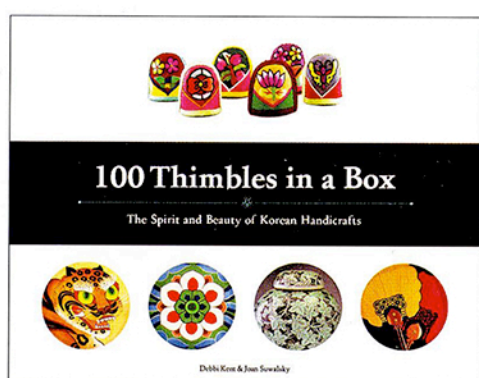


A Glimpse into Korea's Booming Musical Scene

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Chronicle of a Quest for Living Traditions

"100 Thimbles in a Box – The Spirit and Beauty of Korean Handicrafts" By Debbi Kent & Joan Suwalsky,
168 pages, \$39.00/27,000 won, Seoul: Seoul Selection (2014)

"100 Thimbles in a Box" is a labor of love in every sense of the term. Its authors were first introduced to Korea through their adopted Korean children; they naturally developed an interest in their children's native land and, after a visit to Korea, fell in love with its handicrafts as well. This book is their way of sharing the world of Korean handicrafts with readers who might otherwise have never known of them.

Vibrant and colorful photographs grace every page, accompanied by informative and well-researched text. The book begins with an introduction to the handicrafts, traditions, and history of Korea; it is necessarily brief, but sufficient to give the reader a proper frame of reference for what will follow. The second chapter is perhaps even more helpful: a mini-encyclopedia of symbols found in Korean art and handicrafts. These are largely plants and animals, but include natural phenomenon and a few conceptual symbols as well.

The bulk of the book introduces the reader to a variety of handicrafts roughly divided into seven categories: ceramics, fiber arts, paper, inlay, metal, wood, and paintings. Some of the categories, like ceramics, are self-explanatory, while others, such as fiber arts and wood, cover a wide range of arts. Those familiar with Korean arts will recognize some perennial favorites, such as celadon, but there are several gems that many readers might not have encountered before; ox horn carving, a uniquely Korean art, and funerary figures are examples of art forms that have not received as much attention as their more famous cousins.

A number of themes quickly become apparent while reading the book. The connection to nature, for example, is emphasized in the second chapter, and the vast majority of symbols is indeed rooted in nature. The authors explain that the function of these symbols is to foster harmony between humanity and nature, presenting specific examples in each of the arts covered. The authors also lament the decline or disappearance of certain art forms as they are replaced by modern equivalents. The embroidered thimbles that give the book its name, for example, remain mostly as a curiosity in this era of sturdy modern thimbles. But new is not always better.

Perhaps the most brilliant thread that runs through this tapestry is the concepts of preservation and revitalization. There are mentions throughout the text of how certain art forms have seen a revival in recent years, and the last chapter, "Handicrafts Today," looks forward to the future of handicrafts in Korea. At one point in the last chapter, the authors draw on the etymology of the English word "tradition," which means "something that is handed over, delivered, or entrusted." The Korean word "*jeontong*" has a similar meaning, incorporating the connotation of "something handed down," that is, from one generation to the next. Traditional Korean handicrafts continue to seek to bridge generations and flourish in the modern world; "100 Thimbles" is a chronicle of — and itself another step in — this quest.