

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2006

The Documentary Value of Repairs to the Hwarot, the Korean Bridal Robe

Kisook Suh
kisookok@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Suh, Kisook, "The Documentary Value of Repairs to the Hwarot, the Korean Bridal Robe" (2006). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 303.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/303>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Documentary Value of Repairs to the *Hwarot*, the Korean Bridal Robe

Kisook Suh
kisookok@hotmail.com

The *Hwarot* is the most sumptuous bridal costume in Korea. Only noble ladies and members of the royal family wore this robe until the late *Joseon* Dynasty (1392-1910).¹ Later, commoners were allowed to wear the *Hwarot* and it is still worn in the contemporary wedding ceremony in Korea. Although the later *Hwarot* for commoners was plainer, it retained the same design and the structure of the early one.



Figure 1 (left). Front of *Hwarot*, late *Joseon* dynasty, Korea, L 122 cm x W 180 cm, National Folk Museum of Korea, Seoul. © 2005 NFMK.

Figure 2 (right). Back of *Hwarot*, late *Joseon* dynasty, Korea, L 122 cm x W 180 cm, National Folk Museum of Korea, Seoul. © 2005 NFMK.

The earlier *Hwarot* shows the excellence of *gungsu* (宮繡), the palace embroidery, of the royal workshop of the *Joseon* dynasty. Because of the delicate nature of the materials, not many of these early *Hwarots* are known to remain. Extant early *Hwarots* were made mostly in the 18th and 19th century. Except for a few princesses' *Hwarots*, they are identical in design and in embroidery technique and are made of fine red silk and embellished with embroidered flowers and auspicious symbolic motifs.

Since it was very costly to make the *Hwarots*, they were repaired and reused from generation to generation by attaching patches and adding stitches.² These repairs are quite noticeable, which is different than the usual restoration of textiles. This present study began with the idea that the repairs to the early *Hwarots* might have their own meanings and that they would have value as a visual documentation of the people and of the time. I will examine the different types of repairs and then discuss what meanings they may contain.

Primarily, repairs were made in order to reinforce worn out areas on the robes as the result of repeated wearing. Therefore, the repaired areas are concentrated on the edges and the folded areas. There are also numerous repairs to the surface of the ground fabric, mainly caused by

¹ Young Yang Chung, *Silken Threads: a History of Embroidery in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 2005), 359.

² *Ibid.*, 360.

heavy embroideries and the deterioration of the pasted backing paper. Trimming, patches, appliqués, and stitching are the most widely used types of repairs to these damages.



Figure 3. Part of the back of Hwarot, late 18th – late 19th century, Korea, L 129.5 cm x W 206 cm. Brooklyn Museum of Art (20.967) © 2006 BMA.

Trimming was done on the outlines of body panels and sleeves that are the most easily damaged parts. Generally, similar to the ground fabric, red satin was used. However, different kinds of fabrics were also used such as silk brocade, damask and wool twill weave.

One of the most noticeable of the repairs to the *Hwarots* is large patches of textile fragments. The original design of *Hwarots* is composed of body and sleeve panels of red satin and cuffs in white. On the sleeves are three silk strips of blue, yellow, and red. Because of the many patches, often in layers, sometimes it is difficult to figure out the original design.

The textile fragments often of red satin were attached to damaged areas like the trimmings. Different kinds of fabrics were also used: long strips of hair ribbon for instance, fragments of brocaded textiles, and cut pieces from other bridal robes.

Hair ribbons were originally one of the accessories for the bridal wedding attire. It seems used hair ribbons were recycled as repair patches usually attached to the fold line at the shoulder, and sometimes to other parts of the robe.

The primary repair technique used on the embroidered parts was appliqué. The embroidery is the dominant design element on the *Hwarot*. The back panel, especially, is almost completely covered with embroideries. The twisted fine silk embroidery threads were damaged from usage showing evidence of discoloration, abrasion, and loss. Originally in order to maintain its shape with the heavy embroideries, the *Hwarot* had several layers of pasted backing paper. It probably was hard to stitch through the layers of fabrics and papers for repairing. Therefore, instead of re-embroidering over the damaged embroideries, appliqués of the cutout motifs were often used.

Stitching was used on small or narrow damaged areas. The cracks of the backing paper often caused tears on the ground fabric. They used not only red threads to make the repairs less visible but also used threads in different colors of green, purple, and sky blue that made these bold stitches look rather like an additional embroidery design.



Figure 4 (left). Detail of *Hwarot* with repair appliqués, late 18th – late 19th century, Korea. Brooklyn Museum of Art (20.967), © Taken by the author with the permission of BMA

Figure 5 (right). Detail of *Hwarot* with repair stitches, late 18th – late 19th century, Korea. Brooklyn Museum of Art (27.977.4) © Taken by the author with the permission of BMA

The early *Hwarots* in this study are known to be worn in the palace or by the royal family. The evidence of their use by the royal family has been briefly discussed by Dr. Chung Young Yang.³ Arranged marriages were made for princesses to marry to sons of noble families. According to tradition, the bride herself and all of her possessions belonged to her in-law family after marriage including the *Hwarot*. This must be how the *Hwarots* made in the royal workshop were found in families other than the royal family.

The traditional Korean villages had the characteristics of a clan, in which most of the townspeople were relatives and had the same family name. In the village, for economic reasons, many things were shared as a common property: a funeral bier, a palanquin and a set of table and costumes for the wedding ceremony. Usually only a few families in the town owned the *Hwarots* that were designed after the ones from the royal workshop. If a family didn't have its own or an inherited one, they were able to borrow one from another family close to them. Conveniently, the structure of the *Hwarot* is very simple and unfitted that it could be worn by any bride.

Thus the *Hwarot* was used from generation to generation in a family and also shared by the townspeople as a common property. The constant use of the *Hwarots* required constant repairs. These repairs were usually done before the wedding ceremony by the family members of the bride. They did their best to keep the *Hwarot* splendid looking with trimming, patches, appliqués and stitching. Consequently, after being used in many wedding ceremonies, the robe retained all the layers of the women repairers' works.

Sewing and embroidery were very important for the women in the *Joseon* dynasty. Under its neo-Confucian philosophy, women's activities were confined to the inner court of the house and they were supposed to produce all the clothes for the family and to take care of them. Embroidering was required on dresses for special occasions such as weddings and special birthdays.⁴ Generally because women were discouraged from cultivating their talents in the arts

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Beth McKillop, ed., *Korean Art and Design* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1992), 137.

of painting, calligraphy, and poetry,⁵ the craft of sewing and embroidery was one of the few ways for them to show their skills and artistic talents.

Originally the design of the *Hwarot* contained a lot of symbols in the context of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Religious and philosophical meanings were all mixed and infused in the design details, reflecting the harmony of Yin and Yang, the five colors⁶ reflecting the elements of the universe, auspicious embroidery motifs, and so on. All these design elements expressed good wishes for the bride in her married life.

While the women repaired the *Hwarot* in preparation for a wedding ceremony, they restored and added to these motifs their own wishes for prosperity, happiness, and fertility especially for producing male heirs, the traditional virtues required of women of the time.

The *Hwarot* itself is aesthetically important as a masterpiece of ceremonial costume and its repairs have important values as they document a part of women's life at the time. The layers of repairs are rare examples of preserved material documents from the *Joseon* dynasty.

Written records of the *Hwarots* barely remain. The first written document on the object itself was made by a Western museum, the Umlauff Museum in Hamburg, upon its acquisition of *Hwarots* at the end of the 19th century.⁷ Unfortunately the description is very simple and only about the physical condition of the robes which makes it very difficult to find more information about the provenance of the robes. Therefore the repairs may play a significant role in understanding the *Hwarots* as material documents. For example, it was possible to relate one robe to another in different museum collections by a certain type of repair stitches and by patches of identical textile fragments. These repairs would be important clues in revealing more information of the *Hwarots*.



Figure 6. Part of the body panel of *Hwarot* with the identical patch in figure 7. Gift through H. Higenbotham, purchased from the Umlauff Museum in 1899, Field Museum (33157).

© Taken by the author with permission of the FM.

⁵ Song-mi Yi, "Women in Korean History and Art", in *Rapt in Colour: Korean textiles and costumes of the Chosŏn dynasty*, eds. Claire Roberts and Huh Dong-hwa (Sydney, N.S.W.: Powerhouse Museum; Seoul: Museum of Korean Embroidery, 1998), 25 - 30.

⁶ Yellow (center), blue (east), white (west), red (south), and black (north)

⁷ These *Hwarots* were purchased by H. Higenbotham, who gifted them to the Field Museum in 1899. Related catalogue: J.F.G. Umlauff, *Die Koreanische Sammlung des Museum Umlauff* (Hamburg: Friedlandes, 1897).



Figure 7. Part of the sleeve of Hwarot with the identical patch as in Figure 6. Museum purchase from Yamanaka & Co. in 1927, Peabody Essex Museum (E20190F)⁸
 © Taken by the author with permission of the PEM.

The layers of repairs may also show the stylistic changes of the embroidery design. Especially the flower motifs of the peony and lotus were widely used in many other embroidery designs and in other genres of art. These flower motifs are the most important embroidery designs of the robe, explaining one theory of the meaning of the word ‘Hwarot’ originated from the flower design all over the robe.⁹ The appliquéd motifs of flowers over flowers show the different styles of flower motifs over time.



Figure 8 (left). Detail of Hwarot, late Joseon dynasty, Korea, Field Museum (33155) © Taken by the author with permission of the FM.

Figure 9 (right). Detail of Hwarot, late 18th century, Korea, Peabody Essex Museum (E20190F) © Taken by the author with permission of the PEM.

⁸ The original image is rotated 90° CCW.

⁹ Sang Eun Lee, “Joseon Wangjo Hoogi Hwarot-ui Yeongu” (A Study on Hwarots in the late Joseon dynasty), *Boksik(服飾): Journal of the Korean Society of Costume*, vol. 7 (1983): 71-81.

The repairs of patches of diverse textile fragments could be important resources for the study of historical textiles. On the damaged areas, the repairers attached textile fragments that were probably very rare at the time. This assumption is based on the fact that the domestic production of patterned silk weave was banned in the late *Joseon* dynasty when these *Hwarots* were used.¹⁰

Interestingly, however, many of the patches are fragments of patterned silks of brocade, damask, and lampas weave. Considering the rarity of these kinds of textiles, they must have been cherished by the women who generously attached them on the *Hwarot* as the symbol of their best wishes for the bride. Probably these were scraps from the textiles that were gifts or imported for special occasions from China where the silk weaving technique was highly developed. These repairs on the *Hwarots* are one of few examples of preserved textile fragments from the *Joseon* dynasty as well as the ones found in the statues of Buddha in old temples.¹¹

A few museums in the United States and Europe collected the *Hwarot* mainly through two different sources: donations of private collectors and purchases from art dealers, Yamanaka & Co., for example, in the late 19th and early 20th century.

While the Korean museums were reluctant to do any treatment on the preserved textiles and instead made replicas if it was necessary to exhibit them, the Western museums did conservation treatments for the purposes of exhibition or storage. A conservation issue with the *Hwarot* is whether or not to remove the old repairs. There could be two different approaches according to the viewpoint of anthropology or aesthetics.

From the anthropological point of view, every element of the *Hwarot* should be preserved as is including the repairs unless it is thought that it might cause fatal further damage. On the other hand, from the aesthetic point of view, the repairs would be removed in order to recover the original shape or design of the robe. Considering the fact that the repairs have been part of the robe and used as such for a long time, they are more meaningful than mere repairs.



Figures 10 (left) and 11 (right). Front and back of *Hwarot*, late 18th century, Korea, L 129 cm x W 184 cm, Peabody Essex Museum (E20190F) © 2006 PEM.

¹⁰ Yeon-ok Sim, *2,000 Years of Korean Textile Design* (Seoul: ISAT, 2006), 176-178.

¹¹ Am Jeong et al., eds., *Collections from the Statues of Buddha in Korea (至心歸命禮: 韓國의 佛腹藏)* (Seoul: Sudeok Temple, 2004).

One of the examples of conservation treatment from the anthropological point of view was done at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. The least amount of treatment was executed for the sake of preventive conservation: most of the repairs were kept and only disfiguring repairs were removed. According to the conservation report, older purple couching repairs were left in position as requested by the curator. This preserved repair enabled an observation that the same type of purple couching repairs was also found on another *Hwarot* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Interestingly, both *Hwarots* were purchased from the same art dealer, Yamanaka & Co., in the same year of 1927.



Figure 12 (left). Detail of *Hwarot* with repair stitches, after treatment.
Peabody Essex Museum (E20190F) © Taken by the author with permission of the PEM.

Figure 13 (right). Detail of *Hwarot* with repair stitches.
Brooklyn Museum of Art (27.977.4) © Taken by the author with permission of the BMA.

It is not clear that the some repairs might have been done by the art dealer or by the same repairers. However it is clear that these extensive repairs are a part of the robes' history. Certain types of repair may suggest some information related to the provenance of the robes, such as, a certain region where it belonged or a certain time when it was done. For now, it is difficult to say that there is any specific relationship between the robes yet. However without any other documentary information of the robes, these repairs provide us with some resources that could enable further research on the robes.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London made different decisions of the conservation treatment for the panels from *Hwarots*. The museum acquired only the heavily embroidered parts of body and sleeve panels that were detached from the original robes. The panels were treated more as embroidered paintings than costume pieces. Some repairs were completely removed to reveal the original design underneath and some were re-attached considering the historical meaning of their initial use. After removing and re-attaching the repairs, the panels were mounted flat.¹² The aesthetic point of view was very clear in the treatment of one of the panels where they applied the same treatment method to the panel as on Asian paintings with paper backings and adhesive.

¹² Anne Godden Amos, "Korean Embroidery, Techniques and Conservation", in *Orientalisms*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1994): 43-46.



Figure 14. Panel from Hwarot, after treatment, Victoria & Albert Museum (T202-1920).
 © Taken by the author with permission of the V&A.

Figure 15. Removed trimmings and appliques for treatment. Victoria & Albert museum (T21-1925).
 © Taken by the author with permission of the V&A.

A recently acquired *Hwarot* at the National Folk Museum of Korea does not have the same repairs as shown on the *Hwarots* of the several other museums abroad. It is not certain whether there were previous repairs and later they were removed or if originally there were not repairs. Instead of the repairs, it clearly shows the damages that would be hidden under the repairs. The lack of repairs makes it harder to relate this *Hwarot* to the other *Hwarots* in other collections. There is less information with fewer repairs.



Figure 16 (left). Detail of the back of Hwarot. National Folk Museum of Korea © 2005 NFMK.

Figure 17 (right). Detail of the back of Hwarot. Brooklyn Museum of Art (27.977.4).
 © Taken by the author with permission of the BMA.

In conclusion, the repairs of the *Hwarot* need to be considered with their documentary value in its cultural context. They are not only repairs but a part of the integrity of the *Hwarot*. Further these repairs are the important resources that may provide us with more information on the provenance of the robes and on the women's work related to the wedding customs of their time. They reflect the life of the people and the time.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following museums for their great help for this research: the Asian Art Department at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Anthropology Department at the Field Museum, Korean Art and Culture Department at the Peabody Essex Museum, the Asian Department at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Asian Art Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the National Folk Museum of Korea in Seoul.

Special gratitude to Dr. Young Yang Chung for the inspiration of this study and the Textile Conservation Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for their constant support.

References

- Amos, Anne Godden. "Korean Embroidery, Techniques and Conservation," *Oriental Art*, vol. 25, no. 2. February 1994: 43-46.
- Chung, Young Yang. *Silken Threads: a History of Embroidery in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 2005.
- Jeong, Am et al., eds. *Collections from the Statues of Buddha in Korea (至心歸命禮: 韓國의 佛腹藏)*. Seoul: Sudeok Temple, 2004.
- Lawton, Thomas. "Yamanaka Sadajiro: Advocate for Asian Art," *Oriental Art*, vol.26, no.1. January 1995: 80-93.
- Lee, Sang Eun. "Joseon Wangjo Hoogi Hwarot-ui Yeongu" (A Study on *Hwarots* in the late *Joseon* dynasty), *Boksik(服飾): Journal of the Korean Society of Costume*, vol. 7. 1983: 71-81.
- McKillop, Beth., ed. *Korean Art and Design*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1992.
- Sim, Yeon-ok. *2,000 Years of Korean Textile Design*. Seoul: ISAT, 2006.
- Umlauff, J.F.G. *Die Koreanische Sammlung des Museum Umlauff*. Hamburg: Friedlandes, 1897.
- Yi, Song-mi. "Women in Korean History and Art," in *Rapt in Colour : Korean textiles and costumes of the Chosŏn dynasty*, eds. Claire Roberts and Huh Dong-hwa. Sydney, N.S.W.: Powerhouse Museum; Seoul: Museum of Korean Embroidery, 1998: 25-30.
- A Decade of Collecting*. Seoul: National Folk Museum of Korea, 2005.