The traditional Korean dance form Seungmu provides a metaphor for the challenge of defining and representing the rich diversity of Korean art. In Seungmu, the story of a life is illustrated through seven distinct scenes, major events or experiences that summarize a person’s existence. These pivotal moments—including birth and death—are meaningful and essential, but they cannot truly define a life in its entirety. There are so many memories, experiences, and relationships whose influence on our identities are more subtle—and yet can be powerful with their continuity or presence. So with the art of a nation which cannot be sufficiently represented by masterworks that may miss inherent complexities, diversity, and a multitude of tangible and intangible histories.

Everyday to the Extraordinary: Highlights from the Korean Collection makes visible the links between objects in the Harn Museum’s permanent collection and broader networks of cultural influence, including other literature, performing arts, and the everyday experience.

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The exhibition includes objects from a wide historical swath, dating from the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–668 CE) up until the 20th century. By comparing the pivotal events of an era to the undercurrents of cultural norms and shared values, it becomes clearer how the aesthetics of an age intimately reflect the culture and values of the time.

With this framework in mind, in this guide a single object offers an entryway into each historical period. This approach by timeline can be applied to other Korean objects in the exhibition and beyond.

Please print the last page of this guide, featuring the Korean poetic form sijo. The activity was created by the Spring 2020 Harn Writers-in-Residence Debora Greger, Mirjam Frosth, and Angie Chirino.
The three kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla occupied parts of Manchuria, present-day China and Russia, and the Korean Peninsula. Buddhism came to Korea from China, spread by Chinese monks to Goguryeo in 372 CE, and then to Baekje in 384 CE. Silla, whose relative geographical isolation in the southwestern part of the peninsula slowed the transmission of Chinese culture, did not officially recognize Buddhism until the 6th century. Rustic in its construction and decorative modeling, this architectural model offers a glimpse of built structures in the Silla Kingdom. It was likely fashioned for a tomb that would serve as the occupant’s spiritual dwelling in the next life, a reference to a Buddhist stupa or an astronomical observatory.

Through a series of military and political moves, the Silla Kingdom achieved dominance over the Korean peninsula by the end of the 7th century. By 676, Silla succeeded in forcing the Chinese troops to withdraw into Manchuria, and for the first time the peninsula came under the sway of a single Korean government. In the succeeding Unified Silla Period, Korean culture flourished, creating a political and cultural legacy which was handed down to subsequent rulers.

This finely crafted bottle vase has intricately repetitive designs stamped horizontally across its bulbous body and tapered neck. Characteristic of pottery from the Unified Silla Period, double incised lines define stamped decorations into neatly organized registers.

Some of the most outstanding achievements in Korean art and culture date to the Goryeo Dynasty. Goryeo potters produced elegant green-glazed ceramic ware, highly praised by contemporaneous Chinese and later known in the West as celadon.

Goryeo established close ties with China’s Song Dynasty. Tribute was paid to China, but both state-sponsored and private trade included all manner of goods moving in both directions. China exported silk, books, spices, tea, medicine, and ceramics while Goryeo sent gold, copper, silver, ginseng, porcelain, pine nuts, and paper.

While inspired by Chinese traditions, Korean celadons developed several distinctive features. The elegantly curved body of this plum vase (maebyeong) illustrates one of these features in the use of black and white slip to create designs under the cracked sea-green glaze. Maebyeong were functional vessels used for displaying flowers or holding liquids such as wine, honey, or sesame oil. Excavations of Goryeo-period shipwrecks have revealed that vases like this were accompanied by wooden tags describing their contents and were used extensively for trade.

The advent of the Joseon Dynasty in the late 14th century brought major social and cultural changes. In their efforts to augment the power of the government and rejuvenate the country, Joseon rulers withdrew royal patronage of the Buddhist establishment, then seen as corrupt, and promoted Neo-Confucianism as the official state ideology. Another important development in the Joseon Dynasty was the growing challenge on the part of Korean intellectuals to the pervasive influence of Chinese thought and culture in Korean society. With the decline and fall of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Koreans became more interested in promoting their own culture. The art and literature of the period reflects this greater interest in native Korean traditions and everyday life.

Kim Hongdo is the most eminent painter of the later Joseon Dynasty. Kim's genre paintings typically deal with aspects of daily life, showing ordinary people at work or at play. Kim portrayed people of all classes and ages, whether engaged in various types of labor, relaxing after work, or playing games and sports. This hanging scroll depicts a group of men on horseback using falcons to hunt geese.

In certain mountainous regions where both Buddhism and Shamanism closely coexist within local communities, an intermingling of indigenous Shamanistic beliefs while visibly replicating artistic traditions of the Buddhist style. Native shamanistic practice is centered on the belief that the world is occupied by spirits who play an important role in individual and collective lives.
What’s a Sijo?

Sijo (pronounced she-joe) is a traditional Korean form of poetry. The earliest known one was written in the 14th century. Sijo are three lines long, each line 14–16 syllables. One type of sijo, called sijo chang, is sung so slowly, it has been called the “slowest song in the world.”

Sijo began as a sly political weapon. They were written at first in classical Chinese by Yangban, the male aristocrats of the Korean ruling class, who were typically military officials and civil servants. These writers disguised the political points they wanted to make by using nature poetry. By the 18th century, times had changed, sijos were written by everyone, and in Korean.

Poet Hwang Jin-I, 1506–1560, (there’s a K-drama about her!) often wrote sijo half in aristocratic Chinese, and half in Korean hanja used by women even though it was suppressed by the scholar officials. Take this one, for example, where the first half of each line is in Chinese, the second half in Korean:

Can you sense where the languages change?

Jade Green Stream, don’t boast so proud of your easy passing through these blue hills.
Once you have reached the broad sea, to return again will be hard.
While the Bright Moon fills these empty hills, why not pause? Then go on, if you will.

—Hwang Jin-I, translation by David McCann

Create your own Sijo! Use the word bank to fill in the blanks.

old  tiger  forest  hide  listen  annoy
fly  river  magpie  teeth  stalk  regal
green  wince  stones  be  legs  wing
on  parent  dance  powerful  gull  deer
drink  snow  play  crane  bear  water
teach  leaves  baby  ugly  clouds  hungry

Can you sense where the languages change?

So, the ___________ growled, you’ve come to ___________
animal or person
verb

the ________ emperor __________, locked in his __________.
adjective
noun
place

Nights I __________ the ________, eyes low, ears pricked.
verb
place

Did some ___________ ___________ scurry off?

adjective
noun

I would love a ___________. Oh, for a __________! 
noun
noun

Poetry? I __________ it with my claws.
verb

If you get going and need to change some of the given words, go to it.

Created by the Spring 2020 Harn Writers-in-Residence Debora Greger, Mirjam Frosth, and Angie Chirino.