



Learn about luminous Korean mother-of-pearl (MOP) lacquerware

Mother-of-pearl, also known as nacre, is an organic-inorganic composite material produced by certain mollusks as an inner shell layer, and accumulated in other shells, such as freshwater pearl mussels, in the form of pearls. It is very strong, resilient, and iridescent. Mother-of-pearl can be found in strains of mollusks in the class of Bivalvia, such as the clam, oyster, or mussel; Gastropoda, such as snails or slugs; and Cephalopoda, such as

cuttlefish or squid. At current, pearl oysters, freshwater pearl mussels, and to a lesser extent, abalones are predominant sources of mother-of-pearl material.



Abalone Shell Mother of Pearl



Sheets of Mother of Pearl

The mother-of-pearl material, hereon referred to as MOP, used in traditional Korean MOP inlay crafts is mainly that of abalone. Though artisans do also use the MOP of other shellfish, they believe the abalone MOP is of the highest quality, producing the most beautiful colors and light reflections. The natural shells are diligently sanded down until they reach the desired thickness. 100 of these sheets compose of a single 'bundle'. Thick bundles reach about 4 inches (12.1cm) and thin bundles come to a mere 0.25 inches (7.3mm) in total thickness.

MOP can be adhered onto many different kinds of materials such as wood, porcelain, metal, and thick paper (many layers of papers glued together). There are three main methods of attaching the MOP, the first of which is to carve the surface of the base material exactly to the shape of the MOP motif and inlay the MOP. The second method is to glue the sheet of MOP directly onto the surface. Lastly, one can process the MOP into miniscule pieces and scatter them onto a glue-applied surface.

There is also a large variety of ways to cut and shape the MOP sheets. Thick sheets are often sawn or chiselled into the desired shape, with the edges filed smooth afterwards. Thin sheets can be cut into shape with a craft knife or manipulated with a needle. Sometimes desired shapes are stamped out of thin sheets by way of a chisel end shaped into the desired motif. Sometimes, desired patterns are lacquered onto MOP sheets that have been attached as is onto surfaces. The pattern is then brought out by corrosion of all non-lacquered areas. There are

methods of creating small cracks in the MOP to help stick it to rounded objects; cutting and sticking the MOP in simple triangle, square or diamond shapes; or applying a solid color or attaching a gold or metal sheet to the back of an almost translucent sheet of very thin MOP, a practice that was popularized in China's Ming Dynasty(1368~1644) with gold-hued MOP designs. In addition, knives can be used to carve designs into the MOP and pencil-thin lines can be engraved in the MOP to create images such as petals or feathers. Korea's "Najeon", MOP inlay methods, are known to have been passed down from China's Tang (618~907) Dynasty to Shilla (57 BC~935 AD; a country located in the south-eastern part of Korean peninsula) during the time of the Three Kingdoms. Following on from the Tang Dynasty, MOP craftsmanship deteriorated in China during the Song Dynasty. On the other hand, in Korea during the Goryeo (918~1392) period, MOP craftsmanship developed and spread extensively leading to MOP inlay crafts and ceramics becoming representative of the Goryeo (Introduced and pronounced as "Korea" to Europe) period.

During the Goryeo period, MOP was typically applied in sheets and lacquered over to create designs. According to the 'Shik-hwa-ji', a historical text from the Goryeo Dynasty, the royal courts housed an arts and crafts quarter, the 'Joong-Sang-Seo' where artisans were able to create some of the time's most valuable pieces of art. According to texts, in 1272, under the rule of King Wonjong, with Buddhism as the period's main religion, a series of MOP cases were ordered and created under an official government body to hold the 'Goryeo-Dae-Jang-Kyeong', Buddhist scriptures.



MOP Inlaid Mirror, AD 8c-10c, Korean National Property No140, Leeum Art Gallery, Korea



Goryeo Dae-Jang-Kyeong, Buddhist



KOREAN MOP Inlaid Lacquerware for Buddhist Monk's Rosary, circa 12c, 'Goryeo' Dynasty



MOP crafts of Korea are referred to as Najeonchilgi. Unfortunately, of the mere 16 examples of Najeonchilgi currently known to be in existence, only one is housed in the National Museum of Korea. There are 10 in Japan, 3 in America, and 2 in Europe. While it is difficult to explain the exact reasons behind this unfortunate reality, it is worth noting that considering the Najeonchilgi were created by MOP inlay on lacquered wooden cases, it is almost impossible without dedication and care for them to last 700 years. The Najeonchilgi of Goryeo are highly valued black lacquered MOP crafts adorned with images such as chrysanthemums and vines. Such MOP crafts of the Goryeo Dynasty, while hugely popular at the time, deteriorated with the falling of the Goryeo Dynasty. Towards the end of the 13th century and into the Chosun Dynasty period (1392~1910), MOP crafts underwent stark transformations.



MOP Inlaid Case, Chosun Dynasty, Korea
National Museum, Korea



MOP Inlaid Box, Chosun Dynasty, Korea
National Museum, Korea

Najeonchilgi of the Chosun Dynasty can be categorized into 3 broad groups. Images of lotus flowers and peonies, a pair of phoenix, a pair of dragons, or 'Bosanghwa", an imaginary flower resembling the lotus, were among the common motifs appearing on MOP crafts of 16th century pre-mid Chosun Dynasty. These patterns were noticeably simpler and larger in scale than those of the Goryeo period. During the late Chosun Dynasty period (1700~1800), MOP designs became more free, with images of peony blossoms and bamboo, or flowers and birds appearing frequently. In addition, along with this period's cobalt designs, called "Cheonghwa" depicted on white ceramics, the MOP craft images eluded a certain 'pureness'. Then, during the 19th century, alternate MOP craft techniques such as sheet crimping, sticking in strips or pieces, and most significantly a technique of using thin noodle-like strips of MOP either straight or bent to create images of birds or flowers, developed and gained popularity. Naturally, images became less uniform and more representative of each artists free expression. Many MOP images of this time portray realistic representations of the 'Ten Elements of Longevity'(sun, mountain, water, rock, pine tree, moon, bulocho, turtle, crane, and deer), and other natural objects. At the same time, peony blossoms, bamboo, flowers, and birds started being portrayed in humorous and childish ways, leading to another unique and simple dimension to the beauty of Najeon from the Chosun period. Following on from the Chosun period, Korea entered a period of Japanese colonization (1910~1945), during which MOP craftsmanship was only barely able to survive. Restoration of Korea's independence in 1945 re-opened doors for MOP crafts. The 1960's saw Korea's economy develop and Korea's MOP arts and crafts flourish like never before with techniques becoming more detailed and varied according to new and modern tastes. This wave of development pushed forward into the early 1990's.



Korea National Human Property No10 Song
Bang-Woong, Master of MOP Crafts



Master Song Bang-Woong at Work



Far East Meets West