

# *Hallyu! The Korean Wave.* The Global Phenomenon. Special exhibition in Victoria and Albert Museum London

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Visitors entering the main hall of the Museum encounter a most unusual Christmas ‘tree.’ Instead of the actual tree a slender extremely tall female figure stands right in the middle of the grand Victorian hall. She is clad in snow white bridal dress in chiffon and crêpe de Chine, embroidered with a cascading sunburst and crystal stars.

Her down-stretched arms indicate a gesture of bestowing and protecting. The figure is no other than the Virgin Mary. This stunning installation commissioned to the London based Korean fashion designer, Ms Sohee, is a significant pointer to *Hallyu*, the major exhibition, the V&A’s second only on Korea since *National Art Treasures of Korea* in 1961.

The contemporary Korean popular culture, K-Drama (TV), film, K-Pop, fashion, and beauty created *Hallyu! The Korean Wave*, from the early 1990s. As soon as one enters the special exhibition hall PSY Gangnam Style occupies many screens on the large wall, a phenomenal success sweeping the world. In 2016 this song-dance became even more widely and enthusiastically known in Britain when the prominent politician Ed Balls (the former Shadow Chancellor

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of the Labour Party) chose Gangnam Style to compete in one of the most entertaining BBC programmes 'Strictly Come Dancing'!

The next gallery 'From Rubble to Smartphone' introduces the troubled Korea under the forceful Japanese occupation and the Korean war through the first half of the 20th century, now transformed into a powerhouse of technical innovation smartphones and the world's best internet system. The Olympic Game in 1988 in Seoul drew the attention of the world audience on Korea featuring the *horang'i* mascot next to the tiger under the pine tree, with brilliant design of Olympic bus signs and the guides modern yet traditional uniform. In the same room the pioneer of video art Nam June Paik's (1932-2006) synthesized television sets (1986) occupy the entire wall and the ten-fold bookshelf screen; a modernized version of a traditional Korean theme is displayed as a visual comparison of the assembled objects in square compartments.

Korean drama and TV series began to be noticed by the Japanese and Chinese in early 2000. *Winter Sonata* (2002) was such a success in Japan that not only special souvenirs were manufactured: an umbrella was printed with leading actors, and Japanese tourists flocked to Korea. *Taechanggūm* (2003-2004) was so popular in China that a Chinese translation of its 54 series was offered to view. Hallyu truly swept East Asia. This phenomenon of successful TV series continued. Netflix's survival action-drama *Squid Game* (2021) recorded the highest number of viewers all over the world. The ubiquitous costume in red and green with face covering black mask dominates one platform in the exhibition.

Korean films have been a major success in the west. UK film critics highly praised Park Chan-wook's *Old Boy* (2003), the first Korean film to be awarded the prestigious Palme d'Or in Cannes Film Festival. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) secured an Oscar for the first time Best International Feature Film as well as the Palme d'Or and other awards. A small room is installed to view some scenes from *Old Boy*. From *Parasite* a windowless bathroom with cracked and dirty tiles is created to provide a contrast between the slum housing and the wealthy household.

K-pop features pop musicians' costume and fandom offerings of sacks of rice on the flower-decorated altar to favourite bands and to support local farmers. A dedication to their pop-band is a most unusual custom in modern time. Something to do with traditional custom to pray for the well-being of the recipient? A bright space with video is reserved to encourage visitors to practice their own pop dance moves.

The most copious section is on fashion and cosmetics which are both immensely popular in East Asia. The contemporary fashion designers are inspired by and take details from *hanbok*, the traditional costume of men and women. Gentle green, purple, blue, pink is combined in elegant dresses in Lee Young-hee's 'Wind Dress' created in 1994. An eight-fold screen of beauties in 18th century reminds us how traditional women's dress looked like. Pop styles and street styles with flair, often with wild details and extremely short skirts are also featured. The V&A has world-famous collections of fashion, costumes, and textiles. In this context, the immense variety of contemporary Korean fashion is a fitting final choice in this mega exhibition which took three years to make.

Hallyu is not, of course the first mass pop- culture movement. In the 1960s the Beatles swept the western world. At Beatles concerts, the reaction of frantic, over-excited young generation (Beatlemania!) just like at K-pop performances is well-documented. Andy Warhol's mass production of print of famous individuals and towering creation of Campbell soup cans were the hallmarks of his pop art. 'Pop' was like this already thriving long before Korean Pop-Culture. The German historian Kaspar Maase defined popular culture and when it started in his insightful research, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen. Der Aufstieg der Massenkultur 1850-1970*. [Limitless



Entertainment. The Rise of Mass Culture], Europäische Geschichte. Fischer Taschenbuch Vlg. 1997, pp. 64ff, 235ff.] 1900 London music hall, cinema and the invention of television helped the development of popular culture in the west. Indeed, contemporary mass media played an essential role in the spread of Korean popular culture throughout the world.

*Hallyu* contributes significantly to the increase of students who learn Korean language in British universities. In SOAS University of London, for the first time students enrolled in the Korean department outnumber students learning Japanese. Language motivates them

to know more about the history and culture of that country. *Hallyu* is a great way to introduce visitors to the Korea of today

In the V&A there were sensational shows on David Bowie, Alexander McQueen, Dior, Frida Kahlo and others. *Hallyu!* contributes to the unique tradition of this great museum and is a significant achievement for understanding contemporary Korea.

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