

# Epochal Reforms and Exploration of Joseon White Porcelain in Korea

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## The Background of the Emergence of Joseon White Porcelain

Political Reforms: Joseon was established in a reformative manner by Yi Seong-gye, a distinguished general from the Goryeo period, in 1392.

Reform of Governance Ideology: Embraced Neo-Confucianism as the founding ideology. Advocated for integrity, innocence, and humility through self-discipline" (Hyun, S., 1960).

Reform of Color: Revered white color in accordance with the governance ideology, common people in Joseon prefer to wear white clothes (Korea Cultural Heritage Administration, 2022).

This was clearly expressed through Joseon white porcelain works as well. The ideological reforms of the time had a significant impact on Joseon society.



The Joseon white porcelain was produced in three ways.

1. A potter completed the entire process of pottery production with the spirit of a skilled artisan.

2. During the Joseon Dynasty, literati considered the enjoyment of painting, calligraphy and writing a poem as an essential part of their cultural refinement under the doctrine of "Sisuhwailche". Ceramic artworks depicting paintings on pottery could be observed among royalty, nobility, officials, and scholars.

3. Artworks painted on pottery by the specialized painters of the Dohwaseo, the art institution run by the kingdom.



The Imjin War (1592–1598), also known as the "Pottery War," earned its nickname due to the Japanese feudal lords, known as daimyo, who greatly admired the humble pottery of Joseon and brought many potters from Korea to Japan during the conflict.

The Imjin War led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi also resulted in being referred to as the "Pottery War."

The transmission of Joseon's ceramic production technology to Japan led Japan to produce high-fired ceramics at elevated temperatures with the discovery of porcelain clay in the Izumiyama region of Arita in 1616 (Koo, T., 2008).

## Types of Joseon White Porcelain

### 1) Pure White Porcelain

White ceramics produced during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) are referred to as "Joseon White Porcelain."

The firing methods employed include reduction firing, which results in pieces with a slight bluish tint, and oxidation firing, which yields works with a yellowish hue on the surface.

Early 15th-century Joseon white porcelain ware / Ehwa University Museum





18th-century white porcelain moon jar



National Treasure No. 310: 17th-18th century White Porcelain Moon Jar / National Palace Museum of Korea

The moon jar, a round jar produced in a white porcelain kiln for royal use, is known as "pure white porcelain."

It was fired using oxidation or reduction firing techniques.



The production method of a moon jar involves the potter creating two vessels with the same diameters and joining them together by attaching one form on top of the other, inverted. Therefore, the seam mark is visible in the center of the moon jar (Kim, W., & Bae, E., 2015).

The body and treatment of the rim and base of the moon jar reflect the unique philosophy of Joseon in its creation.



## 2) Cheonghwa ware (Cobalt decorated white porcelain)

### (1) Sagunjamun

Cheonghwa ware refers to ceramics decorated with cobalt (Co). Among them, Sagunjamun the "Four Gentlemen patterns" (plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum) are often depicted, symbolizing plants that maintain their integrity without being tainted by the world, metaphorically representing a life of honesty.

White porcelain square bottle with blue and white decoration of the "Four Gentlemen" pattern

White porcelain brush holder with blue and white decoration of orchids/  
National Museum of Korea.

## (2) Cloud and dragon patterns

Dragons symbolize divine power and seeking solace through reliance on great strength. The "Cheonghwa White Porcelain Cloud and Dragon Bottle" appears to have been used during the 15th century, likely for annual royal ceremonies. In the 17th century, a large number of iron-decorated white porcelain pieces were produced.

Treasure No. 785, 15th-century Cheonghwa White Porcelain Cloud and Dragon Bottle / Hoam Museum

17th-century White Porcelain Iron-decorated Cloud and Dragon Bottle / National Museum of Korea



In the 18th century, the depiction of cloud and dragon patterns became more realistic and intricately represented. The dragon symbolizing the emperor, features five dragon toes, with lingzhi mushroom and three-layered decorations commonly seen in royal usage.

For aristocrats, they only use porcelains with dragon patterns with four or three toes (Nam, H., 2004).

During the 18th century, dragons were abstractly represented on the moon jars allowing for a more liberated expression of Joseon's artistic style.

We may see a floral window for depicting a dragon pattern inside.

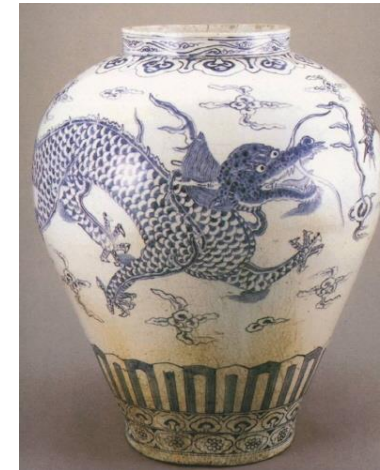


18th-century Cheonghwa White Porcelain Iron-decorated Cloud and Dragon pattern Bottle/ Private collector

18th-century Cheonghwa White Porcelain Iron-decorated Cloud and Dragon pattern Bottle/ Horim Museum

18th-century Cheonghwa White Porcelain Iron-decorated Cloud and Dragon pattern Bottle/ National Museum of Korea.

Early 18th-century Cheonghwa White Porcelain Iron-decorated Cloud and Dragon pattern Bottle/ National Museum of Korea.



### 3) Cheolhwa ware (Iron decorated white porcelain)

Iron oxide ( $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ) was used to paint the images on the pottery.

We may see the "Cheolhwa ware Maejukmunho (Iron decorated white porcelain with plum blossom and bamboo)" held by the National Museum of Korea were influenced by the representational style of the Joseon painting Mukmaedo (Nam, H., 2004).



National Treasure No. 16: 16th-century Iron-decorated White Porcelain Maejukmun Bottle / National Museum of Korea

Mukmaedo produced during the Joseon Dynasty / National Museum of Korea



4) Jinsa ware (Copper oxide decorated white porcelain)

Jinsa was used from the late 12th century during the Goryeo period, and it was extensively produced during the late Joseon period. The desired patterns are painted on ceramic vessels using copper oxide (CuO), and they manifest during reduction firing.

During the Joseon period, copper oxide was scarce and the firing process was challenging, making jinsa rare and expensive.

Late 18th-century Cheonghwa White Porcelain Jinsa Lotus Flower Pattern Jar / Osaka Museum of Oriental Ceramics

Late 18th-century National Treasure No. 294 Cheonghwa White Porcelain Iron-decorated Jinsa Plum Blossom pattern Bottle / Gansong Art Museum

18th-century Cheonghwa White Porcelain Jinsa Phoenix and Peony pattern Bottle / Private Collection



In the 19th century, Joseon white porcelain experienced a surge in production and popular demand, supported by economic stability (Bong-Seon, B., 2017).

This allowed for the creation of various porcelain pieces characterized by their ornate and decorative nature. The proliferation of diverse white porcelain items with elaborate designs contributed to their popularization among people.



19th-century White Porcelain Jinsa Grapevine Pattern Bottle / National Museum of Korea

19th-century White Porcelain Cheonghwa Jinsa Square Bottle with Plum Blossom and Orchid Design / National Museum of Korea

19th-century White Porcelain Cheonghwa Iron-decorated Grape and Squirrel Patterned Jar / Yonsei University Museum



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