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2014: 130 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between Korea and Italy

By Angelo Gioe

Abstract

2014 marked the 130th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Italy and Korea. This paper provides a historical overview of the relations between the two countries and gives two examples of Italian events that were organized to celebrate the special occasion.

The Treaty of Friendship Between Italy and Korea

On June 26, 1884 (the 493rd year of the Kingdom of Joseon and the 10th year of Guangxu, China), Kim Byeong-si and Ferdinando De Luca, both extraordinary plenipotentiary ministers, signed the *Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation between Italy and Korea at Hanyang* (present day Seoul). The treaty was prepared in three languages – Chinese, Italian, and English – and accompanied by three copies of the *Regulations for the Exercise of Trade between Italy and Korea; Import Tariffs, Export Tariffs; and Regulations for Import and Export Tariffs*. On July 24, 1886, Federico Graviosa, the commander of the Italian Navy, and extraordinary envoy Seo Sang-woo exchanged ratifications at Hanyang. The relations were interrupted as a result of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 (also known as the Eulsa Treaty of Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty) following the Japanese victory over the Russians, which cancelled the diplomatic power of Korea and evacuated foreign legations.

The First Contacts Between Italy and Korea

The similarities between the two countries (Italy is located from 47°N to 36°N and Korea from 43°N to 33°N, both are peninsulas that stretch into the sea with an island in the south, and their territories are mostly mountainous) were detected by Daniello Bartoli in his book *Japan* in 1660, where Korea is defined as “a land rich and strong” and comparable to Italy in terms of climate, geography, and character of the inhabitants.

Marco Polo was the first Westerner to note the existence of Korea, known as Goryeo, but the real contribution to his knowledge comes from the Jesuits who worked in Japan during the invasion of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Some of the Jesuits followed the Japanese commanders; for example, the Portuguese Gregorio de Cespedes sent “valuable information about Korea to the Society of Jesus.” Right around the time of this war, Francesco Carletti, a Florentine merchant and traveler, paid ransom for five Korean prisoners while he was in Japan in 1597 and released all but one in Goa. The fifth one, who had learned Italian the quickest, took the name of Antonio Corea through baptism and he and Carletti arrived in Florence in 1606. Corea spent time in Rome in 1610 and then settled in Albi where he died in 1626. This fact moved Europe, and the young man was probably the person painted in the work of Rubens entitled “Man Wearing Hanbok,” which was later sold at Sotheby’s auction house in 1983 for the then record price of £324,000.

The work of missionaries was also valid the other way around, causing widespread news about Italy. The work of Ricci, the bearer of the highest developments achieved by the Renaissance in different fields of knowledge, played

an important role in Korea. Geographical maps and books of the West (i.e. *il De deo vera doctrina by Ricci*) were introduced by Yi Sung-wan and Heo Kyun between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and then until the eighteenth century by other figures such as Chusa Kim Jeong-hui, Jeong Du-won, Yi Yi-myeong, and Yi Sung-hun. This Western science (*sohak*) served the thinkers of *silhak* (practical learning), which was a real and appropriate Asian enlightenment movement before its time for its strong will to reform.

The Resumption of Diplomatic Relations

Korea resumed diplomatic relations with the outside world when it was internationally recognized as an independent government. Relations with Italy resumed in November 24, 1956, the Italian legation was reestablished in Korea in December 1957, and it was elevated to an Embassy in 1959.

A friendly relationship with Italy was already present in 1951 during the Korean War when Italy answered the call of the International Red Cross to help the wounded. They sent the 68th Red Cross Italian hospital medical unit to the port of Busan in November 1951 and operated until January 1955. During this time they admitted 7,250 people to the hospital, treated 222,885 outpatients, conducted 3,297 operations, provided 1,155 dental benefits, conducted 8,444 pathological examinations, and took 17,115 x-rays. Their assistance won acclaim and awards from the Korean, American, and Chinese governments. The year 2014 marked the 130th anniversary of this special friendship, which was announced during the bilateral summit between South Korean President Park Geun-hye and the then Prime Minister Enrico Letta as part of the G20 summit meeting on September 5, 2013.

Economic relationships between Italy and Korea would not really take off until the late 1980s. Two-way trade between Italy and Korea did not surpass \$1 billion until 1987, and reached over \$8.5 billion in 2013. The trade flow structure might be surprising considering that the largest Italian export to Korea is in machinery. As for Korean exports to Italy, the most important sectors are cars, plastic, steel and electric devices. While the two countries have experienced constant growth and outstanding performance, large investment improvements could be achieved. Korea is only the 54th largest source of foreign direct investment in Italy, while Italy is the 29th largest investor in Korea.

Celebrations in the Cultural Profile

Culture, as a set of experiences shared by members of a society, lends itself to enhancing friendly relations between two countries. It not only brings people together through better knowledge of each other, but is also an

essential element of personal and group identity formation helpful to draw upon to meet contemporary challenges.

Working in cultural events develops and produces ideas, books, materials, networks, practices, and experiments to engage in a possible future and disengage homologation (a present-day risk). Culture is a place of independence and a tool for independence, a space to experiment with forms of productive culture cooperation of freedom.

Italian Cultural Events in Korea in 2014

The construction of a cultural program, especially during a year of celebration, must not only attempt to showcase the best of a country's culture with as much breadth and depth as possible, but must also try and meet the frontier and consolidated state of culture of the host country.

In Korea, these cultural areas appear to be design, music, and especially contemporary art within which Koreans move with the same spirit as when they produce automobiles and electronics. The Korean art scene of the last 25 years has been rich and dynamic. For 10 years now, it has received great attention within the global art scene with a growing number of museums, galleries, biennials, and triennials interested in presenting Korean art in both the East and West.

It has been growing vigorously since the democratic transition of the country and the 1988 Olympic Games, which represented a profound change in the social and political landscape. Subsequent growth has transformed Korean society and culture in general. In order to quickly retrace the most important steps in the growth of art in Korea from the 90s to the present day, it is worth mentioning the Whitney Biennale, which was held in Seoul after New York, allowing many artists to participate in an international debate for the first time. This was followed by the opening of the Gwangju Biennale and the Korean permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1995, the Busan Biennale in 1998, the birth of many private museums (Artsonje Center, Rodin Gallery, now Plateau), and the growth of alternative spaces such as Ssamzie Space, Project Space Sarubia, Alternative Space Loop—non-commercial places which were important in the discovery of new talent. Do Ho Suh and Lee Bul, just to name two artists, well represent the internalization of Korean contemporary art and its assumption of a global reputation. Of great final interest, overseas Koreans are being presented through contemporary art projects such as *Who is Alice* and *K-eye*.

In 2014, there have been many Italian cultural events of great depth and breadth, touching various fields of knowledge from a major exhibition dedicated to Giorgio Morandi, one of jewelry created by industrial designers, and Verdi's *Aida* with the original set edition of Franco Zeffirelli and Lila De Nobili's

1963 production at the Teatro Alla Scala in Milan. Since contemporary art is a fundamental element which complements the image of an advanced country, I wish to draw attention to the two exhibitions of *We Have Never Been Modern* and *Craftsmen Designers Makers*.

***We Have Never Been Modern,* Contemporary Italian Art Exhibition Curated by Angelo Gioè and Maria Rosa Sossai**

What is the era of modernity? Who can be called modern? What do we associate with this term when we talk about art? These are questions that the title of the exhibition, *We Have Never Been Modern*, may well prompt Korean visitors to ask themselves. Though legitimate, they envision no exhaustive or definitive answer because the modern era, as a historical and aesthetic fact, is a fluid period with no specific boundaries. Its source and the precise sea into which it flows are both unknown. It is a transitory period destined to end in the contemporary, a term that helps us to marshal the stages of industrialized western culture within a highly precarious framework but differs in presence and duration in relation to the fields of study in which it is used. Is it the *modernité* of the metropolis of which the French poet Baudelaire spoke in the second half of the nineteenth century in *Le peintre de la vie moderne*? Or was it born with the development of western rationalism and the ensuing rational organization of work and society, as Max Weber suggests? Does *modern* mark the end of the Middle Ages, as it does for European historians, or the new order born out of "what has always been," as Walter Benjamin maintains, introducing an idea that has run through the history of western philosophy?

Modernity appears to be a far more slippery idea of time than those preceding it, and this elusive quality was indeed one of the elements that led us to choose the title of the exhibition held by the Italian Institute of Culture in Seoul at the SongEun ArtSpace. Another is connected with Italy's laborious progress in the twentieth century towards an authentic modernity that has never been fully attained: perhaps because of the historical discontinuity of Fascism and its consequences; perhaps because of the rapid change in the Italian cultural and social identity during the period of economic recovery and the attendant swift adoption of the lifestyles of societies more highly evolved in terms of democracy, industrialization, and consumption.

On contacting Maria Rosa Sossai with a view to joint curate this exhibition project at the SongEun ArtSpace in Seoul, I was concerned from the outset to define the cultural aims that I had identified in this event as Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Seoul, namely to promote Italian contemporary art in South Korea and to plan and organize a show capable of gathering together a large number of works so as to illustrate

the qualitative level attained by Italian artists despite their deep diversity in form and results.

These two aims took concrete shape through an interesting process of investigation and comparison. While the selection of artists to take part in *We Have Never Been Modern* inevitably reflects the curators' tastes and values, it also unquestionably captures the vivacity of the Italian art scene, the richness of its cultural points of reference, and the recognition that Italian artists have obtained in recent years at the national and international level. Eleven of the 22 artists featured are women, and this too is a precise indication of growth in artistic sensibility in Italy and the ever-greater move away from discrimination in art criticism.

In *The Poet and Time*, a collection of essays from the period 1926–33, the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva wrote that the contemporary period was not the whole of her time. She added, however, that poets always come to “serve” their time, involuntarily but inevitably. They cannot do otherwise, as serving one's time means obeying an order out of desperation. We have only “this precise minute of the century” in our hands, “only this measure of weight.” For those of us that have no hope of the heavenly kingdom, there is only “the earthly kingdom” and its time. Time is always moving on—as we are with it—but “going nowhere”: movement for its own sake that we have divided up into names and numbers for convenience of historical definition. The century of today—the twenty-first—is juxtaposed with the century of yesterday, the twentieth. We call the time we obey today *contemporary*; we can call the time we obeyed yesterday *modern* or the *century of modernity*.

If true modernity has never been attained in Italy, the title of the exhibition in Seoul, *We Have Never Been Modern*, is closely concerned with the state of things in Italian society and art over the last few decades. It does not “serve” its time but focuses a sort of regret over abandonment of the modernity that we failed to understand thoroughly, or perhaps never really wanted.

The exhibition at the SongEun ArtSpace was divided into five stages, each of which deconstructs the idea of modernity and its perennially renewable flow, and bears a subtitle including the names of the artists who enable us with their works to address some crucial nodes of the present, not only in Italy but also at the broader international level.

The first stage, **Disinventing Modernity (Francesco Arena, Elisabetta Benassi, Rossella Biscotti, Valerio Rocco Orlando, and Alberto Tadiello)**, hooks up with the title of the exhibition but from a later vantage point. Modernity is over and it is now our task to reread it. It must be “disinvented” by reassessing spaces, objects, items, and documents of the twentieth century so as to represent them in the new iconology of an unended modernity.

The title of the second, **Plurality of Worlds (Giorgio Andreatta Calò, Piero Golia, Giulia Piscitelli, Paola Pivi and Luca Trevisani)**, again pinpoints one of the central themes of contemporaneity: the overall expansion of a “globalizing” idea of the planet that artists, though subjected to the pressure of reality, experience in the autonomy of their cultural and existential life, engendering a sort of artistic nomadism that can hardly be limited to the boundaries of a national identity.

The third presents a more complex title, **Parallel Cosmograms (Meris Angioletti, Tomaso De Luca, Chiara Fumai and Nico Vascellari)**, laden with meaning in the field of graphic and iconographic symbolism, as sort of synthesis bringing metaphysical concepts, dreamlike visions and objectual images together on parallel pathways, artistic sensibilities concentrated above all on the impact of signs on reality.

The terms brought into play in the title of the fourth thematic stage, **Politics of Nature (Ettore Favini, Margherita Moscardini, Adrian Paci and Moira Ricci)**, are conceptual spaces hard to reconcile, the former being theoretical and philosophical while the latter bears a whole range of existential meanings. This semantic gap prompts us to consider the many forking paths that art can create within the two central nuclei of being, reason, and pathos.

In the fifth and last stage, **Thinking the Present (Francesca Grilli, Adelita Husni-Bey, Marinella Senatore and Diego Tonus)**, presents the historical time in that of the creation of the work of art in direct relation to the present or to what the fleeting *hic et nunc* can draw here from the historical data of the past, a handover or a legacy capable of conferring substance and meaning.

Overall consideration of the works shown in Seoul reveals a common factor that regards not so much the exploratory spirit of the 22 artists presented as a certain effort of imaginative curiosity that relates the reality of the artistic object exhibited to a now historicized political and social reality that is never forgotten and with which links are maintained. Rather than nostalgic attachment to the past or – worse still – incapacity to interpret the present, this reflects a form of intolerance or annoyance with the anonymous flowering of *topicality*, a temporal subspecies that is severed from before and leaves no traces of itself in the after.

The “re-presentation” of modernity considers the effort of a cultural and historical phenomenon that is constantly called into question and never completely abandoned. We have never been modern because we have too much weight on our backs and modernity is an elusive era that slips from our grasp, as if a heavy boat were being hauled from the quay of the present towards the pier where it cannot dock.

Craftsmen Designers and Makers, Curated by Francesca Veronesi

This exhibition explored the relationship between craftsmen, designers, and makers – that is, design, traditional crafts, and manufacturing and the new opportunities opened up by participatory design culture, the availability of digital fabrication technologies, and creative international collaborations between designers, craftsmen, manufacturers, and digital communities. Through a combination of the creative and entrepreneurial capital of Italy, the exhibition maps the increasingly more complex forms of connectedness that are fostering new collaborations, supporting innovation, and enabling knowledge exchange between designers, craftsmen, makers, brands, and communities and provides the opportunity to discover the similar elements shared by tradition and innovation. By utilizing 3D printers, robots, crafts, and sustainable digital design, the know-how handed down from generation to generation can make a quantum leap and become a new form of work. “Makers” are those who design and manufacture goods in both shared physical and virtual spaces by using group-work methods and digital instruments. The use of digital production technologies of hardware and software as well as services based on social media and the adoption of a position of shared knowledge are other characteristics of makers, who could also be described as technological hobbyists of the twenty-first century and the bearers of the do-it-yourself (DIY) philosophy. The DIY philosophy and open design culture is enabling new forms of social agency and shared knowledge about how things are made and the possibility to manipulate, reproduce, and remix existing design. The results are sustainable methods and experimentation with new approaches to low-cost production, and a new wave of artisanal works is re-claiming the appraisal of crafts and applied research as a vehicle of knowledge preservation and driver of innovation. A maker puts into question the foundations of society by freeing himself from the role of a mere consumer and moreover taking in hand reality in order to deconstruct and reconstruct it in accordance with his own daily needs. Therefore, as crafts and digital manufacture fertilize one another, the distinction between practitioners, professionals, and amateurs is becoming increasingly blurred. The exhibition explored boundaries between open design culture, crafts, and luxury

manufacturing and how intangible and informal knowledge is passed on and shared around the culture of design and making, through the democratization and distribution of tools of invention and production. It addressed a broad range of themes from international talent support schemes, open wear fabrication laboratories, educational and community driven knowledge transfer platforms, to the understanding of the role of designers as innovators, forethinkers and interpreters of the material and intangible heritage of a locale, and research-led collaborations on future textiles and material innovation. It explored the role of makers as contemporary craftsmen and current challenges and opportunities hacking the contemporary fashion industry in ways that strive to be experimental, performative, and participatory.

Conclusion

The set of events held in 2014 to celebrate the anniversary of the two nations had as its primary objective to present the foundation of the constituents of culture—such as the system of knowledge, opinions, beliefs, customs, and behaviors—that characterize Italy on a large scale. The presentation of Italian events in Korea and Korean events in Italy has strengthened mutual knowledge. To paraphrase Proust, it could be said that every cultural event is a journey into the world of others that allows you to have new eyes. Knowing how to observe what is happening in another country allows better understanding of ourselves, and broadens horizons, enabling rich, new combinations of unique experiences. Interculturalism, without a doubt, seems to be the main ingredient to eliminate racism and promote feelings of peace in a process of understanding and cooperation and the best way to celebrate friendship between two countries.

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