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INSA-DONG

SEOUL'S HANDS-ON MUSEUM OF KOREAN CULTURE

by John Holstein/photos by Park Ki-ho

If you are forearmed with super-human resolve, Insa-dong is the place for you during your visit to Seoul. Whether you want a total adventure or just a gift, whether you have a whole day or are pressed for time, and whether you are on a tight budget or things are going very nicely for you – you'll come away from Insa-dong with full satisfaction.

If there is a center for Korea's traditional culture, this is it. The neighborhood is basically one street with its back alleys, about a kilometer long. Here, for visitors to the neighborhood, are antique stores and secondhand-art variety shops, galleries with new productions of traditional and modern design, and traditional restaurants and tea houses. And here also, on the second and third floors and in the back alleys, are the calligraphy institutes, the tea ceremony institutes, poets' and painters' and craftsmen's associations, the tea houses and cafes



Though modern high-rise buildings are gradually encroaching upon Insa-dong, the side alleys of the neighborhood are still predominantly occupied by traditional houses.

where these people congregate, and the other features which comprise the infrastructure of a nation's culture. You may not see all of these during your visit here, but you will feel their presence in the neighborhood's atmosphere of genteel vitality.

Insa-dong always has been a center of activity for the arts. In the old days it probably did not thrive as it does today, since neither the arts nor their artists enjoyed the widespread popularity they do now. Commercially, the neighborhood was simple, a collection of small shops dealing in exquisite antiques which were actually bought and sold as secondhand goods.

The twentieth century's internationalization of Korea changed all this. The end of World War II brought a lot more foreign visitors to the country, some of whom began to frequent the interesting secondhand shops in Insa-dong. In the '50s and '60s they patronized one antique shop in partic-



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Twenty years ago many of the antiques in the country, even the highest quality, could be had for a song. Now, though, because original Korean art has finally found its proper price, the closest relationship a visitor of ordinary means will achieve with one of these top-quality pieces is a wistful sigh of unrequited love.

The array of antiques and curios to be seen in the shops of Insa-dong spans the gamut from small ceramic items to statuary and even includes pieces of dismantled architecture, such as the dragon's heads in this picture.



ular, whose owner called herself Mary, and the neighborhood soon became known to expatriates and frequent foreign visitors as "Mary's Alley."

When land prices in this mid-city location went up in the seventies, Mary's and some of the other smaller shops had to move out.

In place of the shops that moved out, there are many shops which cater to the visitor of modern times. Insa-dong now also has shops which specialize in handicrafts, new paintings and pottery of traditional design, and works of modern design. Artists have gained respectability in modern Korea — that mentality of the neo-Confucian class system which relegated artisans to a lower class is gone now. And Koreans, in response to the modernization and internationalization of their country, are now taking a look at

what they were and what they have become. Since culture is most graphically represented in the tactile, all the plastic arts are thriving today.

The old . . .

Here in Insa-dong is Korea's best collection of old paintings and pottery and furniture, from the very expensive pieces of museum quality, to the more reasonably priced, to the embarrassingly cheap but still very good.

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If you are blessed with the means to take home one of these but have some doubt about its authenticity, you might have the dealer get you an official authentication from the antique dealers association here in Insa-dong.

There are more affordable antiques in many of the shops. A Shilla dynasty earthenware offering cup in good condition, between 1,400 and 1,600 years old, will cost from \$60 to \$300. The same goes for an excellent small 13th or 14th century celadon from the Koryŏ dynasty, or cloisonné accessories also centuries old. Before you buy, ask the owner whether the piece is allowed out of the country — it may be listed as a national property.

Even if you cannot buy, ask about that vase or that chest that has caught your eye. Most of the shop owners speak English well enough and are friendly enough to entertain you with an interesting story about the piece.

(left) The best Korean bedding and cushions are made of bright-colored silks, often elaborately embroidered. The striped coverlet on this shopkeeper's lap shows a typical example of the *saeklong* pattern, from which Asiana Airlines' corporate colors were derived.

(facing page) If you're into Oriental brush painting or calligraphy, Insa-dong has all the equipment you need, including brushes of all sizes up to mop-sized, for writing gigantic characters.

(below) Tea is served in ceramic bowls at Insa-dong's traditional tea houses.





At one of the five shops selling old books you can get an education in the development of the printing trade over the last few centuries. Get the shopkeeper to show you a really old one and then ask about the author and what the book is about. Some of the books are over six hundred years old. Yes, that's before Gutenberg; the world's first movable metal type was invented in Korea at the beginning of the 13th century. One of these really old books can cost between \$800 and \$1,500. You might come upon a first

printing of a book by one of the nineteenth-century missionaries to Korea. Or take a look at an illustrated book of traditional fables or a comic book from the 1940's, either of which you can have for between \$2 and \$5.

The shops where you might have the most fun are the secondhand-art varieties from the old days. Feast your eyes on very good and very bad old and new ceramics, Koryŏ dynasty bronze spoons, gilt wood Bhuddas, sonorous bell-brass bowls, a rusty turn-of-the-century Japanese can

opener . . . a set of deer antlers? These shops are a cornucopia clutter of days gone by.

. . . and the new

Insa-dong also has galleries which sell new paintings with both traditional and modern motifs. Buy or don't buy, but be sure to enjoy — many of these galleries boast of having got at least one currently renowned artist started on his road to glory, and they may give you a good story or two about



(above) Insa-dong's secondhand bookstores are a treasure trove for students of things Korean and casual browsers alike. The assortment ranges from very old, expensive volumes to recent ones that can be had fairly cheaply. Most of the books are in Korean, but there are also many in Chinese, Japanese, English, German, and French.

(facing page) Koreans love rice cakes for special occasions, and the shops in Insa-dong offer some of the best to be had.

(right) Foreign visitors find Insa-dong a must on their itinerary of Seoul.

their progenies to take back with you.

The exhibition posters they are producing these days are state-of-the-art in both design and printing. You might ask the owner or the artist being exhibited if you could have one or two. These invariably friendly people will oblige you if they can. Then take it down the street and have it framed.

One of the galleries is a 17th-century aristocrat's house. Its only modification is the white display matting on the wall, and a set of sofa and chairs for guests to sit and have a chat with the artist or one of the interesting visitors who drop by from time to time. Chŏn Kang-ho, who taught himself in his art, explains in English how he used epoxy and oils to fashion his works on exhibition today. As he shows us around, a few students chat

quietly over a cup of green tea on the veranda, which opens onto the bamboo garden in back.

In the pottery shops which sell new pieces is a fascinating range of traditional and modern designs, and even a few attempts at a synthesis of traditional and modern. Some of these shops have their own kilns in the provinces. One small shop specializing in tea and wine sets is run by a very nice old gentleman more than willing to impart lots of interesting details and anecdotes about how his pottery is produced.

Even the household goods sold in Insa-dong are art in themselves. In the furniture shops wardrobes and vanities shimmer with the lustre of mother-of-pearl emanating from under several carefully applied layers of lacquer. In the bedding shops are the silk-covered *yo* sleeping mats and the *ibul* quilts, in a festive rainbow pattern of dazzling reds, blues, greens and yellows, floral patterns of pale pastel embroideries, or print patterns in subdued or bold earth colors. In these shops you can also pick up a cushion cover in silk or cotton or hempcloth, or have them do up a bedspread for you.





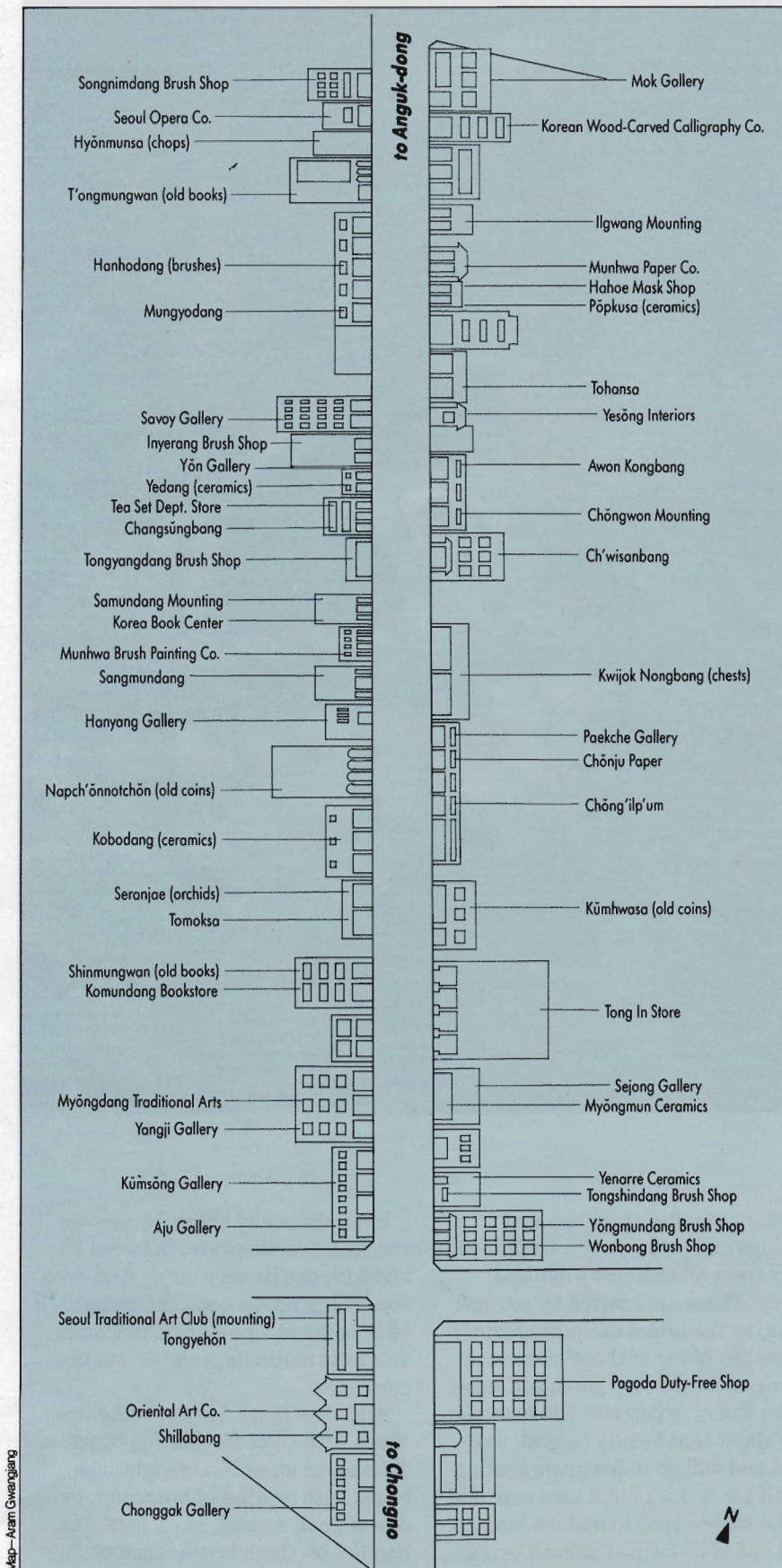
How about a cheap, garish souvenir? Sorry, you'll have to look elsewhere. Instead, Insa-dong handcraft shops offer gifts you will later be sorely tempted to keep for yourself. Silk scarves, place mats woven from thick yarn of hemp or cotton, lacquered paper boxes for accessories and odds and ends, mulberry-paper lampshades, lacquered jewelry boxes with mother-of-pearl inlay, hand print or wood-block print general purpose greeting cards, crystal glasses, clay and wood figurines.

In many smaller shops are new paintings and pottery with traditional motifs from all of Korea's dynastic periods. These are crafted by younger artists, so the prices are outrageously reasonable. Many of these pieces are sublime, most are very good, and some, well. . . Every expatriate will have his story about that beauty he gave to a friend and will go to his grave kicking himself for it. Pick out a nice vase and ask the shopkeeper to make a lamp-stand out of it, for just a small extra charge.

Even the really cheap pottery on the street carts, priced between \$2 and \$10, can be very good. And even something not so good can be used back home in a novel way, maybe as an exotic umbrella stand or waste container.

And then there are the calligraphy shops with their fascinating brushes. Take home an ordinary eight-inch brush with bristles of horsehair, or one of goat, weasel, or ox hair. The handles on these brushes are of natural-finish bamboo, lacquer inlaid

Places to eat and drink



with a dusting of mother-of-pearl, or painted ox horn. You can even see a brush three feet long, which the artist holds like a mop as he walks across the paper he's writing on. Keep a lookout here (and in the scroll-hanging shops) for simple unframed paintings in traditional motifs, done by struggling younger artists; you might happen on a really good one which you can take home for under ten dollars.

The traditional mulberry-bark papers sold in the paper shops come in a variety of whites and rich pastels, some with inlaid patterns of leaf specks or seaweed swirls or other of nature's gifts. For centuries the whites have been applied on bamboo ribs to make the traditional fans, globe lanterns, and kites you can see in these shops even today. These warm whites can also serve as a very pleasant wallpaper; enhance your gifts by wrapping them in the elegant pastels. And now they are finally producing contemporary assortments of stationery and envelopes in the entire range of colors and patterns.

Any self-respecting letter on the traditional stationery requires a personal seal. One shop displays an intricately carved antique seal a meter square, but you don't have to go that far. Tell the shopkeeper your kid's name, or anything you would like translated into Chinese or Korean characters, and he'll have a seal with a handle of agate, crystal, bone, or wood ready for you in no time. Don't forget a case of the gooey red ink!

No other neighborhood in Seoul comes close to Insa-dong's offering of quality traditional foods. You might want to start your day here with one type of meal, look around awhile, take a break at a traditional tea house, look around a bit more, take another rest at the traditional confectioner's shop, and then, after looking around some more, finish off your adventure with another kind of meal.

There are three major vegetarian restaurants in the neighborhood. All of them offer their own versions of traditional decor, and all provide a plethora of side dishes, each one prepared with special care, that you

will not be able to do justice to. At San-kol and Bu-il you can get a thoroughly satisfying meal for around five dollars.

San-ch'on's owner, a former Buddhist monk, brought some vegetarian delights with him from his mountain temple. Did he also bring the mellow, rich-bodied, just heavenly native rice brew they serve here? This is a good place to end the day, because in the courtyard at 8:00 every night a stage show is put on by renowned performers of the traditional arts. The elaborate standard meal and the entertainment will cost you only \$20. Naturally, this place is very popular, so you will probably need to reserve a table.

Other restaurants with their own special cuisine and atmosphere are listed on the map. One that expatriates like very much is Cho-um, where you can get *tōp-pap*, a simple meal of rice covered with a shrimp or meat sauce. And Yōng-bin Garden offers succulent barbecued ribs in a traditional decor.

Man does not live by barbecued ribs alone, so you will have to visit one of Insa-dong's traditional tea houses. One tea house, which caters to younger visitors looking for the atmosphere conventionally accepted as authentically Korean, is in the old tile-roofed house on the same 17th-century compound as the Kyōng-in Gallery.

Here you can expect to hear the haunting strings of the classical *kayagūm*, or the throaty voice of the *taegūm*.

Another tea house, on an upper floor of a 20th-century building, expresses a tradition peculiar to Insa-dong. The atmosphere here was not planned — it has evolved naturally over the last hundred years around a clientele of the neighborhood's denizens. Guests do not sit on silk cushions on a polished *ondol* floor at elegant lacquered tables, but in lumpy-cushioned 1950s chairs at wobbly 1960s tables. The regulars' poems are not enshrined in calligraphy on hanging scrolls, they are scrawled on a sheets of notebook paper scotch-taped to the wall. Here you will often hear the Far East's popular music from the early 20th century, which

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Insa-dong packs in more attractions per square meter than a museum — even the traffic on the street can be interesting. Those who sample this neighborhood's delights will find they want to come back to explore again and again.

reminds some Westerners of the blues.

At the Chongno end of Insa-dong is Pagoda Park, former site of the 15th-century Wōn-gak Temple. The temple is gone, but its spirit remains in the stumps of sculptured marble railing supports lying here and there and the magnificent marble pagoda with its exquisite carvings. On the benches sit the country's elders rehashing the glory and the tragedy of the ill-fated 1919 independence movement, launched from the pavilion in the center of this park. And here are modern Seoul's working people taking a break and Seoul's pigeons, gray and brazen as anywhere. What is it about this simple people's park that is so much more rewarding than the fancy palace parks?

A couple blocks to the west and parallel to Insa-dong runs a six-lane artery from Myōng-dong and the Lotte Hotel. Shops selling paper and calligraphy materials are on the east side of the street. Across the street is a row of shops selling Buddhist materials: artifacts, books, cassette tapes of sutra chants, clothing, temple bells, prayer beads. . . And in back of these shops is Chogyē-sa, main temple for the country's largest zen Buddhist sect.

For one last stop, walk north to the Anguk-dong intersection and turn left (west) on the other main street there. In the first block, on the south side of the street, you will see a small shop which deals in personal accessories from countries all over the world except the industrialized West. The owner here takes responsibility: You are not required to tell your friends back home that you didn't actually visit these countries.

My special thanks to Jim Cunningham, of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, for his imaginative suggestions and his instruction in the history and arts of Insa-dong.

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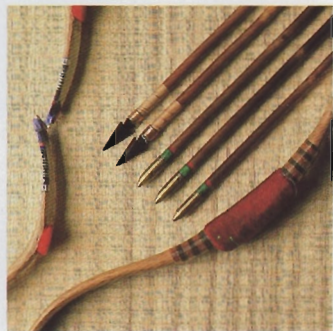
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