South Korea may have first taken part in the Venice Biennale in 1986, and had a permanent pavilion there since 1995 — where it has been represented by such internationally respected artists as Lee Bul (1999), Haegue Yang (2009) and Lee Yong-Bae (2011) — but 2015 has been the year

Korean art took centre stage, grabbing the attention of the fickle art world and making it sit up and take notice. All the indications are that this appreciation can only grow, as Korean artists are becoming an ever-stronger presence at art fairs, in Western gallery shows and in auction sales rooms.

Western institutions have been showing interest in these artists for a while. At MoMA, in 1997, Lee Bul became famous virtually overnight for her glittering but decaying installation of bejewelled dead fish, Majestic Splendor (a later work, Untitled (Infinity Wall), is pictured below); and in 2008 the museum acquired Documentary Nostalgia by Jung Yeon Doo, an 85-minute, one-take film of a performance inspired by the artist’s vain search to find a breathtaking view of the Taebaek Mountains. By 2012, the magazine Art + Auction had named Jung one of the 50 next most collectable artists worldwide. Tate Liverpool, meanwhile, held a major retrospective in 2010 of Nam June Paik (Bubblite Robot pictured overhead), the acknowledged founding father of Korean video art, and in 2012 inaugurated its experimental space, The Tanks, at Tate Modern, with...
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South Korea is finally being recognised as one of Asia’s leading creative powerhouses by the international art world. Emma Crichton-Miller feels it roar.

But it was in Venice earlier this year that this interest crystallised into something undeniably potent. As well as the dreamy, futuristic multimedia installation of artist-duo Moon Kyungwon and Jean Joonho in the official Korean pavilion, there was also the film Factory Complex (about female textile workers in South Korea – an exploration of the underbelly of the country’s economic success) that won IM Heung-Soon the Silver Lion for Promising Young Artist. At 46, he is not all that young, but this year has seen his work (from about $15,000) achieve global recognition – a recent film, Reincarnation, exploring women survivors of war in Vietnam, Taiwan, and Iran, was shown at the Sharjah Biennial and New York’s MoMA PS1.

Outside the Venice Biennale’s official pavilions, at Palazzo Grimani, Poesies Reimagined (curated by New York-based Tagore Foundation International) included two Korean artists of very different disciplines. Kim Joon showed two elaborate digital prints featuring bodies and body parts superimposed with tattoos and drawings (see Ebony-Tiger, $18,000, pictured on previous page) – his work is now available through the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in the US and last year his Chromosome Dptych sold for £21,295 at Phillips London. Chun Kwang Young, meanwhile, who emigrated to America in the 1960s, was showing some of his beautiful Aggregates – often massive sculptural compositions made from small, hand-cut pieces of styrofoam wrapped in antique mulberry paper sourced from Korean books and academic texts and tinted with tea, fruits and flowers. He has been making them since the 1990s and they marry traditional Korean craft techniques with his interest in American abstract expressionism. As Chun has said, “I think the first thing I saw [as a child] was my mother’s face, and then there was mulberry paper. This paper is not just for writing and drawing but is like the spirit and soul of Korea.” Chun has won many prizes in Korea (Artists of the Year in 2001, a Presidential Prize in 2009) and been exhibited at galleries in the US and London, but this year he was honoured with a show at the Dovecot Studio, as part of the Edinburgh Art Festival.

Recent auction prices – £43,750 for Aggregation 04 No.054 at Sotheby’s London in March, against a high estimate of £12,000, and HK$500,000 (about £43,000) for Aggregation 07 No. 77 at Sotheby’s Hong Kong in April – reflect his strong international following. Next year sees a solo show at Bernard Jacobson in London.

A revelation at this year’s Biennale was the exhibition celebrating the poetry of Korean monochromatic painting of the 1960s, 70s and 80s – Dansaekhwa.
“Recognition of Nam June Paik has been long due and is an encouraging step for Korean art globally. I hope it will widen collectors’ views on video art.”

International art fairs, including Basel and Basel Hong Kong, since 2013; both Lisson and Pace have showcased Lee Ufan in London; White Cube will be exhibiting Park Seo-Bo (works from $400,000-$650,000) from January; while Galerie Perrotin will be showing Chung Chang-Sup (works from $80,000, Return 77-0 pictured overleaf) in New York until December 23.

“The revaluation of the Dansaekhwa movement is part of a reevaluation of historical movements across Asia, such as Gutai in Japan,” says Magnus Roubroek, deputy chairman of Borshans Asia. Art consultant Anneve Levene Piper extends the comparison to the current enthusiasm among collectors for artists of the Italian Arte Povera movement and Zero group, who also choose modest materials and a monochrome palette. “A revaluation of Dansaekhwa makes sense given the context of today’s market — and how reasonably priced Dansaekhwa artists are in comparison to works by these other groups.”

Such interest in the Dansaekhwa tradition has helped expand the appreciation of Korean artists more broadly. Lehmann Muppin, based in New York and Hong Kong, represents established installation artist Do Ho Suh (works from about $100,000). Luxembourg & Dayan, in London and New York, shows the exquisite, intensely worked art of Minjung Kim (The Street pictured on previous page, €27,000). Other pieces cost from $3,000-$40,000. And just this year Gagosian took on the estate of aforementioned multimedia artist Nam June Paik (works from $25,000) who died in 2006; the news was widely followed by the show Nam June Paik: The Late Style in its Hong Kong gallery. Next autumn, the London outpost of Korea’s Harenzi Gallery will host an exhibition of his work.

“I feel this recognition has been long due and I see it as an encouraging step for Korean art globally,” says the gallery’s founder Kwak Heubin. “In particular, I hope it will widen collectors’ views on video art, which traditionally has been a difficult medium commercially.”

Levene Piper pinpoints 2012 as a turning point for Korean art: “The Korean Eye show at the Saatchi Gallery [that year] was a seminal moment that gave modern Korean art great exposure in the west.” It was, in fact, the third exhibition of Korean art in London organized by David Ciclitira, founder and chairman of Parallel Media Group, but it was undoubtedly the largest and attracted the greatest media and collector interest.
Ciclitira has been collecting contemporary Korean art since 2007 and is passionate about the blossoming art scene he has encountered on business trips to the country and the diversity and creativity of its artists. “Korea is the creative powerhouse of Asia—and its art is the way it can express itself internationally,” he says. He picks out Yong Ho Ji, whose menacing life-size shark, constructed from old tires, was a sensation at his 2010 show, Fantastic Ordinary, and whose extraordinary Lion 2 (painted on opening pages) paved the grounds of Chatsworth in 2011 as part of a Sotheby’s exhibition, and Hyung Koo Kang, whose hyper-realistic depiction of Mother Teresa featured in 2012. His portrait of Churchill (painted on previous page) fetched around $720,000 at Christie’s Hong Kong last year. He is represented by the Arario Gallery, which has branches in Korea and Shanghai.

Many of the artists Ciclitira has showcased have become established names among international collectors. Foremost are U-Ram Choe, represented by Korea Gallery Hyunju, who creates intricate kinetic mechanical sculptures (from $5,000), combining the skills of the engineer and the artist; London-based Mookeyung Shin (represented by the Halgoje Gallery, with works from £5,000), known for her Translation Series in which she replicates antique Chinese vases and Greek statuary in scented soap; Yoo Soonyong, who shows at London’s Almine Rech Gallery and makes towering sculptures (£30,000-£50,000), Translated Vase pictured on previous page) out of broken porcelain; and Lee Jaebyo, whose work can be seen at London’s Albemarle Gallery and who creates exquisite sculptures (Untitled pictured above, £15,000) from wood and nails, drawing deeply on Buddhist philosophy.

These artists belong to the generation who reached maturity in the 1990s. As associate vice president and regional specialist at Christie’s Yunah Jung explains: “The 1990s were a very interesting time for contemporary Korean art.” The country’s economy was beginning to grow and society to heal after the first free parliamentary elections in 1988. Moreover, in 1993, the Whitney Biennial took place in Seoul, introducing Korean artists to international trends. This was followed by the opening of the first Gwanju Biennial in 1999. Yunah says of this generation: “They are very sophisticated, very smart. They exchange ideas with western culture but speak with their own language and about Korean life.”

Jonathan Watkins, director of the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, which gave Lee Bul her first UK solo show last year, shares Yunah’s high estimation. Indeed, he is anxious lest the current enthusiasm in the west for Korean art distract from admiration for these artists’ unique strengths: “It’s almost as if, after Japan and China, it is now Korea’s turn. That view would be a shame.” He adds, “We must guard against exoticizing Korea as we exoticised Japan.” After all, he reminds me, there are sizable numbers of Korean artists living in London—let alone in Paris, Berlin and New York. On the other hand, part of the strength he recognizes in Korean art derives from its unique history: “Lee Bul is rightly recognised as a pioneer, coming out of difficult historical times.” And, he stresses, “is not just all new technology. Korean artists are very strong on things that are handcrafted too.”

Ciclitira agrees. His latest initiative, the Start art fair at the Saatchi Gallery, the second edition of which ran in September, offered, among other coveted things, some of Chun Kwang Young’s styrofoam and mulberry-paper Aggregates (£75,000) and the Skipwits stand and the extraordinarily beautiful ink paintings ( £1500-£6000) of Kim In Kyun (Space-Lea pictured on previous page, £5000) from Gallery Soloo in Seoul. Looking ahead, Ciclitira says, “Serious interest is already out there—we are just joining the dots.”

ART AND SEOUL
Chun Kwang Young, see Skipwits.
Chung Chung-soop, see Galerie Perret.
Ciclitira Galerie, see skipwits.
Galerie Perret, see Skipwits.
Galerie Tyo, see Skipwits.
Galerie Zieher Smith, see Skipwits.
Harmi Gallery, www.harmigallery.co.uk.
Lee Bul, see Lahmann Maupin.
Lee Jaebyo, see Lahmann Maupin.
Lee Seoju, see Lahmann Maupin.
Lee Sujin, see Lahmann Maupin.
Lee Suyeon, see Lahmann Maupin.
Lee Taejin, see Lahmann Maupin.
Lee Ung, see Lahmann Maupin.
Lee Yeong, see Lahmann Maupin.
Munjeong Kim, see Skipwits.
Nam June Paik, see Gagosian Gallery.
Paek London, see Gagosian Gallery.
PARK Seo-bo, see White Cube.
U-Ram Choe, see Skipwits.
Yoo Soonyong, see Almine Rech Gallery.
Yong Ho Ji, see Skipwits.

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