

## **Mutual Understanding and Respect:**

### **The Role of the National Museums of Korea in a Multicultural Society**

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#### **1. Facing a Multicultural Society**

Today, more and more foreigners are staying in Korea or even acquiring Korean citizenship. This phenomenon has accelerated with the influx of foreign workers and marriage immigrants.

In a society where people from various cultural backgrounds live together, there is the possibility of misunderstanding, conflict and distrust. Rather than trying to assimilate or integrate people from various cultural backgrounds into a dominant group's culture, it is realistic and desirable to try to respect each culture's characteristics and coexist harmoniously.

In this context, the importance of education in a multicultural society has been emphasized in Korea. Recently, educational and cultural institutions are working to improve understanding of cultural diversity. Museums are accessible to the general public and are rich in materials to learn and enjoy. Visitors to a museum are not just viewing exhibitions, but interpreting and connecting acquired information to build a sense of their own culture and

form values and worldviews. Museums can help people better understand cultural diversity.

Hands-on activities are an especially effective way of learning for children and teens. Such museum education allows them to form a foundation for understanding and respecting different cultures and communicating and coexisting with people of different cultural backgrounds.

The National Museum of Korea, as Korea's leading museum, is also trying to play a role in this objective. It is the largest cultural institution in South Korea that presents 5,000 years of Korean history and cultural heritages with 410,000 objects under its collection. Holding a wide variety of exhibitions on Korean art and world cultures all year around, the museum welcomes 3.5 million visitors every year. It provides diverse exhibitions and education programs that embrace people of all ages and multi-cultural backgrounds.

## **2. Cultural Diversity Education**

Cultural diversity education is not new to museums. The National Museum of Korea has long conducted various education programs for both Koreans and non-Koreans, mostly focused on activities for minority groups consisting of marriage immigrants, children from multicultural families, and foreign tourists.

Since the mid-2000s, however, the idea of educating minority groups has

changed as Korea's transition to a multicultural society has accelerated and social demand for understanding cultural diversity has grown. While education for minority groups helps them adapt to new cultures, the majority group must also be encouraged to understand and coexist with new members of society. This has made it important to provide cultural support to all sectors of society to overcome prejudice, eliminate discrimination, and foster tolerance and understanding.

A new approach is needed to help the general public understand cultural diversity beyond the mere education of Korean culture for minority groups.

### **3. Two Examples of New Approaches**

The National Museum of Korea and the National Folk Museum of Korea, Korea's representative national cultural museums, have been active in these areas. Education and exhibitions of world culture are good examples.

#### **1) Culture Discovery Box – National Folk Museum of Korea**

The National Folk Museum of Korea has run a project since 2010 titled Culture Discovery Box, which aims to foster understanding of cultural diversity among children who will live in this multicultural era. To this end, various hands-on materials are organized into boxes so that children can learn about other cultures through activities using them. In addition, the

Culture Discovery Boxes are loaned to schools and libraries where teachers and educators want to conduct cultural diversity education. The purpose of the Culture Discovery Box project is to contribute to social integration and transform cultural diversity into a driving force for future social development.

Selection of theme countries for the Culture Discovery Boxes is focused on those Asian countries from which immigrants arrive in Korea. A Korean Culture Discovery Box was also organized to promote mutual understanding along with those of other countries. The Culture Discovery Box project continues to produce more boxes with which to represent the diverse cultures of Asia.

Each Culture Discovery Box is created with the participation of a number of relevant experts and their communities. An advisory group consisting of researchers of the culture, residents of the country, and staff members of the country's culture center is formed to discuss the organization of the box. Sometimes, museum curators from the country are invited to participate in the project. The advisors help devise a plan for the Culture Discovery Box, select and acquire proper materials, and choose local schools with which to cooperate. Museum staff visit the country to do research on the culture and the lives of the children, taking photos and acquiring proper materials.

Culture Discovery Boxes can be loaned to schools, kindergartens and other educational institutions such as libraries, so that teachers can compose a

small exhibition on the spot, and offer activities for children. Children can learn about other cultures through seeing an exhibition and enjoying hands-on activities. Upon returning the Culture Discovery Box, hosts are encouraged to make a detailed report to help the museum make further improvements to the Culture Discovery Box.

## **2) Special Exhibitions of World Cultures – National Museum of Korea**

The National Museum of Korea has had many cultural exchanges with museums around the world, allowing it to hold many special exhibitions of world cultures. As the international exchange department and the special exhibition department have been strengthened, so have both the quality and quantity of international exhibitions in cooperation with foreign museums.

These exhibitions offer the public the opportunity to appreciate and respect the history and art of various countries and civilizations, including not only European countries with their many longstanding popular tourist destinations, but also the Asian countries which engage in more frequent exchanges with Korea.

The tastes of the general public have also changed. More people are enjoying overseas travel and taking a greater interest in other cultures. Parents want their children to learn about other cultures and understand the globalized world. World culture exhibitions meet these needs.

Initially, the National Museum of Korea mainly held exhibitions dealing with major ancient civilizations well-known to the public, such as Persia, Egypt, and Greece. Exhibitions featuring European art and culture were also held consistently. In addition, the museum organized exhibitions on the cultures of regions geographically distant from Korea and accordingly hard to visit for most Koreans, such as the Inca, Maya, and Central Africa.

It is noteworthy that the museum also held special exhibitions introducing the history and culture of Asian nations, including China, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Mongolia, which are geographically nearer and have more exchanges with Korea.

The National Museum of Korea has included an eclectic variety of countries and cultures in their future exhibition schedule. The museum will try to send a special exhibition of Korean culture to the counterpart museum of each featured country so that mutual understanding between the two countries can be further deepened.

The National Museum of Korea's world culture exhibitions could be regarded as less proactive or less effective than direct cultural diversity education. However, the effect can be much greater when visitors encounter other cultures as spontaneous witnesses rather than just students. Moreover, viewing an exhibition is more accessible and convenient than booking and participating in an education program. People do not have to be reminded of their own cultural backgrounds or whether they are in the

majority or minority when enjoying a world culture exhibition. An exhibition can accommodate incomparably more visitors than an education program can handle participants.

Helping people to look at each culture as having unique characteristics and worthy of study and respect, a world culture exhibition is one of the best ways of conducting cultural diversity education. For a richer experience, though, the National Museum of Korea conducts various related lectures and activities along with the world culture exhibitions.

#### **4. The Role of Museums in a Harmonious Society**

The development of transportation and communication has brought the world closer than ever. Korea, long a homogeneous nation, is gradually changing into a multicultural society, something never experienced by the Korean people. In this environment, mutual understanding and respect is the key to peaceful coexistence and prosperity. People need to learn how to live harmoniously with people from different cultural backgrounds. In this new era, national museums are called upon to respond to the need for cultural education, acclimation, and respect to ensure that a multicultural society will be a harmonious one.

- Please arrange the images into two groups:
  - Culture Discovery Boxes into image 1
  - World culture exhibitions posters into image 2