[INTERVIEW] Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art ready to turn page to its 2nd century

2022-11-13 : 17:10

American painter James McNeill Whistler's “Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room” (1876-77), has long been a showstopper for the Freer Gallery of Art at the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, D.C. The room, which has undergone months of restoration work this year, showcases American interior design in conversation with Asian objects and aesthetics on view. Courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art

Smithsonian museum reflects on its collection, past exhibitions of Korean art

By Park Han-sol

The Freer Gallery of Art opened its doors to the public in the iconic National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1923 as the first national museum of art in the United States — with a founding collection of close to 10,000 pieces hailing from East and South Asia, the ancient Near East and the Islamic world in addition to 19th-century America.

As part of the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum and research complex, the gallery was later joined by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 1987.

Together over the last century, the two galleries, referred to as the “Freer/Sackler,” have jointly established themselves as one of the most prominent academic and curatorial centers for the understanding of Asian art

history, organizing a series of pathbreaking exhibitions across major traditions in the region.

After rebranding it as the National Museum of Asian Art in 2019, the Smithsonian museum, with a collection of over 44,000 rare objects, is now ready to turn the page to its second century as it seeks to open itself to a broader audience.

"To be the National Museum of Asian Art in the 21st century means more than carrying out important academic research and conservation. It also means touching those new audiences," museum director Chase F. Robinson told The Korea Times in a recent interview in Seoul.

To accomplish this goal, the art institution has been leveraging the investment it has made in recent years in digital technology, enhancing the in-gallery experience with compelling interactives as well as tailoring online resources to reach audiences who may never have a chance to visit Washington, D.C. Such efforts have led attendance to more or less double from pre-pandemic times, the director added.

"We were also the first Smithsonian museum to make our collection 100 percent accessible online, with each object represented by at least one image," said J. Keith Wilson, curator of ancient Chinese art, who also joined in the interview along with the museum's Korean program associate, Sunwoo Hwang.

The emphasis on incorporating digital technology into the physical gallery space will continue to be made evident in upcoming major shows, scheduled as part of the year-long celebration of the museum's centennial.

Chase F. Robinson, Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art / Courtesy of National Museum of Asian Art

"Maharana Ari Singh II Enjoying Jagmandir" (1767) will be on view at the museum's upcoming exhibition, "A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur" / Courtesy of City Palace Museum Udaipur, Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation

"A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur" combines extraordinarily large paper and cloth paintings that capture the particular mood of the political and cultural landscapes of 18th-century northwest India with immersive digital components and soundscape, birthing a highly atmospheric show.

"Anyang: China's Ancient City of Kings" turns its attention to the capital of the country's Shang Dynasty (1250 BCE-1050 BCE) during the Bronze Age, and a series of remarkable artifacts of jade ornaments, weapons, bells and vessels excavated in the early 20th century.

"We're developing a completely immersive digital experience for visitors — to transport them both geographically as well as temporally from today, first of all, to the early excavations in the 1920s and then ultimately to the Bronze Age," Wilson said.

"We're also using 3D scanning and printing technology to create a hands-on interactive [section] that will allow visitors to actually put mold pieces together and simulate what the casting experience would have been like in the ancient foundries of Anyang."

Another cornerstone of the museum's centennial celebration will take place in May in the form of a two-week cultural festival in the National Mall, filled with on-site exhibitions, performances, lectures, food and a night market — its first large-scale fete in recognition of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

The facade of the Freer Gallery of Art at the National Museum of Asian Art / Courtesy of National Museum of Asian Art

Museum's presentation of Korean art

Although they share the same budget and staff, the National Museum of Asian Art's two galleries are home to separate collections.

The Freer only displays works in the museum's permanent collection that cannot travel elsewhere, while the Sackler can loan to and borrow from other institutions.

A majority of the Smithsonian museum's Korean art collection is housed in the Freer, which left the Sackler "without a dedicated Korean program," according to Wilson. This, in turn, provided the gallery with an opportunity to try something different.

In 2017, the national museum was awarded a grant of more than $1 million from Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to tailor a five-year Korean arts and culture program, with a centerpiece being the special masterwork exhibitions hosted at the Sackler.

The program ultimately materialized into two spotlight shows that displayed relics loaned from the National Museum of Korea (NMK): "Sacred Dedication: A Korean Buddhist Masterpiece" in 2019 and "Once Upon a Roof: Vanished Korean Architecture," which just wrapped up last month.

Wilson, who was in charge of leading the program, described the two events as "monograph-focused, small-scale [exhibitions showcasing] a small number of objects — maybe a dozen or two at most — but ideas that told larger stories."

"Sacred Dedication" featured the gilt wooden sculpture of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (or Gwaneum in Korean) from the 918-1392 Goryeo Kingdom, the oldest surviving figure of its kind, as its highlight for the first

time in North America or Europe. Also on view were the sacred dedication materials of texts and symbolic objects that used to be sealed inside the Buddhist sculpture.

“The symposium that we hosted in 2020 [in regard to the show] has led to the first English-language scholarly publication on dedication practice in the Korean Buddhist tradition,” the curator said. “It's emblematic of the great variety of results that can come from a relatively small-scale exhibition.”

“Once Upon a Roof” brought into the limelight a series of millennium-old ornamented clay roof tiles called “chimi,” which used to embellish peaks of Buddhist temples and palaces dating back to the Three Kingdoms (57 BCE — 668 CE) and Unified Silla (676-935) periods.

The two shows enabled the museum to highlight the lesser-known aspects of traditional Korean artworks for the American audience, especially since its permanent collection — like that of many other prominent art institutions in the U.S. and Europe — is still heavily focused on classical ceramics from Goryeo and the 1392-1910 Joseon Kingdom.

J. Keith Wilson, curator of ancient Chinese art at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art / Courtesy of National Museum of Asian Art

The gilt wooden sculpture of the “Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara” (1220-85) from the Goryeo period / Courtesy of National Museum of Korea

“If you look at the great collections of Asian art in the five or six significant museums, many of them were assembled during the late 19th and first decades of the 20th century,” Robinson said. “They reflected the tastes not only of American collectors but also of Asian collectors and dealers [at that time] — and those were [concentrated on] pieces from the classical period.”

Wilson added, “Those early generations of collectors making formative Korean collections were generally focused on ceramics, most often Goryeo-era celadons.”

This focus didn't leave much room for the country's non-ceramic media in the traditional field, let alone modern and contemporary works, to come into the spotlight — which, some curators of Korean art point out, has limited the museum visitors' cultural understanding of Korea for decades to what they see inside the glass display cases.

While aware of such views, Wilson noted that “a broadening of what is considered the canon” in regard to Korean

art is gradually taking place in American and European museums.

“I think with the increasing global exposure and with more curators having a chance to come to Korea and see the breadth and depth of Korean culture, it's encouraged all of us to rethink the canon, to broaden what we do.”

In fact, the Smithsonian museum team's recent week-long visit to Seoul was filled with meetings with officials from the NMK, the National Palace Museum of Korea, the Seoul Museum of Craft Art and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, among others.

“Part of the reason we [were] in Seoul was to strengthen the partnership so we can begin to think about loans that would help bring more examples of Korean art into our galleries,” Robinson explained.

Entering its second century, the National Museum of Asian Art is also dedicating itself to expanding its modern and contemporary program, where Korean artworks will certainly play a role.

The Smithsonian museum will open its first-ever major gallery space devoted entirely to modern and contemporary art in the summer of 2023 with a series of video-based exhibitions, including a show featuring the work of Korean artist Park Chan-kyong, who is younger brother of Cannes-winning filmmaker Park Chan-wook.

In addition, it is in the process of finalizing negotiations with renowned Seoul-born installation artist Do Ho Suh, who is best known for producing otherworldly fabric replicas of his former homes around the world, to have his iconic installation placed in front of the museum building in 2024.

“It would be the first piece of art that many, many visitors to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. will see,” the director said.

Visitors look inside the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room during IlluminAsia, a festival of Asian art, food and cultures held at the National Museum of Asian Art in 2017. Courtesy of National Museum of Asian Art

How can Korean art go global?

Partly riding the contemporary global art trend that is increasingly turning its focus on decentering or breaking away from dominant Western cultural frameworks, Korean art has indeed begun to gain momentum on the international stage.

The world's particular fascination with Korean popular culture since the turn of the 21st century — with "hallyu," or the Korean wave, sometimes being compared to the past aesthetic movements of "Chinoiserie" and "Japonisme" — has also arguably had a spillover effect on the country's art scene.

But to solidify Korean art's position in the long term within international academic and curatorial circles, there needs to be continued investment in scholarly research and an increase in the number of English-language publications, both the director and the curator noted.

"The efforts that have been highly successful, such that Chinese and Japanese art is widely appreciated in the U.S., now need to be applied to Korean art. And important scholarship that's undertaken by Korean scholars — it should be translated into English so that their work can have a greater global impact," Robinson said.

"The academic discipline and quality of research in Korea are phenomenal, but it's generally written in Korean for domestic audiences," Wilson added. "So not only is this reducing the chances for foreign students to come to Korea to study [it], but it's also slowing the [Korean art's] growth at a more popular level in the U.S. or Europe."

As a national art institution, the Smithsonian has made forays into fostering an enhanced understanding and facilitating the promotion of Korean research to the anglophone population.

For the two aforementioned spotlight exhibitions, it sought collaborative programming with the NMK and incorporated extensive Korean reports and academic essays into the show after translating them into English.

"That's what we can and need to do — not only to put on really compelling exhibitions but also to advance that project of getting important Korean research out to the broader public," Robinson said.