

# The Silent Surgeons of the Art World

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the vital role of cultural conservators in preserving Korea's artistic heritage, focusing on the complex and often underappreciated work these experts undertake. Featuring an exclusive interview with Yumi Nam, a conservator at the Leeum Museum, the study explores the daily routines, challenges, and rewards faced by conservators. It highlights the meticulous processes and scientific principles behind the restoration process, likening conservators to medical professionals who "heal" artworks. Key conservation projects, such as Amitabha's Sermon, An Jung-geun's calligraphy, and Park Rehyun's Woman, demonstrate the practical application of conservation techniques and the philosophical debate between preserving an artwork's original integrity and updating it for contemporary audience. The paper traces the development of conservation practice in Korea since the 1970s, noting the significant rise in industry support and recognition. It concludes by emphasizing what this discipline involves, the combination of scientific knowledge, artistic skills, and passionate dedication, advocating for increased societal appreciation and support for those who protect our cultural treasures for future generations.

## Introduction

Amid busy days in the bustling city of Seoul, cultural conservators remain the sole constant in their efforts to sustain the beauty of traditional Korea by referring to centuries-old skills of maintaining art. Although the conservation field often goes unnoticed by the regular museum-goer, those dedicated to preserving our cultural heritage stand in the heart of Korea's rich history. The role of a cultural artwork conservator is not just a job, it is a calling for those who have dedicated their lives to safeguarding the treasures of our history. Conservators work as art doctors and surgeons for paintings who treat paintings that have accumulated wounds in the test of time. With their deep appreciation for art, meticulous eye for detail, and profound understanding of the scientific and artistic principles behind art conservation, they sustain the enduring legacy of our tradition.

## An Interview with Yumi Nam: A Day in the Life of a Cultural Conservator

The following is an exclusive interview with a dedicated conservator Yumi Nam from the Leeum Museum, shedding light on a day in the life of the fascinating world of a cultural conservator. Nam's decade-long experience provides day-to-day routines and deeper insights into the profession's challenges and rewards, exploring the passionate journey that drives these art doctors to ensure that future generations can enjoy and learn from our priceless legacy.

Q: Is There A Specific Reason Or Inspiration That Led You To Become A Cultural Conservator?

A: “Painting conservation combines my love for historical artifacts and hands-on work. My favorite perk on the job is being able to touch art from hundreds of years ago, whereas the regular person observes it with a protective glass window in between. I chose painting conservation after studying metal conservation, which requires copious amounts of scientific research and study.”

**Q: What Does a Typical Day Look Like for You as A Cultural Conservator?**

A: “Our days begin and end with preparation. Since even the smallest amount of dust can be detrimental to the paintings, we keep our station sparkly clean. Everyday looks different since we cater to which works we are conserving. Some works only require a quick fix, but others require years of work.”

**Q: What Are the Biggest Challenges Facing the Industry or Yourself in Conserving Cultural Heritage?**

A: “Despite years of experience, I never feel like I master my work due to unpredictable variables for each conservation project. From the outside, it may seem like a relaxing job where you are just sitting down and conserving pieces, but realistically, your back really hurts!”

**Q: What Do You Find Most Rewarding About Being a Cultural Conservator?**

A: “What makes me feel rewarded is when an artpiece I personally worked on is put on display in an exhibition. I feel proud when that happens.”

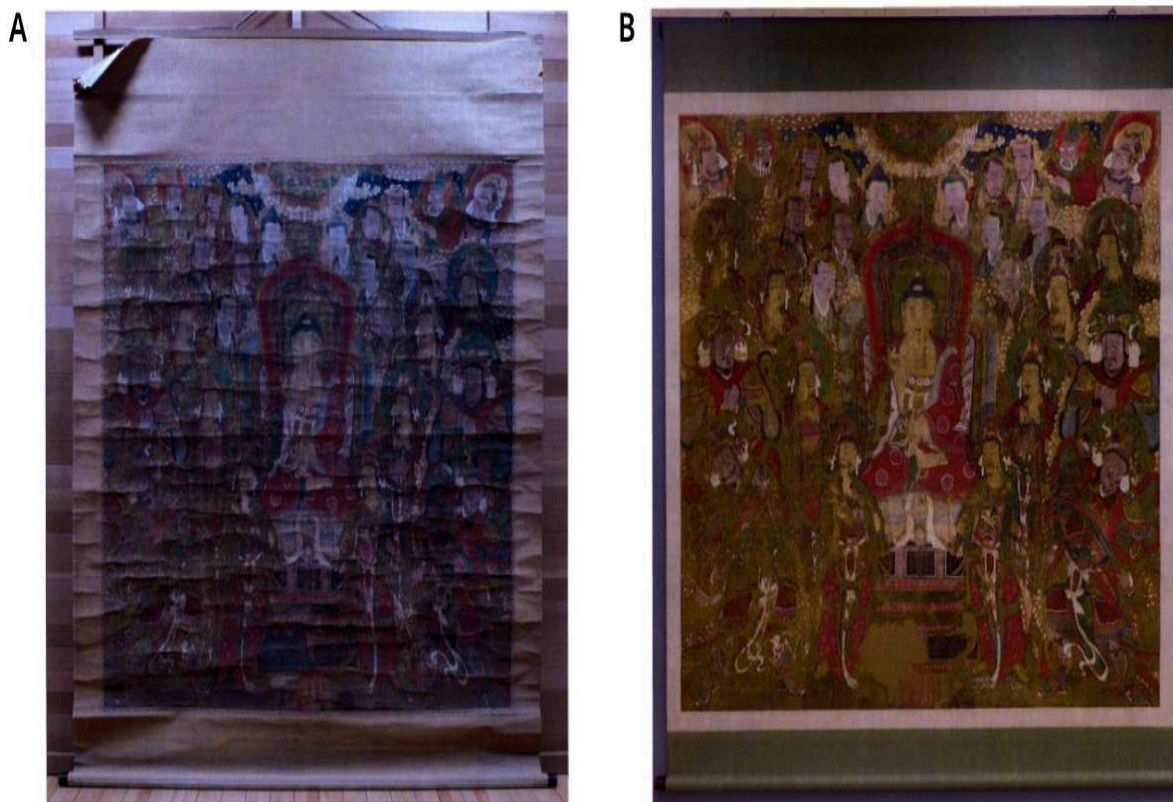
**Q: How Has the Cultural Conservation Industry Changed and How Will It Change Over the Next Ten Years?**

A: “Korea’s conservatory scene started in the 1970s with the archeological discovery of Hwangnamdaechong Tomb and Muryeongwangneung Tomb of King Muryeong. In the very beginning, history and archeological majors collected the relics with no proper training. I remember learning that since there is no oxygen in the tombs, sudden exposure of metal relics to oxygen can cause them to dissipate instantly, much like a scene from Indiana Jones. What I find most interesting is that traditional paintings synonymous with the East Asian tradition flow in the order of China, Korea, and Japan. Conservation, however, seems to flow from Japan to Japan. I think conservation reflects the personality of each nation; the Japanese are extremely meticulous, and the Chinese are agile, especially with the sheer number of artifacts they have. Korea, I think, is in the middle—we are not too meticulous, nor are we that agile either. Overall, a lot has changed. I have been in this scene for ten years now, and few organizations conserved cultural properties before that. Now, there is definitely a tremendous increase in the amount of support for this industry”

## Major Conservation Projects

Following the insightful interview, it is evident that our culture can only be preserved with the magic work of our cultural conservators. The article explores some of the major artworks that have undergone successful conservation projects, including artworks (1) *Amitabha's Sermon* (阿彌陀說法圖), (2) *Calligraphy by Ahn Jung-Geun* (安重根義士 遺墨 - 仁智堂), *Treasure No. 569-17*, and (3) *Woman* by Park Rehyun (朴峽賢).

### Amitabha's Sermon (阿彌陀說法圖)



**Figure 1.** Before and After Conservation of *Amitabha's Sermon* (阿彌陀說法圖). This figure shows the artwork *Amitabha's Sermon*, from the Joseon Dynasty, 17<sup>th</sup> century, color on hemp, before (figure 1A) and after (figure 1B) conservation.

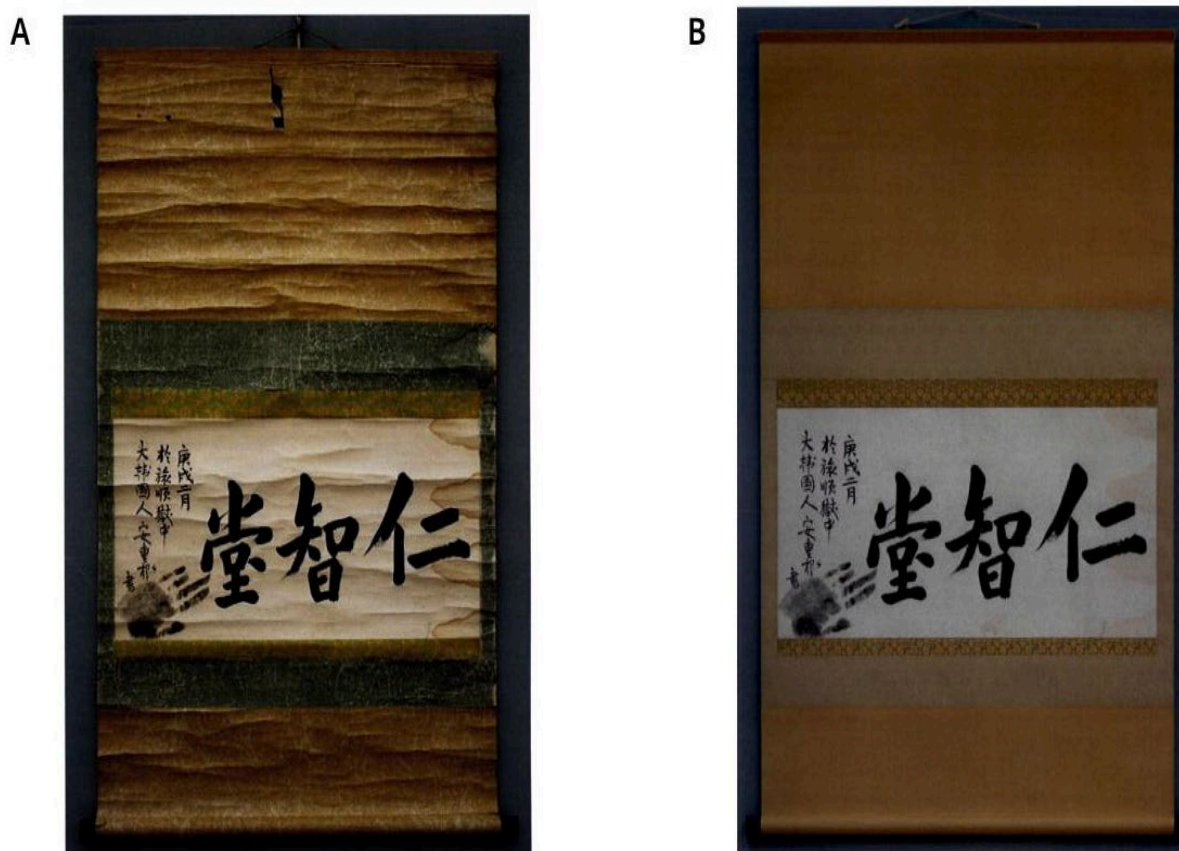
The group portrait portrays Amitabha, the principal Buddha of Pure Land Buddhism, in a lotus position, encircled by various Buddhist figures. Artworks depicting Amitabha's teachings have been crafted since the 16th century and have been revered as sacred objects from the 17th century onward. Despite some fading, hues of red, dark blue, and green-blue remain discernible. The balanced colors, skillful brushstrokes, and cohesive composition indicate that this painting is a distinguished work among late Joseon Buddhist art.

Before conservation, the artwork exhibited several significant issues. The border connecting the superior axis and the superior axis was torn. There were severe horizontal and vertical bends across the entire surface of the work. The left side of the Buddha was severely deteriorated, with the pigment almost completely faded

or peeled off. The pigment layer showed signs of peeling, and the surface of the work was heavily contaminated with foreign substances and stains.

During the conservation process, several steps were taken to restore the artwork. The old reinforcing paper and cloth were removed and replaced with materials similar to the original form during pre-treatment. The pigment layer undergoing the peeling process was stabilized. Foreign matter and contaminants on the surface of the artwork were removed through dry and wet cleaning methods. A bending prevention band was applied to straighten the work horizontally and alleviate vertical bending. The filling of the picture strip was extended to match the connection part of the work fabric. The conservators referred to existing Japanese style and Joseon Buddhist paintings from the same period to guide the restoration process. Finally, a paulownia box was made to safely store the work after the conservation.

Calligraphy by Ahn Jung-Geun (安重根義士 遺墨 - 仁智堂), Treasure No. 569-17



**Figure 2.** Before and After Conservation of *Calligraphy by Ahn Jung-Geun*, (安重根義士 遺墨 - 仁智堂), Treasure No. 569-17. This figure illustrates the calligraphy by Ahn Jung-Geun, created in 1910, calligraphy on paper, before (figure 2A) and after (figure 2B) conservation. The artwork is part of the collection at the Leeum Museum.

Korean independence activist An Jung-geun inscribed his final thoughts in calligraphy while serving his sentence in the Lushun Russo-Japanese Prison for assassinating Itō Hirobumi, the first Prime Minister of Japan and a driving factor behind Japan's brutal annexation of Korea. The calligraphy on the left reads “경술이(삼)월, 어여순옥중, 대한국인안중근서 (Gyeongsul-i(sam)wol, eoyeosun-okjung, Daehan-gukin An Jung-geun

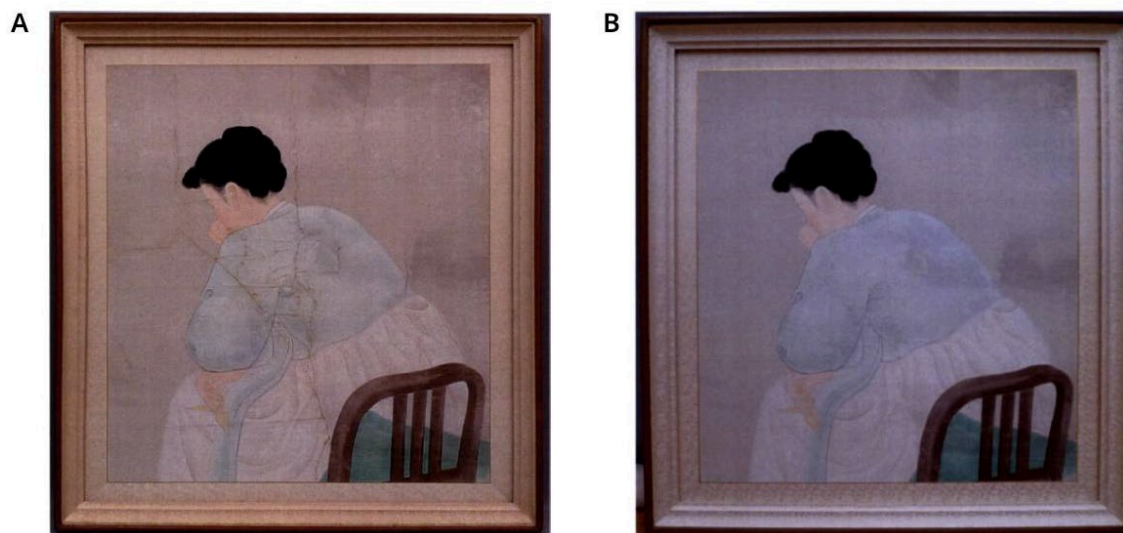


seo),” which translates to An declaring his name and location. To its bottom, an impression of An’s left hand is printed. The last joint of his ring finger is missing due to a pact made with his eleven fellow independence activists to honor their cause in their fight to secure peace and liberation in Korea.

Before conservation, the screen showed very severe horizontal bending. There was a tear and a hole in the center of the top section of the footer. Stains and smudge marks were evident, and the top left and right edges were missing due to chipping. Additionally, insect damage was present on the back of the upper shaft, and there was a tear in the lower shaft.

During the conservation process, several steps were taken to restore the piece. The conservators dismantled the piece and removed the old backing paper through wet cleaning. They cleaned the stained areas by spraying purified water and used absorbent paper to reduce the degree of contamination. The mounting was replaced with a silk mount, referring to the current shape and size of the artwork. Finally, paulownia boxes were made for safe storage of the conserved piece.

### *Woman* by Park Rehyun (朴嶽賢)



**Figure 3.** Before and After Conservation of *Woman* by Park Rehyun (朴嶽賢). This figure presents the painting *Woman*, created in 1942 by Park Rehyun (朴嶽賢, 1920-1976), ink and color on paper, before (figure 3A) and after (figure 3B) conservation. The artwork is part of the collection at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea.

Park Rehyun is a genre-defying artist of modern Korean art during the late Japanese Colonial period. She is better known as the wife of Kim Kichang (art name Unbo), (1913-2001), the pioneer in Eastern Painting and modernization of traditional ink painting. Her oeuvre features works on paper, tapestry, abstract art, and print and can be categorized into four distinct periods: Japanese-style painting with an emphasis on portraits (which she studied in Keijō High School and Tokyo Women's School of Fine Arts) of the 1940s, interpretation of cubism of the 1950s, experimental abstractionism of the 1960s, and tapestry and printmaking in the 1970s. In *Woman*, a young Korean woman in a traditional dress wears her hair in a modern Western style. Her hands are delicately cupped on her cheek, signifying that she is lost in thought. The painting is a triumph of harmony between line, subtle color, and analytical composition.

Before conservation, the artwork was contaminated with dust, and there was yellowing around cracks and lifting of the paper itself. The pigment layer appeared unstable, and failed areas or large cracks had been

reinforced with random paper from the back. Additionally, the plate to which the work was attached had severely deteriorated.

During the conservation process, the volatile pigment layer was stabilized. Contaminants that darkened the painting were removed through wet cleaning. The artwork was removed from the deteriorated board and attached to a new board. The frame was kept in its original form, but the damaged frame, hanging frame, stretcher, and hanging silk were reproduced and used in the original form.

## Conclusion

On a concluding note, it's clear that fulfilling a career in the cultural conservation industry is unique, with both challenging and rewarding aspects. Becoming a conservator is marked by academic professionalism and hands-on experience, requiring a blend of knowledge in science and art. Nevertheless, the essence of this profession entails passion, commitment, and ceaseless learning for our cultural heritage - a triumph of the past's grandeur and contemporary excellence. Yet, modern conservation continues to engage in a distinctive philosophical debate regarding whether culture should be preserved in its original form as it ages or treated to renew its original form in new conditions. As seen in the projects above, despite the comprehensive conservation planning successfully executed with skill and patience, restoring the painting to its original form to how it was right after creation is impossible. Since viewers look at a piece of work retrospectively hundreds of years later, it is significant to honor their original form of existence. The conservators try to refrain from taking the work from its original historical context by constantly in conversation with the future. It is a work ethic for modern conservators to leave flaws in the artwork untouched if it cannot be mediated with today's techniques. As intricate as the profession is, our society should continue to increase recognition and value for a cultural conservator to safeguard and keep our shared cultural treasures alive for future generations.

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