museums. Curators are not only responsible for the care of collections, but exhibition design, narrative creation, community engagement efforts, research, and educational materials, amongst other things (Scorch & McCarthy, 2018), and are increasingly viewed as “indispensable narrators [who] bridge the gap between historical artifacts and contemporary society” through their ability to tell “compelling stories [which enrich] our understanding of art within a broader social context” (CiMAM, 2023). This knowledge making and sharing is achieved, in part, through the practice of interpretation.

In the museum context, *interpretation* refers to the ways a museum communicates information, such as stories, meanings, themes, and ideas about their collections, to their visitors (Anderson et al., 2017). While curation tends to be a more object-focused practice, interpretation has grown as a specifically visitor-focused practice, and serves to support and enhance curatorial vision and storytelling in a museum setting by “build[ing] bridges and remov[ing] barriers between people [and] art” (AAMI; Foley & Guillotte, 2025). It focuses on evoking curiosity and

fostering the creation of personal meaning making; engages visitors thoughtfully through provocative questioning rather than the didactic presentation of information; and seeks to use language that is accessible to the wide majority of people (AAMI; Anderson et al., 2017; Wolmer, 2017).

Many art museums are encyclopedic in nature, and therefore are considered representative of “a global perspective that informs the public about different cultures” (Bu, 2022), and curators in these spaces have often been referred to as stewards or guardians of collections and cultural heritage, displaying and teaching art “without geographical or material limits” (Ward, 2021). In reality, both have historically privileged “dominant Western ideals of race, class and gender” (Anderson et al, 2017). Curation and interpretation, and consequently museums, have traditionally been singular and authoritative in perspective, didactic and inaccessible in their narrative formation and communication of information, largely white and Eurocentric in nature, and “despite the increasing diversity incorporated in art museums...struggle to invent ways to accommodate alternative perspectives. This is especially true where exhibitions go beyond the individual artist and make some claim to present a culture or group” (Lavine & Karp, 1991).

However, over the last two decades, museological discourse which critiques and calls attention to these authoritative curatorial frameworks, as well as cultural representation and the exhibition of non-Western cultural heritage in museums, has risen significantly, deeply reshaping considerations for institutional practice, and shifting museums towards a more critical and self-reflective approach (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012; Schorch & McCarthy, 2018; West, 2019). This ongoing conversation has led to the reassessment of interpretive and curatorial practices in favor of ones that are centered around

thoughtful and nuanced storytelling; decolonization efforts that champion the inclusion of voices and perspectives from communities of cultural origin; and ongoing challenges to established Eurocentric and traditional museum frameworks and narratives for representation (Bu, 2022; Lonetree, 2012; Pegno & Souffrant, 2025; Rowson Love et al, 2021; Sandahl, 2018; Winter, 2002). This type of reflective inquiry and innovative curatorial and interpretive practice has sought to ensure that cultural representation in museums is not narrow, static or monolithic, but inclusive, dynamic and multifaceted, and to shift the museum from an authoritative institution to a “vibrant center for dialogue, exchange and research” (CiMAM, 2023) whose goal is to act as a true “global representative [of...] people through objects” (Ward, 2021).

Like the exhibition of any collection of cultural heritage objects, the exhibition of Korean art and cultural heritage objects in art museums serves as a vital educational resource for the appreciation and understanding of Korea’s art, culture, and history. A brief examination of the collections held by major institutions across the United States helps us form an understanding of how art museums have historically defined Korean art, and by extension, the boundaries that have been placed on Korean culture. In true encyclopedic fashion, collection holdings typically span more than 2,000 years of creative production and include works from a range of mediums dating from 57BCE to the present day. However, the majority of those objects currently skew heavily towards pre-20th century – specifically the Three Kingdoms period (Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla) [57BCE-676CE], the Goryeo dynasty (918CE-1392), and the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). Despite the growing desire of many institutions to diversify their collections through the acquisition of works from the Modern (1910-1950s) and Contemporary (1960s-present) periods (Kang, 2025; Park, H.S., 2025 Nov 14), a significant disparity remains.

Many art museums have had a permanent Korean art collection for decades, but never before has the art world experienced such a fervent desire for Korean culture. Taking advantage of the rise of public interest and the availability of institutional funding, the past five years have seen significant efforts to shine a new light on Korean art and culture, through innovative reinstallations of existing permanent galleries, and the opening of new, dedicated (culturally specific) permanent galleries. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Permanent galleries differ from special or temporary exhibitions in that they are long-term, ongoing displays, often featuring the museum's own collection of objects. They serve as valuable educational resources for visitors, providing greater depth and focus on subject matter that extends beyond the limited-run experience of special or temporary exhibitions (Strack & Cunniën, 2023).

That the majority of objects found in museums' permanent Korean galleries are of the traditional variety, stands in stark contrast to the “glittering, hypermodern image of Korea [that many people] know from pop culture” (Park, H.S., 2025 Nov 28). This imbalance has the potential to create a type of dissonance in visitor understanding of Korean culture, and raises questions regarding not only the scope of Korean cultural representation in American art museums, but the ways museum professionals navigate this in order to present thoughtful, nuanced, and engaging exhibitions which respect Korea's rich heritage while also acknowledging its vibrant and thriving present. The reinstallation of these permanent galleries has provided museums with an unparalleled opportunity to refresh and reevaluate understandings of Korean art and cultural heritage, and the ways in which Korea and its people are represented.

Using these reinstallations as the focus of inquiry, this study investigates the curatorial and interpretative strategies employed in the long-term exhibition of Korean art collections, the ways in which practitioners use these strategies to mediate the gap between collection holdings

and visitor understanding in their long-term exhibitions of Korean art, and subsequently how this is shaping current representations of Korean culture. To do so, this study looks closely at (1) the internal motivations and external factors driving the reinstallations; (2) the curatorial frameworks used in the exhibition of Korean art collections; (3) the interpretive strategies used and narratives constructed within those frameworks; and finally, (4) areas of opportunity in the representation of Korean culture using permanent art collections. Looking at curatorial frameworks allows us to understand who is shaping exhibition narratives and making the decisions about object selection, organization, and thematic content, while looking at interpretive practices enables us to understand how these stories are being organized and communicated to the public, offering greater insight into potential best practices as well as highlighting areas of opportunity for the future.

At a moment when public interest in Korean culture and art is rapidly expanding, and U.S. art museums are conscientiously investing in their Korean art collections via gallery reinstallations, it is important to examine the frameworks through which Korean art is presented because they ultimately shape public understanding of Korean culture, and influence standards for future practice. In addressing this gap, this study hopes to build on the body of research which critically analyzes the way non-Western cultures are represented in Western institutions; to aid museums in fostering a deeper cross-cultural understanding of Korean art and culture within the American context; to support incoming and current practitioners in talking about and interpreting their Korean art collections for display; and to contribute to the work so many individuals are currently engaged in to increase public understanding of Korean history, aesthetics, art and culture in U.S. art museums.

Methodology

This research uses a collective case study design, to gain an in-depth understanding of current curatorial and interpretive practices employed across the field. Data was collected through a series of hour-long, semi-structured interviews, paired with document analysis.

Sites were chosen using the following criteria – (1) encyclopedic art museums, (2) in the United States, (3) with a permanent Korean art collection, (4) who had, within the last five years, either (i) opened a gallery dedicated solely to a Korean art collection, or (ii) who had redesigned an existing permanent gallery exclusively dedicated to Korean art. The final sites included the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) which opened a new, dedicated gallery in November 2024; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), which re-designed their existing gallery in May 2024; and the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM), which opened a re-designed gallery in May 2025.

Participants were recruited from the Asian Art, Korean Art, and Interpretation/Learning departments at each site, where applicable and appropriate, and included curators and interpretation staff or consultants who had explicitly worked on the gallery re-designs.

Participant	Role	Affiliated Institution
Yeonsoo Chee	Korea Foundation Associate Curator of Korean Art	Art Institute of Chicago
Loren Wright	Assistant Director, Interpretation	Art Institute of Chicago
Bradley Bailey	Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Curator and Chair of the Asian Art Department	Museum of Fine Arts, Houston ³
Jiyeon Kim	Curator of Korean Art	Peabody Essex Museum
Jeanne Normand Goswami ⁴	Independent Interpretation Consultant	Peabody Essex Museum

³ During the interview process it was determined that the Department of Learning and Interpretation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston was not involved in the re-design decision-making process, and therefore they were not included in this study.

⁴ During the interview process it was determined that the Peabody Essex Museum does not currently have an Interpretation department, and as such that work is outsourced to an external Interpretation Consultant. Jeanne Normand Goswami is a former Peabody Essex Museum employee, and current freelancer, and was the professional consulted for the Yu-Kil Chun Gallery of Korean Art & Culture re-design.

Results

1. The internal motivations and external factors driving reinstallations

Across all three sites, it was found that the reinstallations were motivated most by an institutional and curator-driven desire to remedy an underrepresentation or poor representation of Korean art and culture within the respective institutions, and a desire for a broader and deeper cultural perspective from which to better engage and inform audiences. The reinstallations were unilaterally made possible due to increased opportunities for financial and operational support from the Korean government and affiliated institutions.

Desire for better representations of Korean art and culture

At AIC, Yeonsoo Chee, hired in 2020 as the museum's first Korean Art Curator, spearheaded the reinstallation of the Arts of Korea Gallery after noting that ceramics were more heavily represented, and the original entrance hallway location was not ideal for creating a holistic presentation.⁵ The new gallery, opened in 2024, provided “an exciting opportunity to broaden and enhance the presentation of Korean art” (Art Institute of Chicago, 2024 Oct 30).

At PEM, one of the first Western museums to collect Korean art,⁶ concerns that the “history and creative genius” of the Korean people had been overlooked (Cardin, 2025 May) prompted the hiring of Jiyeon Kim, the museum's first Korean Art Curator, in 2023. Her appointment was tied directly to the reopening of the Korean gallery, which had been closed for many prior, and highlights a renewed effort to present the collection and culture from a more informed and “valid”⁷ perspective.

At MFAH, the home of the first dedicated Korean art gallery in the American South, Arts of Asia curator Bradley Bailey acknowledged that it “had been a long time since [they] had

⁵ Yeonsoo Chee, interview with author, February 6, 2026.

⁶ Jiyeon Kim, interview with author, March 10, 2026.

⁷ J.Y. Kim, interview with author, March 10, 2026.

focused on Korea,”⁸ and he initiated the redesign after determining that the collection's quality did not align with that of the other Asian art galleries at the museum, as well as the fact that the gallery facilities were outdated both in appearance and functionality – factors which affect the willingness of external institutions to loan higher-quality objects for display.

While all three sites have historic collections of Korean Art, the recent creation of specialized curatorial positions and the investment in gallery reinstallation projects reflects a conscientious commitment to improving the representation and interpretation of Korean art, and demonstrates an institutional recognition of the need to present Korean culture with greater depth and curatorial expertise.

Building on societal interest to deepen engagement with Korean art and culture

This can also be seen reflected in the efforts to create new and more holistic presentations of Korean art which, capitalizing on the zeitgeist of interest in Korean popular culture, seek to broaden and deepen the public’s understanding of and engagement with Korea’s artistic production and cultural history.

At AIC, Chee’s goal was to create an introduction to Korea that resonated with contemporary visitors,⁹ enabling them to look beyond the more familiar “contemporary, glitzy K-pop culture” in order to see and understand the artistic and cultural history behind it (Esposito, 2025).

At PEM, Kim and Normand Goswami aimed to create a space which allows visitors from across the world to connect with the experiences of 19th century Koreans¹⁰, encourages Korean American visitors to expand their perspectives on heritage and cultural belonging (Van Dyke,

⁸ Bradley Bailey, interview with author, March 6, 2026.

⁹ Y.S. Chee, interview with author, February 6, 2026.

¹⁰ J.Y. Kim, interview with author, March 10, 2026.

2025), and which sets visitors up to understand that “Korean art isn’t just one thing, or [something] locked in time.”¹¹

At MFAH, Bailey focused on contextualizing a specific period of Korean art for a broad audience,¹² designing a space where visitors could appreciate masterpieces of the past in conversation with contemporary works from “Korea’s exciting present” (Fahey, 2024).

More opportunities for financial and operational support

A crucial factor making these reinstallations possible can be found externally in the generous support coming from Korea. Besides being supported internally, all three sites received significant support either financially, operationally or in the form of object loans from the National Museum of Korea (NMK) Overseas Korean Galleries Support Program, the Korea Foundation (KF), and the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation (OKCHF), and others.

At AIC, Chee noted that the funding secured, complemented by equal support received from the museum itself, provided an essential foundation for moving forward with the gallery opening. The curators at PEM and MFAH stressed that, without the support, their respective reinstallations would have been impossible. Operational support took the form of conservation support, access to experts and researchers from Korea for consultation and content review, and funding for curatorial positions . At AIC and PEM, the ability to create dedicated Korean Art curator positions was made possible through funding from KF and NMK, respectively.

While these relationships have the potential to be perceived as one-sided, all five participants considered this support and these international relationships to be mutually beneficial as “representing Korean art in [our] big and reputable institutions serves [organizations in Korea] as well, because they are also seeking better opportunities to support the

¹¹ Jeanne Normand Goswami, interview with author, March 18, 2026.

¹² B. Bailey, interview with author, March 6, 2026.

representation of Korea abroad”¹³ – and due to this support, the participants were able to further the goals and desires expressed internally at their respective institutions.

2. The curatorial frameworks used in the exhibition of Korean art collections

Traditional, curator-driven

Across all three sites it was determined that the curatorial framework employed was traditional and curator-driven, with some inter-departmental collaboration. This is in line with general operational procedures for exhibition planning across the sites, which participants noted does not normally include external community consultation or collaboration.

At AIC, the gallery location was decided amongst the Asian art curators, and Chee oversaw all curatorial decisions including the development of the checklist, thematic frameworks, and interpretive content. Loren Wright, Assistant Director of Interpretation, contributed to gallery organization, interpretive planning and content review.

Similarly at PEM, Kim developed the initial concept, and was supported in the formation of the interpretive frameworks by Jeanne Normand Goswami, an independent Interpretation Consultant. While the design process didn’t formally engage community members, Kim acknowledged that she informally sought advice from community members, scholars and other colleagues, and Normand Goswami noted some collaboration with contemporary artists in the development of certain exhibition narratives.

At MFAH, the curatorial process principally involved Bailey and a Korean curatorial assistant who oversaw the Arts of Korea Gallery and facilitated communication with the NMK. The museum does have a Department of Learning and Interpretation, but, as noted in Methodology, they were not involved in the curatorial decisions for the new gallery design.

¹³ Y.S. Chee, interview with author, February 6, 2026.

When asked whether or not they felt that the extensive support from external organizations impacted their curatorial integrity or influenced their decision making ability, all five participants agreed that they did not feel that to be the case, and that, beyond a request to check labels for accuracy by the NMK at PEM, the curators and interpretation professionals had full control over curatorial and interpretive decision-making.

3. The interpretive strategies and narratives used in the exhibition of Korean art collections

In terms of interpretive strategies and narratives, there were several similarities that surfaced across the sites. All three sites employed the use of non-chronological and thematic organization; sought to balance and complement the traditional with the modern and contemporary; and employed a variety of multi-modal interpretive strategies to deepen visitor engagement.

Non-chronological and thematic organizational frameworks

Across all three sites exhibitions were organized thematically rather than chronologically, largely because many objects in the collections lack precise dates. It was suggested that thematic organization can support more dynamic and integrated storytelling, and be perceived as more engaging and visually appealing to visitors. PEM and MFAH employed four thematic content sections, while AIC used six, and across all sites there were varying efforts to balance the traditional nature of the collections by touching on their contemporary relevance, resonance, and continuity.

Balancing and complementing the traditional with the modern and contemporary

This commitment to balancing the historic with the contemporary can be seen reflected in the narratives constructed within the thematic sections, the selection of objects, and gallery design choices.

i. Thematic content sections

AIC's six themes introduce Korea's history, and religious, political and material cultures, highlighting “nuances that can speak to a current audience, [and] showing that these are not just alienated objects from a particular historic moment.”¹⁴ Each section also includes select contemporary works that engage with traditional forms and materials, and in the interpretation of those artworks, Chee talks about how past influences are still relevant, and how they shape universal experiences and relationships today.

PEM's four themes emphasize the dynamic nature of Korean art and culture, and take visitors through a journey from the 19th century to present day, making explicit connections across time by showing how traditional forms evolved into contemporary practice,¹⁵ and posing rhetorical questions throughout which encourage reflection, questioning and empathy from visitors about the thematic content they are viewing. It was also important to Kim that there were elements highlighting the unique immigrant experiences of the Korean American community in the U.S., so the narratives and artists represented in the fourth and final section are a reflection of those individuals' experiences.

MFAH focuses on a specific period of time – the Joseon dynasty – across four themes highlighting specific cultural elements important to the period. Many of these elements still have resonance today, and while the installation offsets these 19th century narratives with “two contemporary works interpreting Joseon-era subjects” (Fahey, 2024) in an effort to “show that [this culture] continues to exist”¹⁶ and influence artists, it was made clear that, narratively, there is less of an explicit focus on highlighting those connections within the actual interpretive content.

¹⁴ Y.S. Chee, interview with author, February 6, 2026.

¹⁵ J. Normand Goswami, interview with author, March 18, 2026.

¹⁶ B. Bailey, interview with author, March 6, 2026.

ii. Object selection

Along with drawing these connections thematically between Korea's past and present, the installations across all three sites conscientiously complement their more traditional collection objects by including modern and contemporary objects as well. At AIC there are four¹⁷ artworks created by living artists which, as previously mentioned, are all a contemporary take on a historical form.¹⁸ At PEM, Kim specially commissioned work by a contemporary artist¹⁹, juxtaposed traditional Korean mask play with reinterpreted contemporary masks²⁰, and displayed and acquired several other contemporary works²¹ to show that the installation is an ongoing conversation between the U.S. and Korea. At MFAH, two contemporary works²² were installed to complement the more traditional forms, and a case lined with LED panels has been installed to include video art by Korean artists in the future.

iii. Gallery design choices

The multifacetedness of Korean aesthetics and culture is similarly displayed through intentional interior design choices.

At AIC the gallery was designed to be a “poetic and immersive experience” (Future Firm, 2024), and by intentionally locating it between the Chinese and Japanese galleries, Chee hoped

¹⁷ The four contemporary works currently on display in the Korean Art Gallery at AIC include *Meditation-Staying V, SC36* (1994, Choi Sungjae); *Globular Vase* (2005, Lee Kang Hyo); *White Moon Jar* (2015, Kwon Dae-sup); and *Aggregation21-JUO73* (2023, Kwang-Young Chun).

¹⁸ L. Wright, interview with author, March 13, 2026.

¹⁹ Yang Sookyun (b. 1982)

²⁰ Contemporary masks from *Seoul House*, a 1980s electric rap opera performance by German born Korean American artist Y. David Chung (b. 1959)

²¹ “A work by Nam June Paik projects the looped image of a celadon vase through closed-circuit television. Nearby, the pairing of a moss-green 1960s hanbok, the traditional formal attire for a woman, with a 1959 oil painting, *Young Girl-Youngjoo* by Kim Hyung Koo, creates a poignant vision of postwar reconsiderations of the past.” (Hatch, 2025)

²² The two contemporary works currently featured in the Arts of Korea Gallery at MFAH are *Moon Jar* (2018, Geejo Lee) and *First Wind* (2015, Ran Hwang).

to highlight the “collaborative, multi-directional and cross cultural influences”²³ that have shaped and continue to shape Korean culture today.

At PEM, the gallery palette of vivid yellow, green, blue, and pink pastels was inspired by *jogakbo* (조각보), a traditional Korean style of patchwork used to make wrapping cloth, which Kim felt was both “modern and timeless, and which would still look fresh in ten years.”²⁴

At MFAH, the gallery design was focused on balancing “the austere beauty and artistic restraint of Korea’s Joseon period with the cutting-edge, sleek aesthetics of contemporary Korea” (Fahey, 2024).

Variety of multi-modal interpretive strategies

Beyond the use of thoughtful and provocative thematic organization, contemporary artworks, and intentional gallery design, interpretation across the three sites included a variety of engaging and multi-modal strategies including first-person interpretive panels (PEM), limited bilingual interpretation (AIC & PEM), the use of auditory elements (AIC, PEM & MFAH), and digital interactives (AIC & PEM).

i. First-person interpretive panels

At PEM, first-person community-of-origin voices were incorporated into every thematic section in what PEM referred to as a ‘Korean voice panel’, which highlight specific individuals, and use first-person quotes to introduce the individual's biography or share a personal story, and show how they are connected to the collection.²⁵

ii. Limited bilingual interpretation

Participants from both AIC and PEM noted that due to space constraints, full bilingual interpretation was not feasible, but artwork titles, mediums and artist names are available in both

²³ Y.S. Chee, interview with author, February 6, 2026.

²⁴ J.Y. Kim, interview with author, March 10, 2026.

²⁵ J. Normand Goswami, interview with author, March 18, 2026.

English and Korean on objects labels and select interpretive panels. At AIC, an Essentials Tour stop in the Arts of Korea Gallery has both audio and written descriptions provided in Korean. The MFAH gallery does not currently employ bilingual interpretation in their gallery.

iii. Auditory elements

As previously mentioned, AIC has at least one stop on their audio tour in the Art of Korea Gallery, at contemporary artist Kwon Dae-sup's *White Moon Jar* (2015). At MFAH they are currently in the process of developing an audio guide which will include more information for each thematic section, including “a stop at Ran Hwang’s work, where she will be talking about her personal biography.”²⁶ Though PEM does not have an audio tour at this time, in a section featuring traditional Korean instruments there is an audio interactive that allows visitors to hear what those instruments would sound like.²⁷

iv. Digital media interactives

Digital media interpretation is employed via tablet interactives, video artwork, conservation videos, and QR codes. At AIC there is an interactive iPad feature that visitors can swipe through which offers a deeper dive into the “techniques and symbolism behind *sanggam* (상감)”²⁸, a traditional Korean inlay technique featured in a portion of the ceramics on display.

At PEM, the first thing you see when you enter the gallery is a commissioned video work created by a contemporary media artist, depicting her own interpretation of Yu Kil-Chun’s²⁹ journey, which serves as both an artwork and an interpretive device. At a folding screen conserved by the Leeum Museum of Art, there is a video (provided by Leeum and translated by

²⁶ B. Bailey, interview with author, March 6, 2026.

²⁷ J. Normand Goswami, interview with author, March 18, 2026.

²⁸ Y.S. Chee, interview with author, February 6, 2026.

²⁹ Yu Kil-Chun is the namesake of the PEM gallery. He was a member of the first Korean delegation to the United States in 1883, became an important figure in the Salem community, donated many of his belongings to the museum, and is viewed as a “pioneer for people who first travelled globally or settled down in another place and then had to adapt to that culture” (Jiyeon Kim, interview with author, March 10, 2026).

PEM) depicting the restoration process, and offering insights into the work that goes into preparing objects for display. By a *hwarot* (활옷) (a traditional bridal robe) display, there is a video highlighting the “tradition of sharing robes, showing how it was used and mended over time, and how it is still used in modern weddings.”³⁰ At the installation of David Chung’s contemporary mask play, the team at PEM employed the use of QR codes to make up for the lack of space for a screen playing the opera, allowing visitors to use their phones to watch clips of the opera and see the objects in use.

While the MFAH does not currently have any digital or tech-related interactives implemented in the gallery, Bailey noted that part of the conditions of the grant received for the reinstallation requires a certain amount to be spent on tech and digital programs, and they are still in the process of designing those.

4. Areas of opportunity in representing Korean culture using permanent art collections.

Collection Content Limitations

Across the sites, the greatest area of opportunity for the representation of Korean culture lies in the limitations of the collection holdings, both in content and in quantity.

At PEM, the collection is extensive but consists of mostly 19th and 20th century everyday objects rather than the so called ‘masterpiece’ artworks.³¹ Kim noted that while she was initially a little worried that their collection would not meet visitor expectations, by leaning into the uniqueness of their collection they were able to proudly showcase a new side of Korean art.

At AIC, Wright and Chee acknowledged that the Korean art collection is relatively small and concentrated heavily on Goryeo era ceramics, thus requiring loans from the National Museum of Korea in order to offer a more holistic and diverse presentation.

³⁰ J.Y. Kim, interview with author, March 10, 2026.

³¹ J.Y. Kim, interview with author, March 10, 2026.

At MFAH, the strength of the collection is 20th century works, but even more limited in size than AIC, making them heavily reliant on external loans, which comes with additional logistical and contractual constraints. For example, they are “contractually obligated, and not allowed to, on [their] own, simply open one of the cases and move something”.

Expanding & Diversifying Through Acquisitions

All three institutions expressed a desire to strengthen and diversify their Korean art holdings through future acquisitions. At MFAH, Bailey noted that his dream would be to expand the permanent collection, as this would reduce their reliance on loans and further increase curatorial flexibility. At AIC, Chee hopes to broaden the collection through the acquisition of ceramics, paintings and contemporary works in order to deepen the museum’s interpretations of Korean art. At PEM, where, as previously noted, the collection is large but consists of mostly 19th and 20th century vernacular objects, the desire is to incorporate more contemporary works which complement existing themes and narratives of the museum’s collection.

Limitations Around Acquisitions

Desires around acquisitions come with their own host of limitations, and the difficulty in acquiring new works is summarized succinctly by Bailey when he says that “acquiring Korean art is difficult because [in order to be able to acquire an object] the provenance has to be clean; it has to be museum quality, and there are a very limited pool of objects available of that quality; and then you have to be able to afford it.”³² He also pointed out that while there are “seemingly endless [externally supported] funds for staffing, promotions, and programming”, there is little in the way of financial support that can be applied to acquisitions.

³² B. Bailey, interview with author, March 6, 2026.

Looking Forward and Dreaming Big

Despite these limitations, participants at all sites remain enthusiastic about the future of representing Korean art and culture. Bailey noted both growing opportunities and interest in Korea as a field of study and exploration within museums. Chee expressed a desire for the gallery to continue to thrive and evolve through “new and robust” rotations of work which explore new ideas, themes and techniques; while Wright articulated a hope for the Korean collection to grow even beyond the confines of the Korean gallery in the future, and be incorporated into “other parts of the Asia galleries, and even into other areas of the museum.” Normand Goswami expressed an interest in exploring themes of cross-cultural exchange that predates Western colonial influence; and Kim shared that she believes “Korean art has a unique voice, and can be shared by everyone”, and her desire is to continue “spark[ing] a curiosity and sense of respect for all cultures that continues to endure, adapt, and inspire” (Cardin, 2025 July).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand current strategies and practices employed in the long-term exhibition of permanent Korean art collections in U.S. art museums, and how these are shaping current representations of Korean art and culture. The recent reinstallation of Korean art galleries at three different museums across the U.S. provided the focus of this study, and the following findings were revealed:

1. Museums are aware of and responsive to the zeitgeist surrounding Korean art and culture, and strong curator and institutionally driven motivations exist to address the historic underrepresentation of Korean art and culture in museums.

All participants expressed the existence of individual and institutional motivations to broaden, deepen, and reconceptualize presentations of Korean art in order to provide more nuanced and holistic explorations of Korean art history and culture, indicating that representation alone is insufficient without more substantive reinterpretation of existing narratives. Institutional support for these initiatives reveals that museums are both responding to public interest (Park, H.S., 2025 Nov 14), and working within wider museological efforts to challenge Eurocentrism in museums, showing alignment with current trends across museum practice to correct, deepen and more thoughtfully engage with representations of non-Western cultures (Bu, 2022; Karp & Lavine, 1991).

2. External funding and support plays a significant role in the exhibition of Korean art in U.S. art museums.

Findings demonstrate that significant funding and operational resources from the Korean government and affiliated organizations³³ enabled curators to re-install permanent collection displays in ways which address the historic underrepresentation of Korean art, and foreground the depth, continuity and relevance of Korean culture. Resources supported gallery reinstallations, dedicated curatorial positions, collections research, conservation initiatives, technological interpretation, programming, and object loans. While some internal institutional support existed, these external partnerships functioned as critical enablers for the reinstallations rather than mere supplementary resources.

Participants confirmed that external support did not impact their curatorial integrity or influence decision making; rather, it expanded access to funding, scholarship and interpretive materials, enabling the creation of holistic and dynamic exhibitions. While this complicates

³³ National Museum of Korea (NMK) Overseas Korean Galleries Support Program, the Korea Foundation (KF), and the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation (OKCHF)

assertions made that external support necessarily compromises curatorial integrity by sanitizing or censoring certain narratives in order to promote positive national branding narratives (Orr, 2023), these findings ultimately demonstrate that institutional efforts to expand Korean representation remain structurally dependent on external partnerships, and highlight gaps in existing infrastructure for non-Western collections (Kwon M.Y. & Pyo K.M., 2025 Nov 29).

3. There remains a persistence of traditional curatorial frameworks.

Though current discourse advocates for participatory, community-based practice (Anderson et al., 2017; Pegno & Souffrant, 2021; Scorch & McCarthy, 2018), the findings highlight a gap between museological theory and institutional practice, revealing that exhibition narratives, thematic structures and object selection remain largely curator-driven across all three sites, reinforcing established forms of curatorial authority (Rowson Love et al., 2021). However, PEM's use of limited informal consultation with community members, scholars and artists, demonstrates that the boundaries of the 'traditional curator' (Rowson Love et al, 2021) are becoming more flexible, and indicate partial alignment with and movement towards collaborative practices advocated within decolonial and participatory museum discourse.

Across all three sites, staff also emphasized the value of having professional staff with direct ties to Korean heritage and culture. Their lived experience and cultural knowledge contributed to more informed and nuanced interpretations of Korean art and culture. While this is not a substitute for community-based practice, it does show the benefit of engaging in institutional diversification, and supports decolonial practices critiquing the historically Eurocentric nature of curatorial practice (Karp & Lavine, 1991; Lonetree, 2012; Scorch & McCarthy, 2018).

4. Inter-departmental and external collaboration with interpretation professionals is a growing part of curatorial practice.

Though the findings have revealed the persistence of traditional curatorial models, a closer look at AIC and PEM suggests collaboration and consultation with interpretation professionals is becoming an important element of curatorial practice. At AIC, interpretation staff supported gallery organization, interpretive planning, and content review. At PEM, which lacks an interpretation department, an external interpretation consultant supported the curator in establishing the interpretive framework, and provided inspiration and insight for innovative and engaging interpretive content. These examples indicate a shift in authority within exhibition development, wherein meaning making is not entirely exclusively the role of the curator. These findings also support scholarship highlighting the growing role of interpretation in enhancing curatorial practice (AAMI; Anderson et al., 2017; Foley & Guillotte, 2025; Wolmer, 2017), and provides practical pathways for museums seeking to move towards more visitor-centered and experiential forms of engagement.

5. Museum professionals are aware of the limitations of their collection holdings and are implementing intentional and innovative interpretive strategies to overcome them.

Across all three sites, participants acknowledged the limitations of collection holdings related to object type, chronology and representational scope, the impact this has on shaping dynamic and holistic presentations of Korean culture, and the concerted efforts they have undergone to address these gaps in their reinstallations. This validates concerns identified in the introduction of this study, and addresses the core purpose of this research: understanding how museum professionals overcome these limitations to create a relevant and comprehensive

presentation of Korean art and culture. Despite differences in institutional capacities, all sites employ non-chronological, thematic organization and a variety of multi-modal interpretive strategies to deepen visitor engagement. These approaches balance the traditional, and heavily pre-modern collections with modern and contemporary elements, creating strong narratives supporting relevance and continuity.

Thematic sections present dynamic and provocative but accessible narratives on religious, political and material culture, symbolism, immigrant experiences and the meaning, uses and importance behind everyday objects. Connections between past and present are highlighted through the incorporation of contemporary and modern works of art, aesthetic gallery design balancing the modern and traditional, and interpretation and interactives demonstrating how objects and techniques from the past continue to carry significance, inspiring artists and fostering meaning making today.

The breadth of interpretive strategies employed across the sites demonstrate a shift from object-centered displays towards experience and visitor-oriented interpretation. Current interpretive scholarship (Anderson et al., 2017) emphasizes the importance of multisensory and immersive experiences for enriching visitor understanding and experiences in museums. The use of a diverse array of strategies – question panels, first-person narratives, live music, audio guides, interactive tablets expanding on niche techniques, video artworks and conservation videos, and QR codes which allow engagement beyond the constraints of the gallery space – across the sites demonstrates alignment with current best practices for evoking curiosity, and engaging visitors critically and thoughtfully (AAMI; Anderson et al., 2017; Wolmer, 2017). Rather than functioning as supplementary tools, these interpretive strategies become central to the contextualization and meaning-making process in the galleries.

Collectively, these strategies help mitigate the potential cognitive dissonance between *hallyu* influenced visitor expectations and the reality of the historical Korean art collections, bridging the gap between historical collections and contemporary society (CiMAM, 2023; Esposito, 2025). The resulting exhibitions are dynamic, multifaceted, and engaging, reshaping how non-Western collections are contextualized and interpreted in Western institutions, and offering rich examples and inspiration for future best practices.

6. Practitioners expressed a desire to expand and diversify their collections through acquisitions, yet face difficulties doing so.

Findings reveal that the greatest area of opportunity in creating holistic representations of Korean culture lies in the limitations of the collection holdings. While participants expressed a desire to expand and diversify their collections in order to curate even better presentations, they also described significant barriers to acquiring museum quality Korean artworks including provenance concerns, scarcity, high market costs and competition within the global art market. While previous findings highlighted the breadth of opportunities available for external support, it was revealed that there is no funding from the Korean government that can be used by foreign institutions for acquisitions, thus making domestic institutions more reliant on museum-to-museum loans, which come with fixed, temporary, short or long-term loan lengths and their own set of contractual obligations.

This highlights an area of opportunity related to the acquisition of Korean art and cultural objects, with findings suggesting that long-term transformation and sustainable change in the representation of Korean art in the West will require more than exhibition-based initiatives, and will depend on the development of stronger institutional infrastructure and reciprocal partnerships capable of supporting collection growth.

7. Limitations aside, practitioners are excited about the future of representing Korean art and culture.

The findings reveal a positive outlook in regards to opportunities to represent Korea through its art and cultural heritage objects, and participants described a variety of exciting visions and desires for the future including: new and robust rotations in the galleries which present even more new ideas, themes and techniques; the potential to grow beyond the dedicated gallery to interact with other cultural collections and areas of the museum; and the ability for Korean art to touch, inspire and resonate with a wide variety of people from all backgrounds.

Implications

Prior to this work, there was an absence of formal research regarding curatorial frameworks and interpretive strategies related to the exhibition of Korean art and culture. This study fills that gap and has great value to practitioners seeking to exhibit and interpret their Korean art collections in a manner which fosters deeper cross-cultural understanding of Korean culture within a Western context, and carries significant implications for museum practice, and broader museological discourse surrounding the representation of non-Western cultures in Western museums.

The findings demonstrate that practitioners can create more holistic and relevant representations of culture, even with limited collections, through intentional interpretive planning and innovative exhibition design. They also further emphasize the value of collaborative interpretive processes, particularly the inclusion of interpretation specialists, contemporary artists and community perspectives in exhibition development. While traditional, curator-led frameworks remain dominant, the study indicates that even limited collaborative and participatory approaches can deepen nuance, accessibility and cultural resonance within gallery

spaces. Additionally, the implementation of first-person voice panels, multimedia interpretation and interactive technologies across the sites highlights the growing importance of incorporating visitor-centered interpretation aimed at fostering engagement and cross-cultural understanding. Together, these findings provide practical and broadly applicable examples for museums seeking to reinterpret historical collections in ways that are more inclusive, dynamic and responsive to contemporary audiences and cultures.

An acknowledged limitation of this study was this researcher's inability to travel to the sites for direct observation and analysis of the execution and reception of these reinstallations, and by extension, the success and impact of curatorial intent and interpretive strategy on visitor experience and understanding of Korean art and culture. Though some document analysis was conducted that found generally positive descriptions of the new galleries, no critical engagement with their reception was found. Participants noted that visitor-focused research or evaluations measuring these elements had yet to be conducted by the museums.

Understanding how visitors experience and understand exhibitions is vital to measuring the success of curatorial and interpretive decisions, and ensuring the continued relevance and efficacy of museum practice. Further research might focus on the visitor perspective, looking at current perceptions of Korean art and culture, whether *hallyu* plays a role in visitors' entrance narratives or affects their engagement with the historic permanent collections, and assessing the success and impact of the curatorial and interpretive decisions on visitor experience and understanding of Korean art and culture as something which bridges contemporary and historical spheres.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Opening	Exhibition	Institution
2026.03.07	<i>Korean National Treasures: 2,000 Years of Art</i>	Art Institute of Chicago
2025. 11.08	<i>Korean Treasures: Collected, Cherished, Shared</i>	National Museum of Asian Art
2025. 03.21	<i>Juxtaposition and Juncture in Korean Modern and Contemporary Art</i>	Cleveland Museum of Art
2025. 03.02	<i>Lunar Phases: Korean Moon Jars</i>	Denver Art Museum
2024. 12.02	<i>Colorful Korea: The Lea R. Sneider Collection</i>	The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2024. 08.28	<i>Meot: Korean Art from the Frank Bayley Collection</i>	Seattle Asian Art Museum
2024. 04.27	<i>Do Ho Suh: Public Figures</i>	National Museum of Asian Art
2024. 03.24	<i>Hallyu! The Korean Wave</i>	MFA Boston
2024. 02.25	<i>Korean Treasures from the Chester and Cameron Chang Collection</i>	Los Angeles County Museum of Art
2023. 12.03	<i>Perfectly Imperfect: Korean Buncheong Ceramics</i>	Denver Art Museum
2023. 11.07	<i>Lineages: Korean art at the Met</i>	The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2023. 10.28	<i>Korea in Color: A Legacy of Auspicious Images</i>	San Diego Museum of Art
2023. 10.21	<i>The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989</i>	Philadelphia Museum of Art
2023. 10.07	<i>Park Chan-kyong: Gathering</i>	National Museum of Asian Art
2023. 09.01	<i>Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s–1970s</i>	Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
2022. 08.06	<i>Jegi: Korean Ritual Objects</i>	The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2022. 09.24	<i>Park Dae Sung: Ink Reimagined</i>	Hood Museum of Art
2022. 09.11	<i>The Space Between: The Modern in Korean Art</i>	Los Angeles County Museum of Art
2022. 07.17	<i>Park Dae Sung: Virtuous Ink and Contemporary Brush</i>	Los Angeles County Museum of Art
2021. 12.13	<i>Shell and Resin: Korean Mother of Pearl and Lacquer</i>	The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2021. 08.27	<i>Likeness and Legacy in Korean Portraiture</i>	Asian Art Museum