

Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds Essay

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Fig. 1, *Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds*, Stoneware with inlaid design under celadon glaze, Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), late 13th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39590>

Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds is a main type of Korean celadon that possesses historical importance for the country, represented by the styles and patterns used in paintings during Goryeo dynasty. It was known as an exquisite and well-made gray-green celadon during Goryeo Dynasty that differed from Chinese celadons.

It left a significant shift in both technological and conceptual ways in the history of Korean ceramics. Before the advent of celadon, the potters during Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C. - 676 A.D.) used the high-fired gray stoneware, which set the stage for the making of them. The development of this style celadon started with an influence of Chinese ones in the early 10th century with the techniques adapted from the traditions of Song-dynasty (960-1279) China.¹ Because of that influence, those created in Korea resembled the features of Chinese celadons (Fig.2) in terms of manufacture process and the form. It was written that “a Song envoy, Xu Jing (1091-1153) noted the resemblance of Goryeo ceramics to the celadons of China’s Yue and Ru Kilns.”² However, from the beginning of 12th century, unique features started to appear in Korean versions: the glazed ceramics in gray-green hue and



Fig. 2, *Vase in Meiping Shape*, Porcelain with incised and carved design under celadon glaze, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

¹ Soyoung, Lee. “Goryeo Celadon.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cela/hd_cela.htm (October 2003). Accessed April 16, 2019

² *ibid*

an inlaid design (*sanggam*), which became a major distinct characteristic of Goryeo celadon.

The sophisticated technique used in inlaid design over the surface involves etching the motifs on the dry clay body and filling in the curved space with usually black or white slip after drying the fired vessel. Potters carved different kinds of plants and animals, but in *Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds*, cranes and clouds are the main motif and are all over the surface.³ The irregular positioning of the cranes makes viewers feel they are flying around the vase with the gray-green background representing sky. This shows that the cranes apply naturalism because the artist tried to show cranes flying around the sky, which is a natural habit of cranes and it is portrayed in the drawings well. They consist of black and white colors: the bodies of cranes and the clouds are presented in white, and the beak, eyes, and legs of the cranes are in black, which is very naturalistic in how the drawings are in the detail in terms of color and its resemblance to clouds and cranes. The black and white colors used in main subjects creates a strong contrast. White color is primarily used to portray the main subjects, which are cranes and clouds, and it also creates contrast to the background. The pattern of cranes were traditionally used in drawings and paintings from ancient times in Korea. The period that potters actually started applying it to vases is 12th century with the development of celadon. People in Goryeo, Korea regarded a crane as a mythic and spiritual being that represented a long life. For that reason, cranes were often drawn in the royal painting called *The Ten Traditional Symbols of Longevity*. The clouds in *Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds* looks like they are rising up, which represent the will of people becoming a good person. The motifs are oftent in a smaller scale when it is on a vase, but this one presents the image in large-scale, which makes the piece look unique and unusual. The top and the bottom of the vase is decorated with a highly stylized wave design. They are in geometric design, which creates contrast to the naturalistic designs over the wide surface.

³ Mark, Cartwright. "Korean Celadon Pottery." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Last modified September 07, 2016. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/945/>. Accessed April 16, 2019

Many motifs used in celadon, especially cranes and clouds, are associated with Buddhism, which was the state religion of the time. Kyung Moon Hwang, a Korean historian noted that “these ceramics’ almost indescribable sheen itself seems to evoke Buddhist spirituality.”⁴



Fig. 3. *Ewer with Phoenixes*, Stoneware with incised and carved decoration under celadon glaze, 11th-12th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

During this period, Korea and China were the only countries that produced fine celadons: first produced in China, and then Korea specifically from the late 9th century when there was an active trade with the Song Dynasty. In Early Goryeo period, there were noticeable emulation of Chinese-styled wares (Fig. 3) such as nature motifs that fully covers the surface. Later, the technique of Korean celadon went beyond that and, competed with those that were renown worldwide.

The specific features of celadon that China did not have was a technique of producing a beautiful gray-green color and the drawings using inlaid design.

The soft pale gray-green background color is another major characteristic of Goryeo celadon. The bluish green color dominates the surface and plays as an image of sky where clouds and cranes are in. The color is way further developed than those produced in China. Xu Jing noted that “the recent techniques are more sophisticated and the glaze even more beautiful.”

Maebyeong was used to store food or drinks. It is usually used with its lid closed, but this one had lost its lid. Goryeo celadon was often used by the royal court only since it was regarded as a highly refined masterwork that were even traded worldwide. For normal people, it hard to even imagine using those celadons for daily supplies.

⁴ ibid

The vase presents voluptuous form that goes down from a larger shoulder to a narrow base. *Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds* has a short neck and an elegant curve that is shaped like an 'S'. The method of firing the clay in an oxygen-reducing kiln with a special glaze gave an extremely smooth and clean surface to the finished vessel.⁵ This technique also gave a glossy surface and texture.



Fig.4, *Maebyeong with lotus de oration*, Stoneware with carved and incised design under celadon glaze, late 11th-early 12th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Maebyeong with lotus de oration is another kind of Goryeo celadon that possesses historical importance. It is the same kind of Maebyeong as described above, but the form and the design are different (fig.4). This vase has a wider upper body that curves down to become more narrow towards the foot. The curve is much rounder than *Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds*. The figure ground relationship is that the design is all over the vase, which makes it look very integrated. The technique used to design the surface is a bit different as well. Instead of filling in the curved space with black or white slip, potters created the patterns only with curving.

Lotus pattern is widely acknowledged as a symbol of creation and prosperity because of its strong vitality. Because of those reasons, it was widely used in ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia as well. In Asia, lotus patterns represented the root of Buddhism. Lotus symbolized purity because it did not color dirty in dirty wetland. Since Korea was based on Buddhism society, lotus pattern was used since the Three Kingdoms period to Goryeo and it was used in clothes, vase, plates, and so on.

The color of the vase is a lot lighter than *Maebyeong Decorated with Cranes and Clouds*. During the process of creating it, potters used raw materials like iron in the clay and reduced the level of oxygen

⁵ Lee, Soyoung. "Goryeo Celadon." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cela/hd_cela.htm (October 2003). Accessed April 16, 2019

inside the kiln during firing, which made the ware appear in gray-green. Potters may have used certain amount of iron to lighten the color.

Maebyeong decorated with Lotus is one of the early Maebyeong created during the early Goryeo when the country just started to borrow the style of Chinese vessels. The style of this vase actually resembles those iron-painted vessels from Cizhou kilns of Song-dynasty.⁶

The patterns over the surface is also lotus, but it is painted in black on the white surface, which creates contrast. The bold lines and the curved leaves in zig zag makes the plant look lively, which shows naturalism. Unlike the first vase (fig.1), the form of this is more round and the body line comes down in straight line. Chinese potters evaluated



Fig.5, *Maebyeong with lotus*, Stoneware with iron-brown design under celadon glaze, 11th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

this vase does not have its own style yet; it still possesses Chinese characteristics in terms of form, design, and the method of making it. By the mid-12th century, Goryeo potters started to study the ways to articulate native tastes with their own techniques. This movement appeared in Jeolla Province where the major celadon industry was. After the study, Goryeo potters came out with an inlaid (*sanggam*) design and the green-gray color, which was a rarity in China.⁷

Although the potters of Goryeo celadon got inspiration from China in terms of method, the Korean ones differ from the other countries in the quality colors and designs in form and decoration. The shape, pattern, and the color of the celadon have greatly developed from the period when potters got influence

⁶ "Maebyeong Decorated with Lotus." Metmuseum.org. Accessed April 23, 2019. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42305>.

⁷ Lee, Soyoung. "Goryeo Celadon." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cela/hd_cela.htm (October 2003). Accessed April 16, 2019

from Chinese potters. In later part of Goryeo, the beauty of the celadon became comparable to any other countries. Potters not only made vases with celadon, but also stools, plates, incense, and other various household goods of Goryeo, which raised reputation of Korea in terms of skills and knowledge and still remains as a great cultural heritage.

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