

Artifacts

CONSERVATION CENTER
for Art and Historic Artifacts



After washing, CCAHA conservator Minah Song, replaces a piece of the map.

WHAT'S INSIDE

page two
letter from the
executive director

page four
questions for
Soyeon Choi

page six
high watermarks

page seven
housing for Asian scrolls

page eight
calendar of events

East Meets West

When Shannon McCune died in 1993, his family bequeathed his large collection of Korean maps to the Library of Congress, helping to make the library the repository of the largest and most comprehensive collection of Korean language publications outside of Korea. Born to missionary parents on the peninsula in 1913, McCune went on to a career as an educator, geographer, and Asia expert, amassing a substantial collection of rare Korean maps and manuscripts.

The conservation of these Korean maps at CCAHA marks the first time the Korean government has funded a preservation project of Korean artifacts in North America. Working through the Library of Congress' Asian Division, the National Library of Korea stepped in to preserve McCune's collection. Even though it is housed on the other side of the world, the collection represents a Korean national treasure: its artifacts include both manuscript copies and woodblock impressions, which generally are less common and more valuable than manuscript copies.

By the time their work is done, CCAHA conservators will have treated 18 maps, ranging in date from 1760 to 1900, during Korea's 1392-1910 Joseon period. "In the Joseon period, cartography flourished and the first accurate world map in East Asia was produced in 1402," notes Minah Song, a paper conservator at the Center, who has written about the history and characteristics of traditional Korean books and bookbinding. "Korean Joseon period maps were often made in portable atlas form, uncommon both in China and in Japan."

The eight maps currently at CCAHA depict the Korean peninsula, several Korean provinces, Japan and the Ryuku Islands; there also is a map of the entire world. Several of the charts are in *concerta* binding or have pages which are folded and then pasted (see image above right). All of the maps are hand-colored and hand-written using classical Chinese characters, which were used by the educated Korean elite until the early 20th century.

At CCAHA, each map receives treatment appropriate to its particular condition. Most commonly, the individual pages of each map are surface-cleaned with natural rubber sponges and a soft brush. Creased areas of the maps are humidified through Gore-Tex and flattened between blotters under moderate weight. The edges and corners of covers are repaired with acrylic-toned mulberry paper and adhered with wheat-starch paste. The corners of delaminated covers are also consolidated

with wheat-starch paste. Tears and losses in the maps are repaired with mulberry paper adhered with wheat-starch paste.

Conservators all over the world adhere to the basic rule of conservation: Follow the principle of reversibility. In other words: Do no permanent alterations. As the American Institute of Conservation puts it, "all [conservators'] actions are governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the reason people created it." But while the Western conservator is taught to combine modern materials with a respect for the original medium, artist, and date, the conservation treatment might have differed had it been done in Asia, Song says.

Asian conservation generally chooses the traditional materials and techniques that were originally used by the artist—conservators are reluctant to use modern techniques and materials. Western conservation is more likely to adapt new methods and materials that are currently accepted practice, believing that they are beneficial for the long-term preservation of the object.

For the McCune project, CCAHA conservators filled losses with acrylic-toned mulberry paper, choosing the medium because it doesn't bleed or fade dramatically over time, rendering it stable for generations. Asian conservation probably would *not* have used acrylic paint for toning, instead favoring traditional materials that have been used for hundreds of years. In the case of a map such as this, they might have used traditional pigments or a natural dye for toning.

Both techniques are correct from a conservation point of view, and in fact, both Far Eastern and Western conservation techniques inform each other. In her "East and West: A Unified Approach to Paper Conservation," the former head of paper conservation at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Pauline Webber, writes that "Asian paper conservation has helped [Western conservators] to make more informed choices about important practical aspects of work treatments, such as pastes and adhesives, brushes and tools, papers, linings, and supports, whether for flattening and drying, or displaying works on paper."

The main difference is that the technique the CCAHA team is using guarantees that the maps won't need further conservation until well into the next century.

--Keltie Hawkins