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## Powerhouse Museum testimony

Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, for the exhibition *Spirit of jang-in: treasures of Korean metal craft*

### Background

To celebrate 50 years of friendship and bilateral relations between Australia and the Republic of Korea in 2011, the Powerhouse Museum, in collaboration with the National Museum of Korea and many other Korean cultural institutions and individuals, developed and staged the exhibition *Spirit of jang-in: treasures of Korean metal craft* and a series of associated events, 27 October 2011 – 12 February 2012.

The exhibition reflected the Museum's longstanding recognition of the importance of understanding and communicating the cultures of neighbouring countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Korean history and culture are relatively unknown in Australia, compared with those of China or Japan, despite the significant political and economic ties between Australia and South Korea (Australia's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest export market in 2010/11) and increasing numbers of Koreans in Australia. Given the cultural differences in terms of institutional systems, language and work practices, travelling traditional Korean heritage objects to Australia was a particularly challenging task. Further, due to the objects' rarity and the complex processes involved in obtaining permissions from the Korean government, a superior cross-cultural communication on the Museum's behalf was vital.

### Vision and content

The exhibition sought to introduce Korean history, culture and arts to visitors through an examination of Korean metal crafts from the Bronze Age (10<sup>th</sup> century BCE) to the present day. Metal craft was chosen as a central theme to celebrate symbolically the trade relationship between the two countries, as iron ore is one of Australia's major exports to South Korea. Additionally, recognition of the enduring intangible qualities of master makers, or *jang-in*, was central to the vision. A vital consultative process was established with the National Museum of Korea, Sumsung Leeum Art Museum, National Folk Museum of Korea, Tongdo Temple and 14 individual Korean artists.

Skills and the processes of making were highlighted in the exhibition which included works by metal craft artists themselves designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Korean government. They included the Master of Cast Iron No. 112, the Master of Silver Inlay No. 78 and

the Master of *Yugi* No. 77. Korea has thus been a role model in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage internationally, and the exhibition offered an exceptional opportunity to introduce the model to Australians. The intangible qualities inherent in making and artistry were represented with a Korean word in the exhibition title: 'Spirit of *jang-in*'. *Jang-in* can be literally translated as 'craftsmen'.

### **Building relationships**

Min-Jung Kim, Curator of Asian Arts and Design at the Powerhouse Museum, has established and maintained strong relationships with Korean government representatives in Sydney and Seoul. Since 2008 she has attended by invitation annual curatorial workshops sponsored by the Korea Foundation (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). Through these, Min-Jung Kim continues to network with the Korean government, cultural institutions, and individual artists and curators.

This connection has encouraged further exchange of personnel. Through the Senior Resident Fellowship program, Mr Lee Hyoung Ho from the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism spent 18 months at the Powerhouse Museum; as part of the Intellectual Exchange Program, the Powerhouse Museum director Dr Dawn Casey was invited to Seoul by the Korea Foundation in 2010. During the development of the exhibition, many individuals from Korean government and private sector actively supported the project and contributed to its success. This included Choung Byoung-Guk, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism; Youngna Kim, Director of the National Museum of Korea; Lee Sei Sup, Chairperson, Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation; Park Young-Keun, Cultural Heritage Administration; Cha Du Hyeon, Executive Vice President, Korea Foundation; Woo Sun Moon, Managing Director, POSCO; Jo Joon Kil, Director, Korea Tourism Organisation and Kim Young-soo, Director of Korean Cultural Office Australia.

As a result of successful cross-cultural negotiations, and in recognition of the importance of this international project, the Korean government allowed 10 national treasures to travel to Australia. Notably, a 6<sup>th</sup> century Silla golden crown, belt and crown ornament travelled outside Korea for the first time. The Korean government also sent a large group of performers designated as 'intangible cultural heritage' to participate in the Museum's public programs. The group also performed at the exhibition opening ceremony, which was co-hosted with the Consulate-General of Korea to celebrate the Korean National Day, giving Australians a rare opportunity to experience outstanding traditional Korean heritage.

Strong international ties between the Powerhouse Museum and Korean cultural institutions and individuals continue. The Museum is working on a Memorandum of Understanding with the Seoul Design Foundation and is in discussion about sending an exhibition to Korea. The Korean government recently appointed the Museum's curator Min-Jung Kim to the committee of the Korean Cultural Office Australia. Christina Sumner, Principal Curator Design & Society has been invited to Korea by the Korea Foundation this year to discuss future collaboration and projects.

A significant component in maintaining strong relationships with international institutions is the Powerhouse Museum's commitment to employing staff from diverse cultural and language communities. Min is a Korean-born Australian who speaks fluent Korean and understands Korean culture in depth. Her presence has ensured a more multicultural office environment and fostered greater cross-cultural understanding in the exhibition team, resulting in an authentic exhibition of Korean culture that provided Australians with a fine opportunity to increase their own understanding of different cultures.