

# 27. BUDDHIST ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF KOREA

**GRADE LEVEL:** High School

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**SUBJECT:** World Religions, Humanities, Asian Studies, World History

**TIME REQUIRED:** 1 class period; additional days for projects

## **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Explore Korean architecture and art.
2. Reflect on Korean culture/beliefs.
2. Learn about Buddhist temples, which are microcosms of the pilgrim's journey to enlightenment.
3. Read and understand iconography through art and architecture.

## **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- The photographs of Korean temples included in this lesson
- Various images of the Buddha

## **BACKGROUND:**

### **I. Brief history of Korean Buddhism**

- A. Introduced to the Korean peninsula from China by a Tibetan monk in 372 CE.
- B. Distinctly Korean—influenced by Korean Shamanism.
  1. Buddhism absorbed Shamanic nature spirits.
  2. Many Korean Buddhist temples built on mountains sacred to mountain spirits.
  3. Some Korean Buddhist temples contain shrines for mountain spirits.
- C. Reached peak in Korea in Silla and Koryo dynasties.
- D. During the later part of Koryo Dynasty, became corrupt—materialistic and political.
- E. In Choson Kingdom, elite introduced Neo-Confucianism and restricted Buddhism.
- F. In Colonial Period, Japanese implemented Japanese Buddhism, allowing monks to marry.
- G. Eighty percent of Korean cultural heritage is Buddhist. Over half of the 230 National Treasures are Buddhist. Haeinsa Temple is one of these National Treasures; UNESCO declared it a world cultural treasure.

### **II. Haeinsa Temple (founded 802 CE)**

- A. Located in the mountains.
  1. The climb upwards puts the traveler in a proper mind set to take in the temple; removes him or her from secular world.
  2. Temple positioned in harmony with nature—Daoist influence.
    - a. A place of peace and
    - b. A place of inspiration for spiritual journey.
  3. Consider the significance of mountains to various religious traditions. What mountains throughout the world have been deemed sacred? What important holy events have occurred on mountains? (For example, Olympus, Fuji, Sinai, Ararat, Olivet (Mount of Olives), Sermon on the Mount, Mesopotamian ziggurats)

B. Physically represents the journey/pilgrimage toward enlightenment, "waking up" (the aim) through monastic practice (the path); an architectural sermon on the Buddhist way.

1. One-Pillar Gate

- a. Symbolizes the initial step on path towards enlightenment.
- b. Pilgrim leaves ego behind and prepares mind to receive truth; purges self of desires and attachments that obstruct progress toward nirvana.

2. Four Guardians' Gate

- a. Painted or sculpted guardians, ready for battle, protect temple from evil spirits.
- b. Pilgrim enters a sacred place, likewise battling against forces that may lure self to the material world.

3. Gate of Nonduality (or Gate of Enlightenment)

- a. Represents enlightenment that transcends duality.
- b. Pilgrim enters paradise, free of worldly troubles.

4. Main Hall or Buddha Hall

- a. Central focus of temple complex and of Buddhist life.
- b. Site of Buddha statue and worship.
- c. Meditation and Buddhahood as the very center of existence; the heart of the temple body.
- d. Traditional belief is that evil travels in straight lines; curved roofs are intended to stop evil from entering buildings.
- e. Brilliant color—especially red and blue—provide richness and splendor and protect wood.
- f. Painted images in eaves and murals on walls represent Buddhist ideas and teachings, instruct pilgrim on the spiritual journey.

5. Library

- a. Highest point of temple compound.
- b. Contains Korean Tripitaka—the scripture and teachings of Buddha.
- c. Symbolical hierarchy above all other buildings of temple compound.
- d. The "head" of the temple body: the intellectual source of wisdom and teaching.

6. Temple plan in shape of sailing ship

- a. Symbol of setting sail from secular world.
- b. Traveling toward enlightenment, toward paradise.
- c. *Haein* means "reflection on a smooth sea"; *sa* means "temple."

C. Beauty and peace: During the Korean War, Haeinsa was used as a refuge for North Korean soldiers, and so an order was given to bomb the compound. The pilot, looking down on the site, was so overwhelmed by its beauty and peace, and by his own religious belief, that he did not drop bombs on the temple. Charged with treason and imprisoned for several years, he was eventually released and became a national hero.

### III. Buddhist Sculpture

#### A. The Buddha Image

- 1. "A Buddha image is not a picture of the historical Buddha. We are all Buddha beings; all things are Buddha beings. So an image of the Buddha is not a graven image to be understood concretely. It is a meditation tool, something to be seen *through*. It is a support for meditation on the Buddhahood within you, not a depiction of any historical Buddha 'out there'."—*Joseph Campbell*
- 2. Not an idol, but an object that helps in meditation.
- 3. Expresses essential message of Buddhism: inner peace and contemplation.

4. Buddhist iconography (symbols):

- a. Lotus—because it grows out of the mud (ignorance) into the sunlight (enlightenment)
- b. Split and elongated earlobes - renunciation of riches (when Buddha was a prince, he used to wear heavy jewels)
- c. Mark (sometimes jewel) on forehead - the third (or inner) eye of enlightened vision
- d. Ushnisha—protrusion on top of head indicating wisdom
- e. Closed eyes—looking inward
- f. Smile of peace
- g. Common mudras (hand positions)
  - (1) Palms together—worship
  - (2) Right hand up as if illustrating a lesson—teaching
  - (3) Raised right hand, palm forward—"fear-not"
  - (4) One hand touching earth—moment of enlightenment/calling the earth to witness
  - (5) One finger wrapped in other hand—finger symbolizes the world and hand symbolizes world of Buddhism; unity

B. Bodhisattva Maitreya

- 1. Buddha of the future—has reached enlightenment but postponed nirvana to pass truth on to others
- 2. Crown and jewels—show he is still part of this world
- 3. Maitreya—in meditation
- 4. Pensive—eyes looking downward
- 5. Spiritual—smile

**PROCEDURE:**

The teacher uses background information and pictures to lead a lesson on Buddhist art and architecture, encouraging shared discussion and individual insights. The students should then work individually or cooperatively on any of the following activities:

- Create an illustrated dictionary of Buddhist iconography.
- Interpret several postcards or photocopies of Buddhist images.
- Compare the Korean Buddha of Sokkuram Grotto to an Indian or Chinese Buddha.
- Compare the smiles of the Buddha and the Mona Lisa.
- Compare the layouts of Haeinsa and Chartres Cathedral: what does each convey about its religion's beliefs?

**EVALUATION:**

In addition to evaluating the activities above, the following essay questions will reveal students' understanding of the lesson:

- 1. Identify and interpret the iconography of the attached image of the Buddha, and discuss what this figure conveys about Buddhism.
- 2. Discuss how the traveler's journey through Haeinsa is comparable to the Buddhist's spiritual journey toward enlightenment.
- 3. Trace the introduction and development of Buddhism in Korea.

**SOURCES:**

*Haein-sa, Reflection on a Calm Sea Temple.* Haein-sa Press, 1994.  
*Korean Buddhism.* Seoul: Korean Buddhist Chogyae Order, 1996.

Lee Sang-hae. "Architectural Characteristics of Haeinsa." *Koreana* (Korea Foundation), 14, no. 1, Spring 2000.

Ross, Nancy Wilson. *Three Ways of Asian Wisdom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966.

*Splendors of Korean Culture*. Seoul: The National Museum of Korea, 2000.



