

# Intangible Heritage and Museum Actions

by Hongnam Kim

**T**angible heritage is the embodiment of intangible heritage. This fact can be a source of significant creative force for museums of all fields in the future, enabling them to overcome conventional limitations and prejudices. Museums need to develop more programmes, not bound by architectural confines, in order to link the tangible and intangible, thus allowing the value of each to be rediscovered and more deeply understood through their connection. Intangible heritage in music, dance, rituals, crafts and other forms often loses its authenticity and vitality when it is separated from its birthplace and environment. It is important that museums attempt to preserve the authentic environment of intangible heritage through their programme of exhibitions, education, and public relations. In this way, they ensure their efforts are sustainable, raise public awareness and gain public support.

> I would like to illustrate the museological approaches to the intangible heritage through two cases of collaboration between museums and communities: the Ewha Womans University Museum, Seoul, with Gurim Village, a small rural town in southern Korea, and The Consortium Art Centre, Dijon, France, with villages in the Burgundy region. The university museum's collection consists largely of traditional arts and crafts, whereas The Consortium's main operation is temporary and contemporary, focused on fine arts and films.

## The Gurim village project, Korea

> The Gurim Village project was on the one hand to assist the village in restoring and revitalising both tangible and intangible heritage and to redefine the village's own cultural identity. On the other hand the project was for the museum to break out of its object-oriented museum concept and programmes, to contextualise its collections, and to specify its role in preservation and reinterpretation of cultural heritage through dialogues, site experiences and site-specific programmes.

> The university museum, one of the top five museums in the country and well-known for its ceramic collection and kiln archaeology, carried out excavations of old kiln sites on the outskirts of the village for years, with little interest beyond its ceramic studies (the

author was then director of this museum). As we were completing the excavation work in the spring of 1997, the age-old beauty of this solitary village, its history, legends, myths and rituals and the surrounding landscape all looked so precarious, as the outside world encroached with its urban developments, fanned by the local government of Yeongam County, which had jurisdiction over Gurim Village. Local festivals became a flourishing enterprise all over the country but they tended to follow a stereotypical pattern of trivialisation and commercialisation with no sense of purpose or identity.

> The Gurim Village area, a riverside turned inland by the government's land reclamation, has a large number of prehistoric dolmens and ancient tumuli. Uncontaminated pure yellow soil and good clay are found everywhere, explaining the rise of the pottery industry. Unearthed from the kiln site are shards dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It is also the birthplace of the celebrated 9<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist monk Dosun (born in 827) and the home of the famous Dogap Monastery which he founded.

> But during the colonial period (1909-1945), the village turned into a sleepy old community of farming families indifferent to its cultural heritage and destiny. What seemed to have protected the village from the fate of many other historical towns was its relative isolation and a sense of pride perpetuated by the tradition of an ancient autonomous governing body, the Daedong Gae Society, founded in 1565 to advocate the ideas of a utopian society. However the society was faltering as the elders passed away and the younger generations left the village for the urban centres, while local government exercised its official governing power over the village.

> The university museum had to move fast in finding ways for the village to stop self-destruction and recover its dignity and cultural pride. It was decided that the best way was to utilise the finds from the kiln sites under the museum's control, as the Gurim villa-

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gers derived no benefits from seeing the excavated material from the kilns and saw no relevance to their own cultural history. Finds were immediately removed, since there was no public museum to make claims for them.

### The strategy of the Ewha Womans University Museum

> The first step taken by the museum was to persuade local government to turn an abandoned school building in the heart of the village into a museum. The history of the community, its traditions, people and products had to be the main constituents of this museum. Its main objective was two-fold: to exhibit the ceramic heritage of the village and to assert the contemporary relevance of their tangible and intangible heritage. The plan was to house a ceramic museum to exhibit excavated pieces from the kilns and to set up a ceramic workshop to revive the ceramic tradition and industry. The university museum was in charge of the building plan, gallery design, exhibition and education programmes. It opened in the autumn of 1999 with villagers and government officials in attendance, all pleasantly surprised by the realisation of a museum of their own. The inaugural exhibition focused on the history of Gurim Pottery, accompanied by a catalogue, a comprehensive documentation of Gurim ceramic tradition, based on the archaeological, socioeconomic, and art historical interpretation of the Gurim kilns, the finds, and all other relevant material.

> However it soon became clear that the Centre could not attract visitors with a mere display made of pottery shards. To sustain the villagers' and local government's interest and expectations, it was vital to make the village's cultural heritage relevant to the contemporary world by putting the Centre on the national and international cultural map. More programmes were needed.

> The following year the museum organised a special exhibition inviting eight leading artists of the country to produce site-specific installations in and around the village in time with the nearby international Gwangju Biennial. The only medium specified was the earth from the village. They were also asked to dwell on the village's natural and cultural heritage of red earth, stream, trees, landscape, architecture, kilns, people, history, myths and legends. This had to be done tactfully, without imposing on or belittling the villagers. The museum made a significant public-relations effort which paid off handsomely; the village became part of the tour package for the Biennial visitors. The media coverage of the exhibition and the village's history and ancient beauty was impressive. The university museum staff and artists in the village project were also enriched by their experience.

> The nation-wide acclaim the Centre received turned the earlier ambivalence among villagers and officials about the university museum's role into trust and confidence. This made it easier for the museum to move on to its second ambition, the restoration of the village and its heritage, both natural and cultural. First the Daedong Gae Society elders were consulted regarding the future of their village, with a choice between preservation and development. After a month of debate they decided to opt for preservation, unthinkable anywhere else in this development-obsessed country. With their blessing, it was not difficult to persuade local government to adopt a 5-year plan including a development strategy of profitable cultural products and detailed suggestions for reviving the ceramic tradition and its industry. The university museum secured seed money from the provincial government to encourage local government. The project was successfully launched. In the meantime the historical Daedong Gae Society was registered as an important intangible cultural property, recognised for its historic and cultural values.

> All these became a source of pride and present-day relevance to the villagers. Youths who had left villages for the nation's cities began to return and recover a sense of belonging. Following the 5-year plan, the community is now seriously considering organising a rare-book festival, in memory of the community's famous scholars and poets. The pottery studio has been running well, with professional staff initially trained by the university museum.

### The Consortium Art Centre, Dijon, France

> The case of The Consortium appears more relevant to illustrate the fascinating role that a contemporary art museum can play in the preservation and reinterpretation of intangible heritage. Regarded as a fountainhead of contemporary art with its commissionership for the French Pavilion at the 2000 Venice Biennial and the 2003 Lyons Biennial, it has a close working relationship with the Pompidou Centre in Paris. The Consortium has shown how to expand its programmes beyond its collection and in-house exhibitions by creating projects in nearby towns aimed at both heritage preservation and the establishment of its contemporary relevance.

> The Art Centre's projects began in Burgundy as early as 1992, as commissions from the Fondation de France (created in 1969 by André Malraux at the instigation of Michel Pomey) initiated by Xavier Douroux, a co-director of The Consortium Art Centre, who closely followed the

spirit and action plans of the foundation's model of political economy for art, "The Protocol". Developed by the foundation's cultural director, François Hers, it sets out *"to shape the relationships between society, its artists and their works in a contemporary way"*.

> One of the projects involved the restoration of old abandoned wash places in about twenty rural villages, where womenfolk used to gather to wash clothes. These desolate towns inhabited by no more than 20 families, far apart from each other, appeared to have lost their life-force. With the disuse of these communal wash places, the womanfolk lost a vibrant channel of communication. The museum decided to find ways of reviving the old wash places and reinventing their usage for the villagers' current population. Naturally the museum resorted to what it did best: a form of exhibition.

> The museum wanted to invite world-known contemporary artists in and outside France who would share their vision and come up with creative ideas. Their plan was for each site to have one site-specific installation work using the artist's unique perception of the wash place to evoke the old atmosphere of the town, its history and life style. For each site, the first planning grant, which comprised 20% of the total budget, came from the foundation, with 40% from local government and 40% from central government.

> One site was restored with the installation of a children's playground within the complex by a woman artist who wanted to recreate the memory of children playing while the women were washing and chatting. Another restored site centred on the idea of water itself, with a large stone basin equipped with a system which dropped water from the inner eaves of the building and was activated as visitors entered. One site was designed to be filled with the sound of chattering women. In Blessey, an environmental artist from Switzerland designed an art-in-progress work to restore woods around the swamp right

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below the washing place, for which he made an agreement with the villagers to take turns watering them. The mayor of this small town of less than 20 families participated in the actual restoration work, involving youths from a nearby remand school. The museum also worked closely with the tourism offices in the region.

#### Drawing a parallel between the two partnerships

> Common features of these French and Korean projects are the preservation and restoration of historical monuments and the natural environment, serious dialogue with the community, the redefinition of intangible heritage, the engagement of contemporary artists through site-specific works, and the involvement of cultural tourism as the sustainable resources for the community. What is interesting is that the two institutions learned of

each other's project by chance and have since visited each other's sites.

> Some may question the approach of these two museums: are they imposing their taste and standards on the rural community? What right do they have? I believe the legitimacy of that right lies in the democratic decision-making process among all involved so that the task becomes a collective responsibility. There must be no assertions of cultural centrality and hegemonic claims. Being not only respectful but also critical of the people and the communities is important in order to involve them in the dynamic process of recreation of culture with a sense of balance and discernment.

> Intangible heritage and tangible heritage thrive in and with each other. Museums are probably the best-equipped institutions to link them and to find better ways to make the intangible heritage of the world more sustainable. How they do it depends on each museum. One thing is certain, however: the National Folk Museum of Korea will not remain an onlooker.