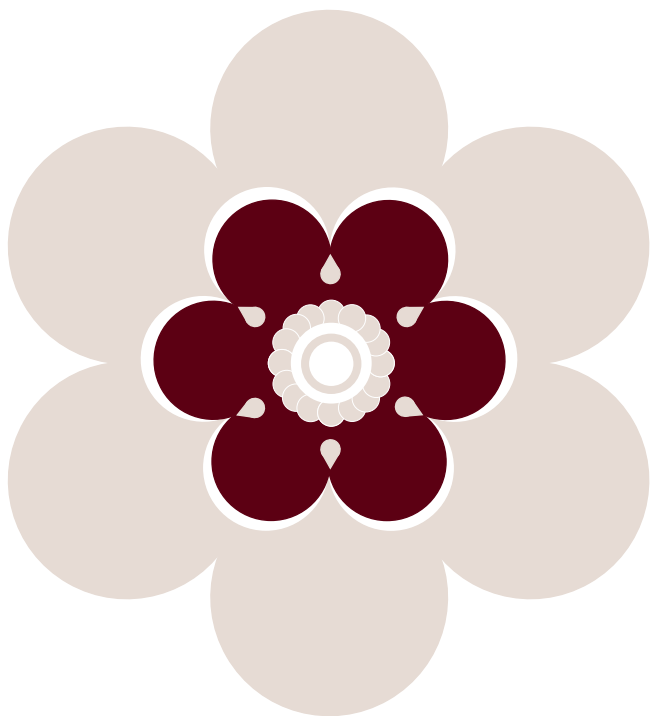



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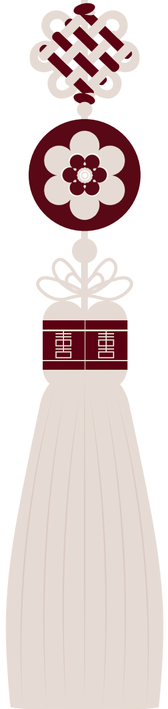

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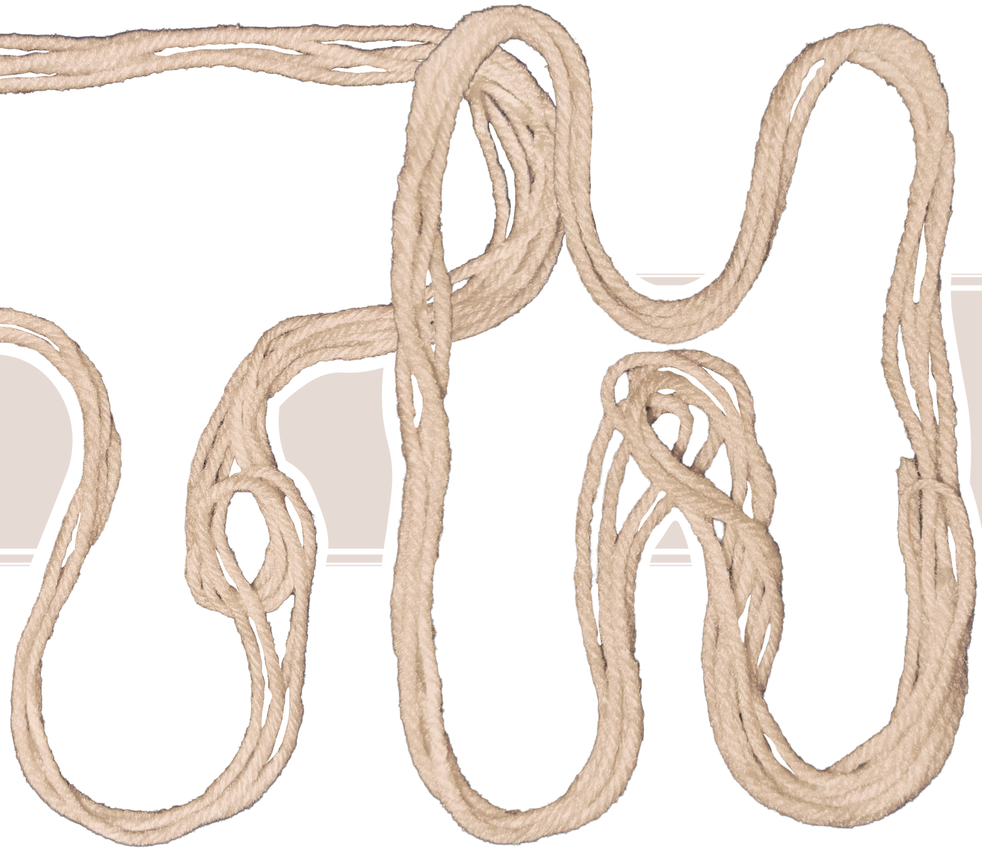
FIRST READ



THREADS OF MEANING

Introducing Hanbok, Korea's national dress and identity

by Mimsie Ladner

The Hanbok (한복) has a history as colourful as each garment. It was worn daily up until about a century ago; however, it remains an important part of Korean culture, with people wearing it on special occasions and holidays. Its enduring presence reflects a deep connection between tradition, identity, and national pride.

The Hanbok, which has roots in present-day northern Korea, northeast China and part of Mongolia, was designed to facilitate ease of movement. In Korean, the term "Hanbok" literally means "Korean clothing," with "han" referring to Korea or the Korean people and "bok" meaning clothing. The fundamental structure of the traditional Korean dress, specifically the jeogori (저고리), baji (바지) and chima (치마), was established during the Three Kingdoms Period, and the design features have remained relatively unchanged to this day.

Hanbok can be classified into everyday, ceremonial and special dress, and then further categorized by gender, age and season. Regardless of the differences in these classifications, the basic aesthetic framework of all Hanbok is centred around the Korean fondness for the natural, the desire for supernatural protection and blessings and the Confucian dress code, which emphasizes propriety and primary colours.

한복은 한국 사람들의 역사와 민족의 영혼을 담은 소중한 문화유산이다. 한복을 통해 우리는 조상의 지혜와 그들의 인생을 배울 수 있고, 그로 인해 현재 우리의 존재를 다시 엿볼 수 있다. 다양한 방법으로

한복을 재해석하거나 받아들일 수 있지만, 잊지 말아야 할 것은 항상 경건한 마음으로 소중히 대하는 우리들의 태도이다. 한복은 그저 그런 전통 의상이 아닌, 우리가 평생을 지키고 공부해야 할 숙제이다.

The general design of Hanbok aims to create a delicate flow of lines and angles, resulting in a silhouette that feels both structured and fluid. Similar to the soft, sloping eaves of hanok/한옥 (traditional Korean house), the balance of the curved baerae/배래 (the bottom line of the jacket sleeve) with the sharp angles of the dongjeong/동정 (the creased white lining of the jacket collar) illustrates the softness and elegance of traditional Korean aesthetics.

Another prominent attribute of Hanbok is vivid colours. Traditional Hanbok had vibrant hues that corresponded with the five elements of the yin-and-yang theory: white (metal), red (fire), blue (wood), black (water) and yellow (earth). Colours also symbolized social position and marital status. Bright colours, for example, were generally worn by children, and muted hues by middle-aged men and women. Unmarried women often wore yellow jeogori (저고리) and red chima (치마), while matrons wore green and red. However, women with sons donned navy. The upper classes wore a variety of colours. Contrastingly, the working class were required to wear white but dressed in shades of pale pink, light green, grey and charcoal on special occasions.

A person's social position could also be identified by the material of his or her Hanbok. The upper classes wore closely woven ramie cloth or other high-grade lightweight materials during warmer months. They dressed in plain and patterned silks throughout the remainder of the year. Those in the working class were restricted to cotton. Beyond material distinctions, symbolic meaning was also communicated through decoration. Patterns were embroidered on the traditional Korean dress to represent the wishes of the wearer. For example, peonies on a wedding dress signified a wish for honour and wealth. On the other hand, lotus flowers symbolised the hope for nobility, while bats and pomegranates illustrated a desire for children. Dragons, phoenixes, cranes and tigers were reserved for the Hanbok of royalty and high-ranking officials.

“ITS ELEGANT AND GRACEFUL DESIGNS REFLECT THE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITIES OF THE KOREAN PEOPLE.”

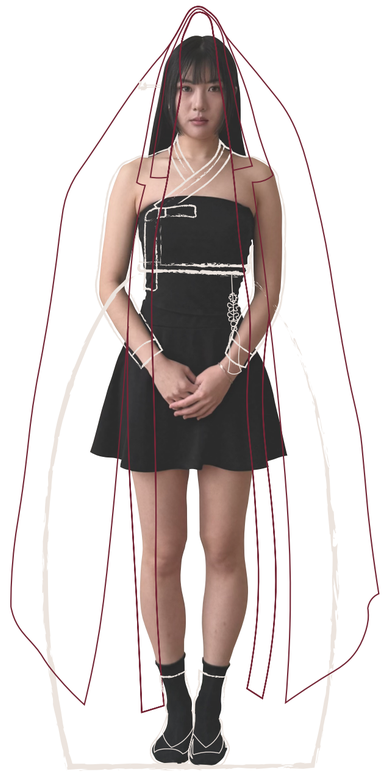
In the late 19th century, Western suits and dresses became more popular, with the West continuing to influence South Korea’s formal and casual wear today. However, on special occasions such as weddings, Lunar New Year (설날), ancestral rites and Dol/돌잔치 (a child’s first birthday), people still wear their Hanbok. This continued practice reflects the enduring cultural importance of Hanbok despite the growing presence of Western fashion. In this way, Hanbok functions not only as ceremonial attire but as a visual reminder of Korea’s cultural legacy within modern life.

Korea’s traditional dress has undergone many changes throughout its 2,000-year history and continues to evolve today. Designers have made classic motifs more wearable by adapting traditional patterns and structures into cotton, linen, leather and lace. These modern reinterpretations of the Hanbok have influenced the global fashion world, from the Champs-Élysées to New York Fashion Week. Yet despite this evolution, Hanbok retains a rich cultural heritage, valued not only for its history and preservation but also for its uniquely Korean artistic significance.

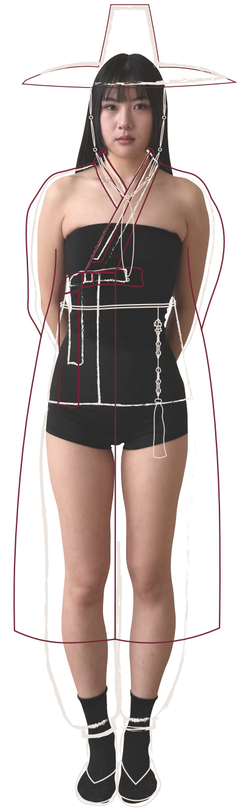
FIRST THREAD: LAYERS & LINES

Understanding Hanbok through fashion terms and the key components that shape its unique style

by Ara Ohanian



WOMEN



MEN

| 속 곳 | 저 고 리 | 치 마 | 장 옷 | 장 신 구 | 신 / 버 선 |

ㄱ

ㄹ



ㄴ

ㅁ



ㄷ



ㅂ



WOMEN'S:

ㄱ SOKGOT

Layered undergarments creating a compact upper and fuller lower silhouette, including daeja (대자), soksokgot (속속곳), and sokbaji (속바지)

ㄴ JEOGORI

Upper garment, like a short jacket or blouse, shorter than men's and varying by age and era

ㄷ CHIMA

Voluminous skirt tied above the bust, forming an elegant high-waisted silhouette

ㄹ JANGOT

Outer garment for covering the face when going out, longer than a durumagi (두루마기) and with white sleeve cuffs called geodeulji (거들지)

ㅁ JANGSINGU

Accessories like norigae (노리개) and binyeo (비녀); hair accessories like dwikkoji (뒤꽂이) were more varied than men's

ㅂ SIN/BEOSEON

Shoes and socks, often delicate and decorative, varying by social status

MEN'S:

ㄱ SOKGOT

Simple undergarments, mainly sokjeoksam (속적삼) and sokgoui (속고의)

ㄴ JEOGORI

Upper garment, like a short jacket or blouse, longer than women's and varying by age and era

ㄷ BAJI

Roomy pants designed for ease of movement and comfort

ㄹ DURUMAGI

Overcoat layered over the jeogori (저고리), worn for warmth and formal occasions

ㅁ GAT

Traditional hat with forms and strap details indicating social status

ㅂ JANGSINGU

Accessories like norigae (노리개) and dae/tti (대/띠); limited but conspicuous markers of status

ㅅ SIN/BEOSEON

Shoes and socks, often simpler and more practical, varying by social status

ㄱ



ㄹ



ㄴ



ㅁ



ㄷ



ㅂ



ㅅ



| 속 곳 | 저 고 리 | 바 지 | 두 루 마 기 | 갓 | 장 신 구 | 신 / 버 선 |


KOREA

FADING THREAD

Tracing the historical evolution of Hanbok

by Odynovo

THREE KINGDOMS PERIOD

/삼국시대

57 BC – 668 AD



The origins of Hanbok can be traced back to the Three Kingdoms period of Korean history. During this time, its style was influenced by neighboring countries such as China and Japan. Hanbok was worn in various ways and made from different materials depending on context and social status.

During this period, the kingdoms of Goguryeo (고구려), Baekje (백제), and Silla (신라) developed individual clothing styles that formed the foundation of traditional Korean clothing. Goguryeo attire favored bold, practical designs suited to a warrior culture, Baekje clothing emphasized elegance and refined details, and Silla dress balanced functionality with artistic expression. However, some records indicate that the Three Kingdoms shared similar tastes in clothing, with only slight variations in style and decoration.

With the support of the Chinese Tang Dynasty, the smallest of the Three Kingdoms, Silla, succeeded in conquering Goguryeo and Baekje, leading to the establishment of the Unified Silla Kingdom. During this period, Silla maintained close diplomatic and cultural ties with the Tang Dynasty, resulting in extensive exchanges in art, religion, and court culture. These interactions had a profound influence on clothing styles, particularly among the aristocracy, where garments reflected Tang aesthetics through more elaborate silhouettes, luxurious fabrics, and decorative details. As a result, the dress of the Unified Silla period marked a significant transformation, standing out as a distinct and highly influential phase in the history of Korean clothing.



676 CE – 935 CE

UNIFIED SILLA PERIOD

/통일신라

GORYEO KINGDOM
/고려시대

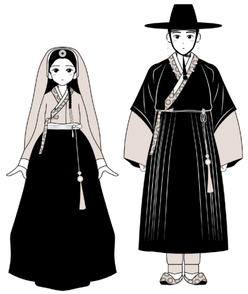
918 –
1392



The Goryeo Kingdom rose to power following the collapse of the Unified Silla Dynasty, marking a new political and cultural era on the Korean peninsula. During this period, clothing styles were strongly influenced by the Mongol Yuan Dynasty due to prolonged contact and political relations. These influences led to garments designed for greater comfort and practicality, particularly suited for horseback riding. As a result, Goryeo dress reflected a blend of indigenous Korean traditions and foreign elements, shaping the foundations of later developments in Korean clothing.

JOSEON DYNASTY
/조선시대

1392 –
1897



During the Joseon Dynasty, clothing styles evolved to establish the form of Hanbok as it is recognized today. The distinction between men's and women's Hanbok became more pronounced than in earlier periods. Women's jeogori (저고리) gradually became shorter, while men's clothing styles remained largely unchanged. However, men typically wore gat (갓) as essential accessories when going outdoors.

KOREAN EMPIRE
/대한제국

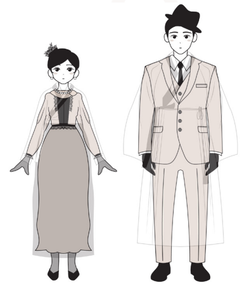
1897 –
1910



After King Gojong (고종) established the Korean Empire, tensions and debates between Western-style uniforms and traditional Hanbok intensified. It was during this period that the term "hanbok/한복" emerged, used to distinguish traditional Korean dress from Western clothing. These debates extended beyond clothing to the body itself, as the introduction of short hair for men through the 1895 haircut ordinance challenged long-held Confucian values and marked a visible shift toward modernity. Alongside these changes, Hanbok gradually became less decorative and more restrained in form, favoring a simpler, more refined aesthetic and practical construction suited to everyday life.

JAPANESE COLONIAL PERIOD
/일제강점기

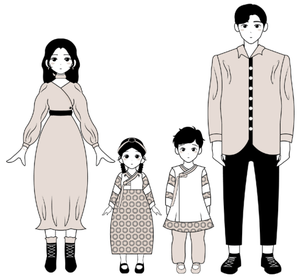
1910 –
1945



From 1910 to 1945, under Japanese colonial rule, Koreans were officially allowed to wear Hanbok, but it was often criticized by colonial authorities for its loose fit and tendency to get dirty easily. During this time, Hanboks were often required to be dyed navy or black, reflecting increasing regulation over appearance. Through schools, workplaces, and public institutions, Western-style clothing was actively promoted and, in many cases, implicitly enforced as the standard of civility and order. As a result, Western-style clothing came to be regarded as a symbol of wealth, progress, and modernity, whereas Hanbok was increasingly associated with poverty and backwardness.

MODERN KOREA
/현대한국

1945 – 2010s



After 1945, Korea regained independence from Japanese colonial rule. However, South Korea faced the long process of rebuilding infrastructure and industrializing, particularly in the aftermath of the Korean War. During this period, Western-style clothing became the dominant form of dress, and Hanbok was largely relegated to obscurity. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that Hanbok re-emerged as formal ceremonial attire, for example during national holidays such as Lunar New Year (설날) and Thanksgiving Day (추석), as well as life-cycle events including weddings and ancestral rites, with a growing accessibility that allows people to wear a wide range of Hanbok styles, including those inspired by royal garmewnts.

In recent years, an increasing number of designers have focused on Hanbok design. Today, one can observe not only traditional styles but also modernized or lifestyle Hanbok, which integrate Hanbok elements with contemporary clothing, allowing these diverse forms to appear across a wide range of contexts, from everyday wear to stage costumes, performances, and other cultural and creative spaces. This approach has become a new trend in Hanbok fashion.



PRESENT - ING

CURRENT KOREA
/현재의 한국



REMAIN(ED) THREAD

DIALOGUES

Exploring how the Hanbok shapes personal and cultural identity through reflections

Q1.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WORE A HANBOK, AND WHAT OCCASION WAS IT?

TAEYOUN KIM I wore a Hanbok a few days ago for a theater performance, as it was part of the costume.

EUNWOO CHUNG The last time I wore a full Hanbok was around April 2023, when I visited Gyeongbokgung Palace using a rental service, as visitors wearing Hanbok are allowed free admission to the palace. Around the same period, I also wore a modernized Hanbok during a photoshoot.

ELENA KIM The last time I wore a Hanbok was in the first year of middle school. I've always liked Hanbok, and while tidying up the house, I found my old one and decided to try it on.

ERICA KIM I don't clearly remember, but I have photos from when I was a child. It was probably during Thanksgiving Day, when I was around six or eight years old.

Q2.

WHAT EMOTIONS DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE HANBOK?

TAEYOUN KIM Excitement: I associate the Hanbok with excitement, as I mainly wore it during childhood and on special occasions like traditional holidays. Thinking of it brings back those feelings of anticipation and joy.

EUNWOO CHUNG Pride: I feel proud that Hanbok, as a representative garment of Korea, has clear historical records and a strong legacy, unlike many countries that have lost their traditional clothing.

ELENA KIM Memory: I associate the Hanbok with my childhood, since I wore it a lot when I was young. It has the power to hold and bring back those memories whenever I think of it.

ERICA KIM Beauty: I associate the Hanbok with beauty—especially its silhouette. I find the shape and overall form very elegant.

SHAPING IDENTITY.

Q3.

HAVE YOUR FEELINGS TOWARD THE HANBOK CHANGED AS YOU'VE GROWN OLDER OR AS SOCIETY HAS CHANGED?

TAEYOUN KIM As I've grown older, my feelings toward Hanbok have become more bittersweet. I feel a sense of sadness because wearing Hanbok on special occasions was almost a given in my childhood, but now that tradition seems to be fading. However, at the same time, I find it fascinating that what once felt uniquely ours is now being appreciated and enjoyed by people from many different countries.

EUNWOO CHUNG When I was younger, I saw Hanbok as something worn only on special occasions like Thanksgiving. Now, I feel more connected to it and can approach it more easily, largely because of the wider variety of designs—especially modernized Hanbok—compared to the limited styles in the past.

ELENA KIM My feelings have stayed mostly the same, but living in Canada has made me feel a bit nostalgic for it.

ERICA KIM My feelings have mostly stayed the same. From the beginning, I didn't really feel a strong personal connection to the Hanbok. To me, it has simply felt like Korea's traditional clothing.

CARRYING MEMORY,

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY.

“

Q4.

DO YOU FEEL THE HANBOK PLAYS A MEANINGFUL ROLE IN SHAPING KOREAN IDENTITY TODAY? WHY OR WHY NOT?

I think Hanbok still plays an important role in shaping Korean identity since we continue to wear it on occasions. However, its influence seems to be gradually fading, especially among younger generations. — **TAEYOUN KIM**

I personally feel that it does not play a significant role, but it still contributes to strengthening Korean identity in a subtle way, as Hanbok does not immediately come to mind when I think about our identity. — **EUNWOO CHUNG**

I think it plays an important role. I believe a person’s identity is shaped by their actions and environment, and while the Hanbok isn’t everyday clothing like it used to be, it still consistently plays a key role in shaping Korean identity today, as it is our cultural heritage. — **ELENA KIM**

Yes, because as Korea’s traditional clothing for generations, the Hanbok continues to play a meaningful role in shaping Korean identity today. — **ERICA KIM**

“

SHARED HERITAGE,

Q5.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE HANBOK AND YOUR OWN SENSE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY?

I think the connection feels very natural because I grew up wearing Hanbok and seeing it from such a young age, it became a quiet but constant presence in my life, and without even realizing it, it naturally settled into my sense of who I am as part of my cultural identity. — **TAEYOUN KIM**

I do not feel a strong personal connection between Hanbok and my cultural identity, yet I believe it remains important to preserve it. — **EUNWOO CHUNG**

At first, I thought my connection to the Hanbok had grown distant, but thinking about it now, I feel it has actually become stronger in some ways thanks to its various modern forms. I guess it’s a bond that can’t really be broken. — **ELENA KIM**

I wouldn’t say there’s no connection at all, but it isn’t a strong one either. Having grown up here, the Hanbok feels both familiar and unfamiliar to me at the same time. — **ERICA KIM**

Q6.

WHEN YOU SEE SOMEONE WEARING A HANBOK, WHAT ASPECTS OF KOREAN IDENTITY DO YOU FEEL IT REPRESENTS?

I feel like it represents the meticulousness and wisdom of Korean people. From the fabric and structure to the colours, every detail feels intentional and thoughtfully designed. So I think it reflects our identity that values precision and care, even in the smallest elements. — **TAEYOUN KIM**

I think Hanbok strongly represents our aesthetic taste. Through its diverse styles and accessories, Hanbok reflects a long-standing historical focus on appearance and an emphasis on refined, subdued elegance. — **EUNWOO CHUNG**

What strikes me most when I see someone wearing a Hanbok is the wisdom and knowledge of our ancestors. The colours and patterns reveal not only their ingenuity in creating vibrant hues from natural resources but also how much our people have cared about even the smallest details for generations. — **ELENA KIM**

I’m not really sure. Since I’ve lived here from a young age, it’s not something I consciously think about or strongly associate with specific aspects of Korean identity. — **ERICA KIM**

SUBDUED ELEGANCE

Its undulating silhouette, shaped by flowing structural harmony, conveyed a subdued elegance that reflects the Korean philosophy of beauty.

SYMBOL OF HIERARCHY

Its systematic attributes, shaped by social and gender norms, conveyed a symbol of hierarchy that reflects the Korean philosophy of Neo-Confucianism.



PRACTICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Its organic curves, shaped by a harmony of coexistence between humanity and nature, conveyed a sense of practical sustainability that reflects the Korean philosophy of life.

단아함

그 물결치는 실루엣은
유려한 구조적 조화로
형성되어 단아함을
전달하며 한국의 미적
철학을 반영한다.

체계의 상징

체계적인 속성은
사회적 성별 규범에
의해 형성되어
위계의 상징을 전달하며
한국의 성리학적
철학을 반영한다.



실용적 지속성

유기적인 곡선은
인간과 자연의 공존이라는
조화 속에서 형성되어
실용적인 지속가능성의
감각을 전달하며
한국의 삶의
철학을 반영한다.

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STITCHING TIME: THREADED IDENTITIES THROUGH THE ART OF HANBOK