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HOW WE
USED TO LIVE

Korea Furniture Museum

words

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The Korea Furniture Museum was founded in 1993, originally as a private platform for owner Chyung Mi-Sook to house her collection of 2,000 pieces of antique Korean furniture. The museum itself is a collection of fragments — or in some cases entire buildings — gathered from across Korea and reassembled onsite into 10 *hanok* structures. Among these are units from Changgyeong Palace in Seoul, extricated from its demolition in the 1970s, and the residence of 순정효황후 Empress Sunjeong, the consort of the last emperor of the Joseon dynasty.

The long *hanok* that forms the palatial, central complex of the museum lies at the end of a stone-paved path, its sweeping roof emerging in a jumble of peaks and ridges, resembling the forested hills of Mt Bukhan behind it. The path winds under angular pines, the warm glow of their red bark reflected in the building's pinewood eaves, which rise and crest like waves. Through an arch inscribed with Chinese characters, further *hanok* project from the main building, raised by stone columns above trickling water and low, shrubby pines. The hazy apartment blocks of Seongbuk-dong, Seoul, are just visible beyond the courtyard walls.

The painstaking building work, employing traditional methods for working with wood, stone, paper, and tile, was completed in 2007, and by 2011, the museum was ready to open to

the public by appointment. Automatic doors and electric lanterns are carefully concealed by latticed woodwork and *hanji* paper. Stone sculptures of *haechi* — protective spirits — flank the steps to the entrance, their eroded forms like abstract, stocky lions. Inside, a high pine ceiling is raised above a spacious hall by two rows of timber columns. Joseon-era architecture adhered to strict measurements according to status, whether you were nobility, a peasant, government official, or member of the royal family, and the distance between each of these pillars is in keeping with palatial proportions. Chyung has received the president of South Korea here, in addition to the spouses of G20 world leaders, and international dignitaries. In July 2014, Xi Jinping and his wife, First Lady Peng Liyuan, visited for dinner, and were reported to have particularly enjoyed the *doenjang jjigae* — a soybean paste soup.

The basement of the main building is peppered with alcoves; the museum has the capacity to display up to 500 pieces of furniture at one time, the majority of which can be viewed here, organised by type. An avid collector since her teenage years, Chyung amassed most of the pieces during the 1980s, when many families moved from traditional homes to new apartments in Seoul. Persimmon wood writing tables from the 19th century populate the shelves of one recess, and persimmon boxes of identical

한옥 HANOK

Hanok translates as 'Korean house', *han* meaning 'Korea', and *ok* meaning 'house'. Many varieties exist, from a single-structure peasant's *hanok*, to a nobleman's sprawling rural estate, to the compact city variety adapted for small plots in the Bukchon and Ikseon neighbourhoods of Seoul during the early 20th century. Key features of a typical *hanok* include the use of pinewood, stone and *hanji*; vast, pitched roofs with low-hanging eaves; a central courtyard, and an underfloor heating system known as *ondol*.





size are stacked like a miniature staircase. These would have been used to store books, with the titles inscribed in ink on the outside. Elsewhere, paulonia wood wardrobes are etched with intricate scenes: groves of tall, leafy bamboo; bees and butterflies visiting long, flowering grasses; and a gnarled, twisted pine. Traditionally, a father planted the remarkably fast-growing paulonia on the occasion of his daughter's birth. At the time of her marriage, at the age of 15, the tree would be felled and used to make furniture for her marital home.

A small number of rooms on the ground floor are arranged in the style of a noble family's *hanok*. The first belongs to the *sarangchae* — the men's quarters — where reading tables are positioned in front of cushions on reed mats. A raised indoor terrace, reserved for the owner of the house, occupies much of the room. In one corner, a latticed bamboo cylinder — sometimes referred to as a 'second wife' — leans against the wall. Designed to hug during sleep, it channelled cooling breezes on hot summer nights. When experienced from a seated perspective, the measurements of the room slot into place: the volume of the roof expands overhead, a low cupboard becomes the perfect height for leaning an elbow on, and the windows reveal clear views of the courtyard, the white gravel reflecting daylight into the room.

The bright *anchae*, or women's quarters, also overlook the courtyard. A pine tree bends to meet the open window, and a garden wall is decorated with symbols of longevity: turtle, deer, sun, crane, fish, and sacred fungus. The furniture in the *anchae* was previously owned by Chyung's parents, so there is a fitting intimacy to the alternative name the Korea Furniture Museum is often known by: *This is How We Used to Live*.

Adjoining the *sarangchae* is a long sitting room, which would have been shared by the whole household. Thick shutters of pine and *hanji* are suspended horizontally above the windows, ready to bring down during Korea's cold winters. An ornate screen depicts a summer scene of giant lilies, whiskered carp and elegant herons. All the screens in the *hanok* correspond to the seasons. The museum team will exchange this for an autumn landscape the moment the lily flowers disappear from the pond outside. •



병풍 BYEONG PUNG

Folding screens, or *byeong pung*, were an important feature of traditional Korean interiors, and were often decorated with *minhwa*, an art form practised by anonymous Korean artists around the 18th century. The owner of the museum, Chyung Mi-Sook, paints the folding screens on display here herself, based on these historic designs.

