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Interpretation for our times: East and West: Past influences, future vision

Seong Kim

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Interpretation for Our times: East and West: Past Influences, Future Vision

By

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September 20, 2000
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Acknowledgments

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I offer thanks to my thesis committee members, Rich Tannen, Charles Lewis and Leonard Urso for their inspiration, assistance and encouragement. I am grateful to Douglas Sigler and Stephen Proctor for their assistance.
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I. Preface

Most of my furniture design is based on historical references. Not only because of my historical interest but also because of the value of the past as a means for future references. Among the historical points, my interest focuses in particular on the cross-cultural influences. Studying in the United States as an international student is a great opportunity to compare the cultural differences between Far East and West. My thesis is titled *Interpretation for Our Times; East and West; Past Influences, Future Vision*. The purpose of the thesis is first to study the history of cross-cultural influences. Second, I want to explore my furniture works based on historical references and in order to suggest future references for the continued development of cultural sharing in the new millennium.
Historical Background: Cross-Cultural Influence of East and West
For true understanding of cross-cultural influences of East and West, one must examine how initially they started to influence each other. When western traders and missionaries first visited Japan in the sixteenth century, the Eastern culture greatly influenced the western cultures.\(^1\) In China notable trades with Europe started in the early Ming and early Qing dynasties.\(^2\) From the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century in Europe, there was a great interest in Oriental Art. The East India Company with varying degrees of governmental support greatly contributed to this taste and the Dutch were the major link among the companies with the West.\(^3\) Therefore everything imported from the East India Company was called Indian rather than Oriental.

To meet the growing demand for Eastern imports Europeans began to produce, *Chinoiserie*, which is the French term for the Oriental influence in the decorative art in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century. *Chinoiserie* represents the adaptation of the Oriental motifs and subjects to the European decorative arts. One source of motivation was the imitation of lacquered pieces from the Far East with the Oriental motifs.

As for the historical reference in the eighteenth century, the Chippendale style combines three different cultures in furniture design. Thoroughly eclectic in taste, it mixed French, Gothic and Chinese. Thomas Chippendale’s *Gentleman and

\(^2\) Ibid
\(^3\) Ibid
Cabinetmaker's Director the third edition in 1762, illustrated Chinese style furniture characterized by dipping canopies like Chinese roofs, open trellis panels, carved fretwork friezes, angular outlines and lattice works (fig.1). The Chinese influence penetrated the furniture for Rococo rooms especially for bedroom suites. The Mrs. Montague's bedroom suit in Hill Street is the example of preference of Chinese style in the mid-eighteenth century English. Many European cabinetmakers were appreciative of the lines of Far Eastern furniture. The cabriole leg, the typical rococo curvilinear leg, is one example of cross-cultural influence in the eighteenth century.

Fig. 1

In the mid nineteenth century, the cross-cultural influences virtually started with opening ports in the Asian countries including Korea, Japan and China. Despite official bans, European traders and explorers began visiting the Far East more

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frequently during the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{5} As a result of the Opium War, China opened ports to foreign trade and residence. At the same time, the late Victorian style lost popularity to the Oriental after the London fair in 1862. The English introduced large quantities of Oriental goods in the 1862 fairs. In the United States, the tendency followed the Centennial Exhibition in 1876. After the fair westerners started to adopt the oriental motif with their interpretation. The term ‘Anglo- Japanese’ style was initiated. Indeed, E. W. Godwin was one of the influential designers who understood the compositional potential of Japanese art (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{6}

![Fig. 2](image)

In the twentieth century, the cross-cultural influences differ from the past fashion. At the turn of the twentieth century, Art Nouveau style has all raided

*Chinoiseries’* repository of colors, techniques, and motifs. Art Deco designers such as

\textsuperscript{5} "Asia." Microsoft\textsuperscript{®} Encarta\textsuperscript{®} Encyclopedia 99. © 1993-1998 Microsoft Corporation.

Jacques-Emile Rulmann and Paul Frankl, used lacquer materials and techniques rather than displaying classical revival motifs.

At the early twentieth century, cross-cultural influences were mainly between East and Europe. However, after the Second World War, the cross-cultural influences between East and West had a big change. Traditional Asian institutions had been slow to borrow or adapt Western cultures. The tendency of one-way trade, East to West, has been changed since the First World War. After the war, the United States came to the world; the West began to mean Europe and the United States.

After the war many immigrants from all over the world, including the Far East, went to the United States, and these immigrants began to mix the different cultures. For example, I. M. Pei designed the National Gallery in Washington and Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (Fig. 2). The two architects, Mies Van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright, are icons of the modern. Among their influences, the taste for Eastern art has remained popular and essential. It is different from the past in the way, in which the artists themselves experience the new culture and create in their own language. Frank Lloyd Wright visited Japan in 1905. However, his experience with Japanese culture traced back to the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, which included the Japanese pavilion of Nippon Tea house and the Ho-o-den. Frank Lloyd Wright, after returning from the first visit of Japan, designed the Robie house in 1906, and published the book, *The Japanese Print* in 1910.
In exploring art of the twentieth century, recent scholars have challenged the notion of modernism as a strictly Western concept and phenomenon by relocating modernism from the text of Euro America to that of Asia. The current surge in interest in Asian artists throughout the contemporary art field is hard to miss. Their work is found with increasing frequency in museums mainstream galleries, and alternative spaces.

After a few decades, since East and West first started their trades, the taste for Eastern art has remained a popular and essential influence. Design is one of the ways to represent the life and culture in certain times. A cross-cultural influence is an opportunity to suggest a third culture and art. Thus, by providing familiar reference points based on art and architecture from east and west, my work gives me an opportunity to look at things from a different angle and engage people in a global spirit of understanding about how they are similar and different.

Fig. 3
The thesis is mainly focused on the cross-cultural influences between South East Asia and the United States. My work strives to a new aesthetic that reflects the social demands of the times with a vocabulary of shapes and formative elements of traditional cultures that are merged to create a new cross-cultural design vision.
Folding Screen Maple, curly maple, and pencil, 50 X 4 X 42 inches
Four works were produced especially for my thesis. The first piece, folding screen (fig. 1) was conceptualized as an attempt to combine western minimalism and eastern simplicity. The challenge was giving a balance to all of these cultures.

Folding screens were one of the trade items during the period when West and Far East first started their trades in the late seventeenth century. Folding screens in the eighteenth century gave informality and flexibility to the European interior space. Folding screens were popular objects to use with japanning, imitating Oriental lacquer technique. In the West, folding screens from the Far East were the most avidly collected imports during the late nineteenth century and they still make an imposing addition to interiors with an oriental bent.

Furthermore, in the twentieth century, the flexibility of walls in the eastern interior, such as sliding doors and screens, has been attractive to western architects. The screen so subtly integrated with its environment that it has become one unit, and creates proportions that would lead people to harmony with the exterior. The development of movable partitioning, such as sliding doors and folding screens, evolved in response to this innovative perception of space, and the eastern idea of setting up a room by surrounding a certain space with movable partitioning or furniture. This enables the function of a given space to be changed by adding, removing or rearranging pieces of furniture.

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8 Michael Freeman, *In the Oriental Style*, (London 1990), 84.
The overall shape of my piece recalls the traditional residence, especially the eastern roof shape (fig. 5). The curvilinear shape also refers to the European furniture in the eighteenth century. Thus, the shape links both cultures together. The screen consists of three panels, arranged symmetrically, but in detail the veneer-matching work on the panel is not symmetric. Most of the shaping of the piece is curvilinear and shows minimal decoration. The use of maple, the lightest wood with little contrast in grain, provides a subtle sense of monochromatic whiteness. Pencil lines blend with the wood color, rather contrast with it.

![Fig. 5](image_url)

The arc match patterns in the panels are applied by pencil drawing and imply the eastern philosophy of Yang and Yin as well as the minimal design element, a partial circle (Fig. 6). The patterns are represented by both pencil line elements and shapes of veneer patterns. Those in the middle are simply created by different arrangements of arcs, and those in the two side panels are within 8” X 8” by inch squares. The combination of two different arcs is the quotation from the work of Sol
Lewitt. The patterns on the panels are made of curly maple veneer, alternating the grain direction of the veneer, which gives a strong curly grain direction when it is reflecting light within the subdued color. The old eastern philosophy of Yang and Yin is symbolized by a full circle. According to the ancient Chinese philosophy:

“All natural forces are determined by opposing forces: by Yin and Yang. The opposing forces do not conflict, but presuppose and complement each other: because, for completeness, they are interdependent, they strive for unity. Yang and Yin are such extremely abstract notions that it is difficult to grasp them without looking at specific associations.”

Fig. 6 Symbol of Yang and Yin

The employment of pencil drawing on the middle panel of the screen calls forth questions from the viewers, “why pencil drawing on the natural wood?” and “why pencil?” Pencil is the medium that could create a subtle image on maple color. Later application of lacquer finish allows the pattern permanence. In addition, pencil drawings were commonly shown on the minimalists’ wall drawings. For example, Sol
Lewitt, the American minimalist, frequently used pencil drawing for walls and his pencil drawings are a conceptual approach to minimal art. He assigned numbers to each arc and combined those arcs by orders to create new patterns.

According to Pawson in *Minimum* “Minimalism is not just matter of eliminating things but of distilling what remains into something as close to perfection as possible.” 10 Minimalism is about so much more than removal of ornamentation. It relies on fundamentals such as proportion, shape, and discipline.

Simplicity is the key to my work, both in terms of material and form. First, because of the fear and confusion of the new millennium in art the simplicity is the more preferable aesthetic. Simplicity is a major aesthetic connecting both East and West. The love of simplicity is easily found in both eastern and western art. The sense of simplicity and balance between two cultures is essential in my work.

The quest for simplicity is an ideal shared by many cultures. From the Quakers to the Zen, simplicity is defined as a virtue that can purify the spirit, and can offer the adherent a sense of inner tranquility and sense of liberation. 11 Zen leads to calm and the essence of humanity; it creates a feeling for balance, beauty, and dignity. That is also implied in the motto: “All is one, and one is all.” 12

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While in Western culture a more rational or conceptual sense of the work predominates, in Oriental culture the tension between two elements in opposition is a question of sensibility, of spatial perception. According to the English critic, C. J. Holmes in the *Burlington Magazine* of 1905, “Oriental art is almost wholly symbolic. The artists convey to the educated spectator a sense of the things beyond mere...which the most elaborate and complete representation would fail to convey.”

In my works, walls in interior space are an essential concept. Movable walls give a flexibility and privacy in a space. In the eastern interior, contrary to the western interior, movable walls have been used, an interest of western architects in modern times. Mies van de Rohe’s works show its use (Fig. 4). The movable wall is the most

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distinguished element compared to western architecture. Space assumed a new lead role in the conception of the work of art and in the architecture, considered as environment. Nevertheless, the relationships established between art and architecture usually go through phases of confrontation, which occasionally evolve. Screens and draped fabric create movable walls, permitting several different activities to take place in the same room.

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14 Vittorio Savi. *Less is more: minimalism in architecture and the other arts* Barcelona: Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya; ACTAR, 124.
Wall Hung Cabinet 24 x 24 x 5 1/2 inches Dyed Bird’s Eye Maple
Eastern meanings of space could be interpreted as an extension of minimalism. The next step in exploring interior space between East and West was the idea of the alcove. The alcove was placed in both Eastern and Western interiors. Two wall pieces were designed based on the cube, which is the minimal element juxtaposing the two traditional interiors. The wall hung cabinet, one of the wall pieces, made of maple and aluminum, illustrates the distinctive characteristics of traditional Japanese interior. The negative spaces in alcoves and patterns from tatami mats, in particular were explored.

Fig. 9

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<tr>
<td>1.91 meters</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.81 square meters</td>
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<td>1.88 meters</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.74 square meters</td>
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<td>1.66 meters</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.37 square meters</td>
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Tatami sizes.
The cabinet has similar patterns on both sides of the door and inside the cabinet. The selves in the cabinet are designed for storing small items such as teapots and cups. The pattern is made up of the different placement of the shelves. The door of the cabinet is slightly overhung from the carcass to give the thinness to its look and make it easy to open.

On the front of the cabinet, veneer patterns show the dominance of horizontal and vertical lines, implying tatami mats. Tatami patterns (Fig. 9) that Japanese use as a surface for sitting, sleeping and walking on, represent an aesthetic element in my furniture design. In general Tatami is approximately 3 feet by 6 feet. The front veneer patterns on the door sustain the actual proportion of Tatami, 1:2. Moreover I try to eliminate curve lines on this piece to be reflected linear elements, panels and Tatami mats in the interior.

The arrangement of open and closed space in the interior and the exterior of the piece is influenced by alcoves; not only the shape, but also the subject of it. The use of the alcove and tatami mats is the major characteristic distinguished from the Western interior, which is a major theme of the piece, reflecting the distinct interior space in the furniture design as rather eclectic but still simple and calm. The contrast of the wood and metal in this piece maximizes the notion of the eastern space.
The use of the alcove in the eastern interior is little different from its use in western interior. The development of the alcove closely related to the fashion of the interior decoration. It became customary to hang decorative items, especially precious imported items, in the alcove, with a low table placed before it also furnished with precious collection items.

There are many frames and panels in eastern interiors, which can be arranged by specific needs. The interior partitions are a major part of building, which give harmony with nature and bring the exterior to the interior. The raw materials used in the eastern architecture give rooms quiet, subdued tones.
The geometric patterns in subdued color also can be found in domestic uses. The wrapping cloth for bedding in the late eighteenth century in Korea (fig. 11), has similar echoes to the interior setting. The patch work is made of semi-transparent material. Therefore the seams assume strong liner design functions. The pattern used in the wall hung shelf is the most popular pattern universally used in any kind of objects, include exterior (fig. 12) and interior decoration.

Fig. 11

In general, white or light brown color from natural materials defines a composition of space in eastern interiors. There is a certain degree of simplicity in the traditional interior color scheme within the natural materials such as wood, paper, and reed. To accommodate these quiet and subdued tones I chose cream colored wood, curly maple, for my furniture piece. Compared to the previous work, the cabinet shows the use of linear elements in use with the same kind of wood.
On the contrary, aluminum inlay represents the contrast of the boarders of tatami. However, the material is cold and synthetic rather than natural. One of the pieces of the aluminum pattern projects out as a door handle. In modern work, lightness is made by new materials such as steel and glass.\textsuperscript{15} The quest for such lightness is perhaps also transference of the centuries in the Far East.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Klusacek and Blaser 1996, 12.
\textsuperscript{16} Klusacek and Blaser 1996, 12.
Wall Hung Shelf, Kowazinga and maple, 30 x 30 x 7 inches
The second wall piece is the wall hung shelf with a mirror made of kowazinga and maple. Compared to the cabinet, the shelf shows the use of kowazinga whose grains add a graphic image to this work juxtaposing the arc and square. Exploration of classical vocabulary of shape is the other approach to minimizing the ornamentation. A composition of minimal elements such as arc and square within a cube shape create a practical element and allows the limited structure.

The shelf is placed within a cube shelf; does not break up the outlines and it is confined within a limited space. Based on the cube, the shelf is placed in right-angled horizontal and vertical members. The shape of the shelf is curvilinear reflecting the arc inlay patterns. The cube shape is divided up horizontally and vertically into four equal squares by the veneer-matching pattern.

Fig. 14
In contrast to the folding screen, the arc pattern on the surface is created by inlay. It is a strong contrast from the dark and the light color wood, kowazinga and maple, unlike the subtlety of the folding screen. Donald Judd remarked, “Two colors on the same surface almost always lie on different depths”  

The interrelationship between the shelf, the front surface, and the mirror is essential. The little square, the mirror, is the junction of all of these elements. There are no actual boundaries between inside and outside. The use of the mirror for the negative space is an opportunity to imply a greater space beyond the actual piece. Positive and negative spaces more appropriately describe internal relationship. After all, the elements make harmony like the relationship between interior and exterior in the traditional eastern building.

For the minimalist, Sol Lewitt’s words about the cube:

“The most interesting characteristic of the cube is that it is relatively uninteresting. Compared to any other three-dimensional form, the cube lacks any aggressive force, implies no motion, and is least emotion. Therefore it is the best form to use as a basic unit for any more elaborate function...because it is standard and universally recognized, no intention is required of the viewer. It is immediately understood that the cube represents the cube, a geometric figure that is uncontestable itself. The use of the cube obviates the necessity of inventing another form and reserves its use for invention.”  

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19 Colpitt 1990, 15.
It is necessary for me to resolve my work in relationship to the interior and to create the illusion of three-dimensionality. Indeed, the two wall pieces are not only the continuation of the wall but also the focal points of the wall in the modern interior, reflecting the traditional and modern, also east and west.
Hall Table 40 X 10 X 35 inches, Mahogany
Fig. 15
After exploring those three works, I had to seriously think about my
interpretation of my theme. What would be the last piece? What did I learn from the
previous works? How am I going to develop my own interpretation for this final
piece? I had to look over my thesis statement and I had to think about what I had
missed in the previous works. The final piece is a hall table.

The reason for the use of mahogany in this piece, which is not bright in color,
but has soft grain and therefore has a certain kind of subtlety, is to avoid using the
same material and color that was used in the last pieces. It is possible to accomplish
simplicity though this material because it has subtle grains patterns. As the historical
reference, most of the furniture made in Chinese styles was of mahogany in
eighteenth- century Europe.20

The hall table was designed based on minimal elements, squares and circles.
The back panel is tapered down slightly however, it still closes to the square shape.
The panel is divided by veneer patterns into four similar shapes. Mahogany gives
greater effect on this veneer- matching work, compared to the previous work.

The base consists of three free- form bent laminated pieces. Plus, the patterns
on the rear side of the back panel are the same as that on the front. Free- form bent
laminations allow the piece to have dynamic movement.

Combinations of formal and informal shapes are found in the piece. The
informal shape of the bent laminated pieces reflects the arc shape on the veneer work

on the back panel. The previous works were mostly focused on the two-dimensional images. This piece explored three dimensionality within a subtly, different approach from the last three pieces. Moreover, this piece represents dynamic movement compared to the previous pieces.
Conclusion
At the next millennium, my furniture work accommodates interpretation of cross-cultural ideas between east and west in the past. Every country has certain images expressed in its art and cross-cultural influences provide great possibilities creating a third new culture in art.

My work strives to create a new aesthetic that reflects the social demands of the times. The vocabulary of shapes and formative elements of traditional cultures merge to create a new cross-cultural design vision. I pursue art as a mutual balance between tradition and modernism. Indeed, the practical purpose of my work offers inspiration from the recurrence of the past. One can feel strong links to the past in my work as well as connections to the present and future. By studying how they are influenced and related to each other in the past, I explore cross-cultural influences and search for the styles that connect with the past, yet are suitable for the future with my interpretation of these times. The dual theme of traditionalism and modernism will run throughout the new millennium.

In my furniture work, the importance of understanding history and theory is essential. This is a paramount experience for me to compare East Asian and Western Art and to find a link between two different cultures in relation to furniture design.
Bibliography


