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Beyond the kimchi jar: the growing influence of Korean fusion

South Korean designers are winning followers around the world with their edgy East-meets-West aesthetic

■ INTERIORS
Kavita Daswani
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The collection included carved concrete tables, tripod-like floor lamps and delicate porcelain bowls, and many had not been shown in the West before. The exhibition, work by five Korean designers at New York's R 20th Century Gallery, was a hit and by the end of the eight-week run in May most of the pieces had been sold.

Gallery co-founder Zesty Meyers says the response was amazing, and clients were asking for more.

The event was organised with Gallery Seomi in Seoul, which was founded 30 years ago as a showcase for traditional fine art. Two years ago it became a design gallery dealing specifically in contemporary furniture and accessories.

The New York event's success highlights the rising influence of Korean designers of contemporary furniture, accessories and lighting. Korean designers are showing up in greater numbers at international design fairs, on design blogs and at important gallery events.

Among them is Choi Byung-hoon, professor at the College of Fine Arts at Seoul's Hongik University. He has recurring solo exhibitions at Paris' galerie Downtown and two of his pieces - a small japanned tray with Korean lacquer and a laminated wood lounge chair - are in the permanent collection at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany. Choi, who has a largely Western European following, says that no matter what medium he works in, he keeps his work simple.

"This is connected with the specific aesthetic consciousness of Korean traditional culture," he says.

"Koreans have a tendency to focus more on the inner world rather than the visible expressions of the outside. As an individual, to find a clear identity rooted in one's cultural background is important."

Two other designers are turning heads: Taek Jung-myung, whose elongated, see-saw-inspired deckchair was showcased at Design Miami in Basel last month, and Lee Hun-chung, a graduate of the Master of Fine Arts programme at the San Francisco Art Institute, whose stylised ceramic furniture is quietly sought after.

In addition, there is the Nothing Design Group, a collective of Korean designers whose pieces have been shown at an event organised by conceptual design group Droog in Amsterdam, at 100% Design in Tokyo and the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York.

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Meyers says that what makes Korean designers especially attractive today is the way in which they seamlessly fuse East and West, the traditional and the modern.

"Most of them are brought up with Korean traditionalism but educated in the West, and after taking those Western ideas back have created something new," he says. "We're seeing the first results of that now, and I think the combination of that new style is going to be very important on the design scene."

Many make pieces that hew closely to traditional aspects of Korean culture. Choi Joong-ho reinterprets a typical Korean lamp, the chong-sa-chorong, which is usually a wooden pole with a hooked end holding a fabric lantern. Choi takes that silhouette, but reforms it in steel and glass, in shades of red and chrome.

Similarly, London-based Korean industrial designer Kim Baek-ki takes the shape of a kimchi jar to re-imagine a piece that can be used as a storage container, footrest or stool.

"I don't think Seoul is a centre of design and art yet but I believe that Korean design has gradually evolved and expanded, and now I think it's moving rapidly towards becoming a centre of design," says Kim Dong-hyun, an award-winning Seoul-based industrial designer. "Designers and decorators are increasing in number and Seoul is trying to develop qualified designers and a design culture. There are more design events and interest."

Kim began his business two years ago, and has since been a regular at exhibitions at Seoul's BMH Gallery. His more recognisable pieces include the Majestic Arm Chair, a seat with an ultra-high throne-like back and armrests that slant upwards, and the Fence + Stick, a wire fence able to hold luminous letters or multicoloured decorative components.

Kim says he is inspired by the moment. "Every single factor around me can be my design element," he says. "Recently, I've been working on observing new materials and their impact on our senses."

Seomi's director and curator, Jinny Chung, says she routinely deals with representatives from auction houses Christie's and Sotheby's, as well as individual buyers, collectors and dealers. Some of the pieces on offer, including hefty stone-and-wood furniture from Choi, can sell for as much as US\$50,000 (for a pair of red oak side tables).

"Other markets, like the Chinese art market, might be bigger than Korea's," Chung says. "But we are developing very strongly in the design world."

Other emerging designers on the scene are part of collectives, producing pieces that have a commercial purpose while still retaining a strong avant-garde aesthetic.

At the Nothing Design Group, director Koo Jin-woog actually designs plenty. The three-year-old design studio in Seoul, the home of most of the country's contemporary designers, is essentially a group of young Koreans who, says Koo, "create poetic and narrative designs that playfully address the relationship between people and their environment".

For example, Koo's Play Ground, Play Table piece is a long wooden table with spaces to hold soil and grow plants and flowers. Koo created it to "raise fish, store books" and also as a regular table by moving a transparent acrylic plate on the top. As a whole, the group is inspired by Eastern design philosophy, taking its name from the idea that "nothing can be designed into something".

The group has amassed awards, including five from Germany's International Forum Design. One was for its 2007 prototype The Origin, a basin based on the idea of a river source flowing into a lake. A cobblestone doubles as a plug for the sink and also releases or blocks the water flow, conveying calm.

Designer Kim Nam-hoon created bricks embedded with star-shaped lights, while Park Joong-yeol's hangers are essentially wall stickers resilient enough to hold kitchen utensils, clothing, cutlery and mobile phones. Kang Seung-han's Mug o cups stand at 45-degree angles, keeping both rim and the inside cleaner.

Koo says that while edgy Korean design might be in its infancy, a growing number of people are taking to the discipline.

"In Korea now, there are thousands of designers and hundreds of design studios," he says. "That number has continued to rise because of the importance of design. Design is also a promising job in the future in Korea."

Meyers agrees that the movement is just starting to flourish; he is planning another exhibition of Korean designers next year. "We showed something new that's never been seen before," he says. "To get that kind of reaction from the tastemakers, no matter where they come from - they instantly responded to the work, and were not afraid to buy. These are collectors who are normally ahead of the curve."

"They can spot when something is going to be great design, well ahead of time. I think it's going to be the new emergence, and become a pretty big thing."