

최병훈

Choi Byunghoon

Artist,
art furniture designer

Artist and designer Choi Byunghoon was the first to introduce the concept of “art furniture” in Korea in the early 1990s. Since his first solo exhibition in 1993, Choi has been a trailblazer in the art and design scene, spearheading the genre with works that have been met with acclaim from both Korean and international audiences. His custom-made furniture is housed in Cheong Wa Dae (the Presidential Office) and has been acquired by major institutions, including the Vitra Design Museum, M+ Hong Kong, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the National Museum of Qatar. His works can also be found in public spaces in Seoul and across Korea. He is represented internationally by Laffanour Galerie Downtown in Paris and Friedman Benda in New York.

What first drew you to your craft, and how did that lead you to becoming an artist?

I entered university in 1970, when industrialization was highly valued and design was seen as essential. I joined the Department of Applied Arts at Hongik University, majoring in woodworking and industrial design. Although I was well suited to industrial design, I was more drawn to its artistic expression rather than its mechanical aspects.

A turning point came in my senior year when I was selected for the National Art Exhibition in 1973. While serving as an ROTC officer, I continued creating works and eventually won the Grand Prize, which at the time, was considered the main path to officially debuting as an artist.

After my military service, I worked for about five years at the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) because I needed a stable job to support my artistic endeavor. While on the job, I was lucky to travel abroad with a business passport to all kinds of places at a time when traveling overseas was still restricted by the government. Traveling overseas in my 20s deeply broadened my perspective as I learned that there were different values from mine.



Afterimage of Beginning 018-499, 2018

At heart, I always knew I wanted to become an artist. But at the time, there wasn't really a market for art, so I chose to join the academia for stability while continuing my practice. I was professor at Kyonggi University for four years, before moving to Hongik University where I taught for 27 years.

At Hongik University, I reformed the curriculum, with the belief that we need to teach art furniture. Traditional woodcraft education no longer suited the times. I persuaded the faculty to establish "Art Furniture" as a course and change the department name from Woodcraft to Woodworking and Furniture Design. This was in the early 1990s when I held my first solo exhibition and introduced the term "art furniture" in Korea.

What drew you to the concept of art furniture, and why did you feel it was necessary to adopt it in your teaching?

I believed woodworking could be combined with art to elevate their value. Not all furniture should be art furniture—industrial, mass-produced design also has its place—so both tracks remained in the curriculum, allowing students to choose their own direction. I taught the Art Furniture course until I retired.

The term "art furniture" was already in use internationally, and I felt it was important to introduce it. Although many were unfamiliar with or skeptical of the concept, my international experience convinced me that we couldn't stay where we were—we had to create something new.

Furniture occupies a large portion of our living space, and even when it's not in use, it can function as sculptural art, like music playing in the background. If furniture is art, we can enjoy the aesthetics of it while moving around the house.



Afterimage of Beginning 021-580, 2021

How far do you think art furniture has come?

I think it has come very far, almost reaching its peak, especially in the past few years. The concept of art itself has also evolved—what once referred only to painting now encompasses a wide range of values. I believe the concept of art furniture will continue to evolve as well.

Designers now must have a clear sense of identity. In the Modernist era, it was enough to produce well-made modern objects, but today, global design is defined by each designer's personal vision. Many people were skeptical when I first began, even saying that I ruined the craft. I didn't mind because I was confident this was the direction the world would take.

Now, art furniture has reached many stages, but the next evolution may be shaped by AI, individual design abilities, and changes in production methods. I tell my

students that hard work alone isn't enough—they must understand how the world is changing, what values the era demands, and align their work accordingly.

How would you describe your artistic identity and philosophy?

My works reflect the Korean sensibility: the beauty of restraint, calmness found in meditation, and the fusion of primal and modern elements to create something new. I am also deeply interested in balance—both literally, as in the chairs and scales I study, and philosophically. I dislike extremes, whether far left or far right; I value harmony and equilibrium rather than being consumed by one side.

My Meditation Chair is designed to help a person enter their inner world. It is a quiet, reflective piece—one that is not about showing off, but about connecting with one's inner self.

Even with a Korean sensibility, the work must have international relevance; it cannot be narrowly regional or nationalistic.

When did you become interested in restraint, calmness, and meditation?

Right after my time at KOTRA, while I was exploring my own path, I traveled to places like Peru and Mexico. In Peru, I visited Cusco, high in the Andes at 4,000 meters and once the capital of the Inca Empire, before going on to Machu Picchu. Experiencing these places and learning about the world triggered me to learn more about my own culture. In Korea, visiting sites such as the Gamun Temple ruins in Gyeongju reinforced this fascination with stillness and meditation—the sense of breathing in centuries of history.



Afterimage of Beginning 9985 (Meditation Chair), 1999



Afterimage of Beginning at the National Museum of Qatar

I never felt any inferiority about Korean culture. In fact, those experiences only strengthened my appreciation for it. I often tell my students that differences themselves give value. You are not less because someone else excels at something; your uniqueness is what gives you worth. Experiencing international exhibitions in New York and Paris confirmed this for me: difference is recognized and valued.

How is your work perceived internationally? Do people notice the Korean sensibility of your works?

I first exhibited overseas in Paris in 1996, and I wondered how to present my furniture in the home of French design. I realized I only needed to be true to myself rather than imitate local decorative styles. Visitors commented that my work resembled East Asian painting—minimal, with empty space, and very Korean in feeling—which was very encouraging.

Unlike China's bold and exaggerated expressiveness or Japan's deliberate refinement of nature, Korean beauty often lies in naturalness, simplicity and subtlety—like Joseon-era white porcelain, where the undecorated vessel offers no details, only a feeling. This understated, contemplative aesthetic aligns with my sensibility, and I try to absorb it into my work. Even minimalist, simple pieces were well received in Paris, which encouraged me to continue exhibiting internationally.

Abroad, most people notice an Asian or Eastern aesthetic, but few distinguish the differences between China, Japan, and Korea. Only some scholars, curators, or sensitive observers recognize them. When I first spoke about this years ago, Korea's national power was weak. The country didn't gain enough recognition to spotlight its artists. Today, with K-culture and Korea's rising international influence, perceptions have changed dramatically. For example, audiences knew little about Korea at my 1996 Paris exhibition,

but by my New York exhibition in 2025, recognition and reception of Korean artists were completely different. The global stage now offers excellent opportunities, though K-culture's influence may not last forever.

In Korea, we haven't yet seen anyone that matches your reputation when it comes to art furniture. There are artists in their 30s and 40s who are gaining attention, but few are known who are older in the 50s and 60s group. Why is that?

Many Korean craft artists remain trapped within their own familiar materials or techniques—confined in their comfort zone, clinging to old values, and rarely venture outward to explore broader perspectives. Repeating the same work endlessly kills an artist's vitality. If you see the works of great artists, they transform over time, in line with the artist's curiosity and growth.

I started with wood, but I now use any material I need. Many others are restricted by their material, which limits their growth. To advance, you must explore the unknown, experiment, and take risks. I love traveling alone, visiting sites, and satisfying my curiosity. Growth requires effort, challenge, and evolution—just like life.

Over the decades, how do you think your work has evolved?

I think it has moved closer to nature. In the beginning, I polished and refined elements, believing that sleek, crafted aesthetics defined beauty. Over time, I've increasingly embraced rough, natural elements—letting the inherent beauty of raw materials, like stones, speak for themselves. These are aspects that humans cannot truly recreate, and they've become essential in my work.

Your signature project, “Afterimage of Beginning,” is a continuing series of works. What's the inspiration behind this?

The series reflects my curiosity about the unknown—the mystery of the universe after the Big Bang and the evolution of humanity. I use natural materials like stone, which carry the weight of time, connecting the past to the present.

These materials have encountered me here and now, and are taking on new value moving forward. There's a sense of pride and fulfillment in that act—a feeling that I am contributing something meaningful.

I mainly use natural materials—wood and stone—because they carry the essence of time. While I've occasionally used carbon fiber, I rarely work with artificial materials like plastics, as I prefer the authenticity and life inherent in natural sources.



Voice of Silence 2025, Friedman Benda, New York



Afterimage of Beginning 9754, 1997



Scholar's Way at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

What do your works “Scholar’s Way” and the “Silence” series embody?

These pieces reflect the journey inward—embracing your inner world without showing off or trying to impress others. It’s about walking your own path, which is a recurring theme in my work.

Recently, I’ve emphasized the concept of silence. In a world overflowing with mass media, endless opinions, and extreme political discourse, silence has become increasingly valuable. Choosing silence allows you to preserve your own values, will, and philosophy, rather than being swept up by the noise. In this age of constant information and expression, silence itself can be a virtue and a meaningful way to maintain inner clarity.

Since many of your works can be found throughout Seoul, it would be fun to explore the city through your art. Tell us about a few.

At the lobby of the **Seoul Museum of Craft Art**, you will find the information desk that I designed. I wanted to place rough, natural elements in a refined contemporary space. The furniture had to be functional, so I created cabinets to store office supplies. I added basalt benches and wooden-and-stone stools around the desk to offer sitting space for visitors.

Along the **Deoksugung Stone Wall Path**, you will find wood and stone benches for people to rest along the “Path of Contemplation.” It’s better known as a romantic path for couples, but it’s actually a great path to experience history and culture. Stone can be cold to sit on, so I created wooden versions too. It was a project commissioned by the Seoul city government, but the maintenance has been poor. The wooden benches have been much damaged due



Lobby of the Seoul Museum of Craft Art

to seasonal changes and management issues, but they continue to serve as public artworks.

In front of the lobby at **Four Seasons**, there is a sculpture representing Yin and Yang—an upward Yang energy balanced by a downward Yin, bringing a distinctly Eastern philosophical element into the space.

Several of my basalt stone benches can be found at the fashion concept store **BOONTHESHOP** in Cheongdam-dong, and the **Hoam Museum of Art** outside of Seoul.

Are there any places in Seoul you particularly like, or neighborhoods you favor?

One of my favorite spots is the **Secret Garden inside Changdeokgung (Palace)**. It's truly a masterpiece—breathtaking and the finest example of Korean garden design in Seoul. Another favorite is **Seokpajeong** and the **Seokpajeong Seoul Art Museum** in Buam-dong, northern Seoul.

I often visit museums, especially the **National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA)** and the **Leeum Museum of Art**. A walk from the MMCA and the nearby Kukje and Hyundai galleries all the way to the Seoul Museum of Craft Art and Insa-dong area is ideal for exploring Korean art.

As for neighborhoods, I like the area around the MMCA, and also the **antique streets of Dapsimni and Jangnpyeong**, which have the best concentration of antique shops in Seoul.

What kind of city is Seoul to you?

To me, Seoul ranks alongside New York and Tokyo in terms of energy and activity—but I think Seoul is even more

dynamic than Tokyo. It's a city brimming with life and vitality.

I notice how clean Seoul is when walking around the city. The subways are spotless—something rare in large, densely populated cities worldwide. The energy of this small country is remarkable, and the fact that Korean culture has gained such global recognition in such a short time is truly impressive.



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