

OTTCHIL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN TONGYEONG, KOREA

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## Introduction

At the end of the Ottchil craft, the artist's wife brought us some apple slices. My girlfriend and I sat down with the artist at his work table. My girlfriend's niece and nephew explored the studio while I proceeded to ask some questions. As I ate an apple slice, listening to the artist give his reply, I was just amazed at the whole experience. I am in Korea and interviewing a talented artist about his educational program in the Korean language. Luckily, my girlfriend was there to translate for me because my Korean ability is not yet at the level to have such deep conversations, but there I was, pushing myself to new heights in my Korean ability, in my art education studies, and being more outgoing. I will always remember that moment.

In my efforts to research community art education programs, I came across two locations that intrigued me: the Tongyeong Ottchil Art museum and the Atelier of Jongryang Kim. What drew me to these two locations, is that they solely feature the traditional Korean craft of Ottchli. Being an American expat in Korea, I have the special opportunity to learn more about Korean culture. For my research on community art education programs, I did a case study of both locations through interviews, observations, and participation in available programs.

The Tongyeong Ottchil Art Museum consists of a video introduction room, three gallery rooms, and a café in the main building. Next to the main building is the art studio and artist residency program. The third building has a gallery room on the first floor and housing for the artist residency program on the second floor. The Tongyeong Ottchil Art Museum is directed by the artist and educator, Sungsoo Kim.

The Atelier of Jongryang Kim consists of one large studio room with a small office on the second floor of a building in a residential area. The studio space has a few tables where he teaches visitors how to do the craft. The studio and craft are run by Jongryang Kim.

### **Supporting Literature**

Ottchil is known as lacquerware in English and has been in East Asia for thousands of years (Kim, 2014). The technique that is unique to Korea is called Najeon-Chil-Gi or mother-of-pearl inlay in English (Kim, 2014). This technique was developed during the Goryeo Dynasty dating back to AD 918 (Song, n.d.). Sap from the Ott tree or Rhus Verniciflua, is refined to make the colored lacquer (Kim, 2014). The mother-of-pearl is prepared by shaving down oyster, abalone, and conch shells to thin slices leaving only the shimmering interior (Song, n.d.). Layers of lacquer are inlaid with these thin mother-of-pearl pieces (Kim, 2014). More layers of lacquer are glazed over and sanded down to reveal the beautiful image created with the shells (Kim, 2014).

Community art education programs are important for the development of the community. Students often do not have access to more advanced materials and to artists creating with such materials. London (1994) states, “Direct experience brings the participant into contact with the thing itself in all its color, texture, dynamics, and raw otherness” (p. 13). This is especially true when visiting community art education programs and the two locations that I visited. As an expat, I do not know where to obtain mother-of-pearl pieces. I could show my students pictures of it and make a craft with paper using a similar process, but the firsthand experience of seeing the colors

with our own eyes and touching the shell pieces makes it so much more special.

London (1994) also points out:

The main work of the creative person – and the main reward of a creative arts program – is to be able to look at the world with wonder and awe, to be able to direct attention to the riches, most significant parts of the world, to ask the most penetrating questions, to design the most effective strategies for accomplishing goals, and to create the most significant symbols to represent the experience (p. 14).

As I observed and participated in programs at both locations, I considered how these programs might produce these feelings in my students. The craft that we did at the Atelier of Jongryang Kim gave us a representation of that experience. The hand mirror that I decorated with the mother-of-pearl pieces sits on my desk at home and always reminds me of the experiences I had. It is something tangible that I can keep to remember the amazing time we had creating them.

Cleveland (2011) mentions that, “the success of community-based work is often tied to role the community has in identifying its own needs, formulating possible solutions, doing the work, and owning the result” (p. 9). Both artists I interviewed recognized a need for their community and took ownership of it by creating programs for people. This need was the protection of their craft for future generations. Due to this, I also researched the preservation of traditional/cultural crafts to support my case studies. It was difficult to find any research on preserving traditional crafts, but I was able to find a study with the aim of providing new ways to preserve traditional crafts. Lassen and Wood (2013) write, “Today many traditional craft skills are in danger of

being lost because traditional craft knowledge is taught less and less, and the transmission of this knowledge is dependent on its practice" (p. 32). Their solution to this is to create 'bridges' to help transfer the skills from an 'expert learner' to others (Lassen and Wood, 2013). Lassen and Wood (2013) define an 'expert learner' as someone who "has the ability to learn new skills from the expert with minimal instruction" (p. 35). With the newly acquired knowledge, they developed resources such as videos and handout to help others learn the technique. I think this is a very clever idea to preserve traditional crafts. By using the video and handouts, leaners could take their time and experiment with the instructions provided. If these resources are readily available to anyone, they could generate a lot of interest in these traditional crafts and some might even seek out masters in order to perfect their skills.

## Overview

The Tonyeong Ottchil Art Museum is directed by Sungsoo Kim who is also an artist and teacher. His mission is to promote the traditional craft because ottchil art has been seen as inferior to western art. The term lacquer is thought of as being a synthetic chemical but Sungsoo Kim wants to show the world that it is a natural product and hopes that the world will come to appreciate its value (personal communication, September 13, 2017). The museum has a curator and two other staff members who do administrative work and take care of the café. The main education program is the artist residency program however they offer guided tours to groups who schedule in advance. They also host seminars, forums, workshops, and events throughout the year to support their goals. The artist residency program is funded by the city of Tongyeong for two months or the Korean government for three to four months. They program takes place

in the summer but they do not find out which funding they get until January or February. Professional artists and educators usually participate in the artist residency program as it is an all-day intensive course for several months.

The Atelier of Jongryang Kim is the private studio of Jongryang Kim. He supports himself on the sales of his artwork (personal communication, September 12, 2017). He offers a mother-of-pearl inlay craft for visitors. The hand mirror was 15,000 won, approximately \$15. However, the money is not the reason he offers the craft. His mission is to promote and inspire new generations to learn about lacquerware with mother-of-pearl inlay. He believes that by turning it into an art form, Korean culture can be protected from disappearing. Jongryang Kim has a relationship with one of the more popular guest houses in town who often refer visitors to participate in the craft experience. He is also listed on the tourist map.

### **Description and Discussion**

Unfortunately, the artist residency program was already finished by the time I visited the Tongyeong Ottchil Art Museum. Sungsoo Kim was able to show me some work from the recent program. It was a beautiful portrait of a woman. The glistening shells created the face and hair in stark contrast to the pitch black of the lacquer. This piece was done by a Chinese professor who was already knowledgeable in the Chinese form of lacquerware, but wanted to learn about the Korean style with mother-of-pearl (personal communication, September 7, 2017). I was able to see the drawings and the final piece. The Chinese professor who made it was involved in the two-month program. I also observed several other artists working in the studio. Two artists were carefully placing tiny pieces of shells on their lacquered wood panels, while another artist was

working on his drawing. I found out that these are local artists who share the studio space (personal communication, September 7, 2017). It looks like Sungsoo Kim is an excellent teacher because all of their work in progress was already beautiful. In the museum, I was able to walk around and people watch. Everyone I saw was very impressed with the artwork on the walls, taking pictures and saying how beautiful they were. From what I observed, most people watched the video introduction first, then enjoyed the gallery, and finally rested with some coffee in the café. I believe that the video introduction is an excellent idea to teach people about what lacquerware and mother-of-pearl inlay are. By watching the video first, visitors can appreciate the work in the galleries much more.

Overall, I think the programs do a great job of showing the beauty of this art form. The artist residency program is definitely something I would like to do if I had two months free. This would be my only critique and recommendation to the museum. They should design a craft or shorter program for more people to be able to participate in. I think if they had an area where visitors could touch the mother-of-pearl pieces or do some small craft with them, visitors would have a more memorable experience. If they could also provide a Saturday class that lasted a couple of hours, I think more people would participate and be able to learn about the mother-of-pearl process firsthand.

As I walked into the Atelier of Jongryang Kim I could smell lacquer and glue. I looked around and saw a table with our craft prepared and ready for us to start. At the back of the studio was his work table. He was working on a massive mother-of-pearl painting of mountains in traditional Asian style. He was placing small pieces of the mother-of-pearl on the lacquered wood panel. When we started the craft, he explained

a little of the process of how they make the thin mother-of-pearl pieces by shaving them and sanding them down. He showed us some of the big shells that they come from. The kids were excited to see how big the shells are. The kids were able to hold and feel the shells. We then chose either a hand mirror or bookmark. We were directed to draw our design, then cut up pieces of mother-of-pearl to make our design. Jongryang Kim was very kind and patient with the kids. He encouraged and praised them as they drew and collected pieces of mother-of-pearl. We then glued those pieces to the cover of the hand mirror. This experience was amazing for everyone involved. My girlfriend and I enjoyed it just as much as the kids did. If the museum had some kind of craft like this, it would allow them to achieve their mission more fully.

During my interview with Jongryang Kim, I asked him about why he started doing this craft with visitors. He related that he did not want this craft to disappear. He said there used to be 20,000 craftsmen doing this art, but today there are maybe 20 (personal communication, September 12, 2017). He spoke about developing the craft for visitors as a way to spark interest in the art and preserve it. He said he was one of the first to develop a step-by-step way for visitors to enjoy the craft. He hopes that his craft will inspire new artists. I asked him if any of the visitors ask to study under him or become his apprentice. He said that yes, people do ask him to teach them. But he doesn't want to take any students. He thinks that if he starts teaching students, then they will only copy his style without developing their own way. He thinks he could teach them the skill but that they should only learn the skills then go and learn other styles and then develop their own style. I understand his mind, but I believe that if he really wants this art form to continue, he should teach the skills. Similar to what I wrote about

the museum, Jongryang Kim could set up a Saturday class where he only teaches the basics. He could then have an open studio space for people to create their own work after learning the basics. He could then act as a guide, only teaching more when students have trouble.

### **Implications**

As an art educator, these studies have shown me the importance of learning about traditional crafts and art forms. It is important for cultures to protect their cultural heritage. Jongryang Kim told me that he thinks these traditional crafts need to evolve into art forms in order for them to be protected and continue into the future. This makes me wonder what other trades and crafts are at risk of disappearing? How can we evolve them into art forms to protect them? How can I do my part as an expat in Korea? For further research, I want to look into the mission of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage. I know they are protecting some music forms, art forms, and even ways of life here in Korea. I wonder how they are protect intangible cultural heritage and how can we add new forms to the list. I believe it is the duty of the art educator to consider the culture of the students we teach. Are there any ways art educators can partner with UNESCO to help preserve these traditional art forms?

In conclusion, I believe both the Tonyeong Ottchil Art Museum and the Atelier of Jongryang Kim are doing inspiring work to protect the art form that they are passionate about. As I develop my relationship with both artists, I will offer my help to improve their efforts to preserve this traditional art form.

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## Appendix A

### Questions and Translated Answers for Interview with Jongryang Kim

김종량 아뜰리에 – 나전칠기체험 (Atelier of Jongryang Kim – Najeon-Chil-Gi)

#### 1. 당신은 어떻게 예술가 되었습니다?

(How did you become an artist?)

- a. When he was 13 years old his father introduced him to 나전칠기(Najeon-Chil-Gi). He worked as an apprentice until he could do the work on his own. At that time, it wasn't considered an art. He made wood furniture with layers of lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay. He emphasized how it was not an art form but considered just a trade, like a craftsman.
2. I had planned to ask him if he had always worked with 나전칠기, but after this question I knew he had worked with it since he was 13 years old, over 50 years.

#### 3. 미술 팔겠습니다?

(Do you sell your artwork?)

- a. He said that most of his work sells, and is pretty expensive.
  4. 미술 전시합니다?
- (Do you exhibit your artwork?)
- a. During this time in the interview he emphasized that he does not try to show off his artwork. He said that he focuses on the quality of his craft and that people will seek out his work because it is so good. As an artist, he

feels more of a sense of accomplishment when people seek out his work than when he pushes it on others.

- b. He used a Korean proverb to describe this, "If a flower smells good, then the bees will come to it."
- c. He told a story of how he sold a beautiful plate inlaid with mother-of-pearl to a woman, and then didn't think about it again. Then years later, a friend of his found that same plate in the MET. He found out the story of how its journey to the MET. The women who bought it from Jangryang Kim sold it to the CEO of Samsung, and he donated it to the MET. He used this story to show that he did not approach the MET to showcase his work, but because of the beauty of his work, it ended up there.

\*He also mentioned about this story later for question 7.

- d. Jangryang Kim also did commission work for a while. A big connection he had was with one of the big ship building companies in the area. It was not a contract but the ship building company would contact him when they wanted work. Again, he did not make this connection on his own but because the ship building company found him because of the quality of his work.

## 5. 언제 하고 왜 방문자를 위 해이 공예품을 만들기 시작했습니까?

**(When and why did you start doing this craft with visitors?)**

- a. After seeing the exhibition of his plate in the MET, he noticed how small the section on Korean art was compared to other cultures. He was inspired to teach more people about this artwork.

- b. He believes that the craft of 나전칠기 needs to evolve into an art form to be preserved. He spoke about how other cultural activities may disappear unless they evolve into art forms to be respected and remembered. He said there used to be 20,000 craftsmen doing this art, but today there are maybe 20.
- c. He spoke about developing the craft for visitors as a way to spark interest in the art and preserve it. He said he was one of the first to develop a step-by-step way for visitors to enjoy the craft. He hopes that his craft will inspire new artists.
- d. **We asked if any of the visitors ask to learn under him and if he takes any apprentices or students.**
- i. He said that yes, people do ask him to teach them. But he doesn't want to take any students. He thinks that if he starts teaching students, then they will only copy his style without developing their own way. He thinks he could teach them the skill but that they should only learn the skills then go and learn other styles and then develop their own style.

**Najeon-Chil-Gi Craft Process:**

1. He showed us some of the shells that the mother-of-peal comes from and explains a little of how they make it. He said they buy the shells from all over the world, then use a machine to make it very thin.
2. He then gave us the choice of doing the mother-of-pearl inlay on a bookmark or a hand mirror (15,000 won).
3. We then traced a circle to and were told to draw our design.
4. After drawing our design, we then covered it with the mother-of-pearl pieces.  
There seemed to be many small scraps that we could use. He also had some pre-cut designs such as fish and flowers for children to use. We could cut them with the exact-o knife or with scissors.
  - a. The kids had trouble cutting the pieces and needed help with that.
  - b. Jenna made a wonderful floral design and followed her drawing very well.
  - c. Logan tried drawing a character, but really just wanted to layer the mother-of-pearl pieces without his drawing. He made a wonderful seascape.
5. After we had all the pieces, we painted on some glue to the top of the hand mirror.
6. Using our fingers and tweezers, we carefully placed each piece following our drawing.
7. When all the pieces were placed, we painted another layer of glue.
8. Jangryang Kim placed each hand mirror in a nice box and painted another layer of glue.

## Appendix B

### Questions and Translated Answers for Interview with Sungsoo Kim

Tongyeong Ottchil Art Museum

1. What education programs does the Ottchil Art Museum offer?
  - a. Sungsoo Kim told me about the Artist Residency Program that the museum runs during the summer. He said it is usually 1-3 months long.
  - b. In response to my question about who typically enters the Artist Residency Program, Sungsoo Kim responded by saying that every year different people join and that it is hard to guess about who will join. I tried to dig deeper by asking if students or teachers typically join. To answer my question, he said that professionals enter the program, such as artists and teachers because it is a very intensive program that lasts all day for several months. He said that the 2-month program is equal to about 1-2 years of university study because it is so intense.
2. I asked about how the program was funded and he didn't really understand so I asked if participants had to pay.
  - a. He said that the program is free because Tongyeong City supports the program for 1-2 months. And the Korean government supports the program for 3-4 months, however they do not know what funding they will get until January or February of each year.
  - b. Students are required to pay for their own tools and food.

3. Next, I asked about the curriculum in the Artist Residency Program. There was some confusion, so I asked if he taught the lacquer process and the mother-of-pearl inlay or just the mother-of-pearl inlay.

a. He responded by saying that he teaches in a traditional way where the students watch and copy the master to learn the process for a few times, then they are free to start working on their own.

4. I asked if there were any other educational programs besides the Artist Residency Program.

a. Sungsoo Kim told me that people can learn Ottchil outside of the Artist Residency Program throughout the year, however there is not much space so only a few people can and that it isn't supported by the city or government so the student would have to pay for it.

5. I told him I had seen some pictures of groups listening to lectures and in the museum. I asked him what kind of program were these pictures from.

a. Sungsoo Kim told me that these were from guided tours of the museum. They are free to groups. They just have to call the day before to let them know.