

*The following is the text of an account by Dr Robert Anderson, Director of the British Museum, of his visit to Pyongyang in March 2001. We are grateful for permission to reprint it here:*

Korea has a rich and distinct cultural heritage that a few museums in the UK are able to represent in their displays. In November last year (2000) the British Museum opened its Korea Foundation gallery and, with some loans, was able to present a wide range of material from prehistory to the present day. The opening ceremony was attended by Chris Smith, the secretary of state for culture at the time, and Peter Mandelson, then the secretary of state for Northern Ireland. Also present were two North Korean officials assigned to the International Maritime Organisation in London; at that stage the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the UK did not share diplomatic relations.

This changed after successful talks were held between the two countries the following month. One December evening, the British Museum laid on a small party for officials from both sides who had been negotiating long and hard during the stay. I was handed a letter by one of the North Koreans inviting me to bring a small delegation from the British Museum and the British Library to North Korea's capital Pyongyang.

It was an invitation we had long wished for as entry to North Korea was not easy. The Korean War of 1950-53 had ended with the country being divided along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. This line approximately followed the ancient pre-7<sup>th</sup> century division between the Shilla and Paekche kingdoms to the south and the Koguryo to the north. The Shilla overcame the others and unified the country until 918, when a new kingdom, the Koryo, took over. This was succeeded by the Choson, whose kings reigned until as recently as 1910, when the Japanese annexed the country until the end of the Second World War. From then on [North] Korea was led by Kim Il Song, the great leader, who later developed the Juche philosophy of self-reliance.

The Korea Foundation Gallery at the British Museum had material to illustrate the southern cultures and their successors, but there was nearly no representation of the north. Very few historians or archaeologists had been able to see the ancient monuments and contents of North Korean museums and so could not judge the cultural variations they revealed. For this reason the opportunity offered by this trip was of considerable significance.

So it was with great anticipation that Beth McKillop, Jane Portal (curators of Korea from the British Library and British Museum) and I arrived in China's capital Beijing to obtain visas and airline tickets for the twice-weekly Air Koryo flight to Pyongyang. After arrival (having compulsorily deposited mobile phones at customs) we found ourselves in a hotel with our guides who presented the programme for the forthcoming week.

Most of our wishes had been granted. The complicating factor turned out to be UK-related; a diplomatic delegation led by the head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was visiting North Korea at the same time as us. So we were asked to spend some of our time meeting ministers and attending official functions. This was certainly of great fascination, but it slightly curtailed the cultural visits.

The museums of North Korea transmit strong messages. The first images one sees on entering all public buildings are huge representations of Kim Il Song. These are either massive sculptures, or paintings covering a whole wall. Our hosts expected us to pause here as a sign of respect. All of the museums are extremely cold (there is a power crisis in the country) and there were few other visitors. We wondered whether the museums were open at all in the usual sense.

All of the guides spoke English adequately, if somewhat mechanically. My companions challenged the interpretation of some of the material and a dialogue (usually in Korean) would be established. The Korean Central History Museum, with 19 galleries, contains large numbers of well displayed archaeological objects and antiquities, particularly relating to the early Koguryo. Evidence on display indicates that a Chinese colony was established near Pyongyang during the Han Dynasty. But this is rejected by North Korean curators who claim it for Koguryo. Controversial material is also discovered in a tomb identified as being that of Tangun, said to be the founder of ancient Korea 5,000 years ago. The great leader had a massive white marble tomb built on a prehistoric site.

The Korean Art Gallery opens with rooms displaying reproductions of murals from the stone chambers of Koguryo tombs. It is valuable to see them like this as the tombs themselves (we entered a number of them) are small and dark. Several demonstrate the early arrival of Buddhism in Korea, while others display Daoist motifs. There are galleries of Koryo and Choson paintings, but a room of particular interest displays revolutionary art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Factories are painted in romantic tones and guerillas display brotherly concern.

The Korean Folklore Museum in Pyongyang presents its ethnographic collection with a thematic approach. As with all the museums we visited, red plaques on the exhibits indicate that they were personally inspected by the great leader. At the conclusion of the visit we sat drinking ginseng tea with the director and her staff and had a valuable dialogue with curators.

We also went to Kaesong, south of the capital, and to the mountainous Myohyangsan area to the north. Here are the two great International Friendship Exhibition Halls. One is devoted to presents given to the great leader, the other to those given to the dear leader. We were told the former displayed 204,000 items. This seemed unbelievable until the dozens of galleries, organised country by country, were actually visited. The only similar exhibit I have seen (it is now dismembered) was in Nicolae Ceausescu's National Museum of Romania.

Particularly impressive is the well-used national library, called the Grand People's Study Hall. It is not a simple library: there are lecture halls, rooms for scholarly consultation, music, etc.; it is a centre for social education as much as for reading. We were allowed into the bookstacks to see English language holdings. Beth was able to resurrect book ordering, which has faltered in recent years.

The British Museum concentrated on acquiring contemporary work in the socialist realist style. As example is a collection of pots that are decorated with scenes of building construction. But it was interesting to note that traditional celadons are still made in North Korea. All purchases were generously classified as cabin baggage by the airlines, ensuring their safe delivery to the British Museum. They will be displayed in the lobby of the Korea Foundation Gallery from 24 November, when a North Korean study day will take place. This will include a contribution from a senior DPRK curator. All are welcome. Nothing quite like it will have happened before.