CELADON Pottery -- A Chinese porcelain having a translucent, pale green glaze.
Korean celadon of the Koryo dynasty (918-1392) is famous for its many innovations that set it apart from the celadon wares of China. Probably the most striking innovation by Korean potters is the development of the inlay technique, which is known as sanggam.

Earlier examples of inlay can be seen in use of silver wire embedded in the surface of metal containers. The inlay of mother of pearl in lacquer wares is another example of the technique. This tradition was at some point adopted to decorate celadon, creating a new type of celadon ware. To make an inlaid piece, a potter would first mold a shape out of clay or throw clay onto a potter’s wheel. Once the desired shape was crafted, the piece would be left to dry until the surface became firm, like leather. The potter would then carve out designs and motifs on the hard but pliable face of the exterior of the shaped clay.

Into these open carvings, the potter would paint in the inlay material to fill up the gaps. It was once believed that the inlay material was crushed black and white quartz. Incidentally, some modern artisans still use quartz in their inlays when trying to duplicate Koryo wares.

But recent scientific analysis of inlays suggests that Koryo artisans used black and white slip. Slip is a mixture of clay and water. After the slip filled in the carved out portions of the clay body, it is believed that the finished product was fired at a low temperature and then placed in a kiln where pottery was heated to temperatures reaching 1150 degrees centigrade.

Finished sanggam wares display black and white lined figures that draw striking contrast against the translucent grey-green-blue glaze of celadon. Scholars are not sure exactly when this technique was first invented but one strong clue may be inferred from the fact that King Injong’s tomb did not contain a single inlaid piece among the items he was buried with. Since King Injong died in 1146, most historians believe that the inlay technique was developed in the latter half of the twelfth century.

One of the finest examples of this technique, considered by many scholars to be the epitome of sanggam wares, is National Treasure no. 68. An elegant maebyong, or prunus vase, the silhouette of the piece strikes a dramatic S-shaped profile. It measures 42.1 centimeters making it one of the largest vases of its kind from Korea.

The treasure is decorated with inlaid cranes flying in the same direction, surrounded by black and white circles. The bodies of the cranes were made by carving into the clay and filled in with slip; white for the crane’s body and black for the eyes, beak, and feet. In between these circular emblems are cranes flying in opposite directions with clouds interspersed throughout.

National Treasure No. 68 was once in the personal collection of Chun Hyung-pil. Chun used his vast personal fortune to buy Korean work that had been smuggled out of the country and he purchased art that might have been sold to foreigners. According to KBS News, Chun bought this vase for 20,000 won from a Japanese broker in 1935, a sum that could have bought him several expensive homes during that time period.

National Treasure no. 68, arguably the ultimate example of the sanggam technique, is currently held at the Gansong Art Museum in Seoul. Thanks to the great work of Chun Hyung-pil, people can see this national treasure in the fall and spring of every year in the country it was made.