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Exclusive: S. Korean artist's unique 'art bench' transforms National Museum of Qatar

10 works by artist Choi Byung-hoon permanently installed in central plaza

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South Korean artist Choi Byung-hoon's "art benches" are installed in the central plaza of the National Museum of Qatar. Crafted from 5-ton basalt, partially polished and partially left in its natural state, the works harmoniously complement the building's facade. /Provided by Choi Byung-hoon

In Doha, Qatar, a city renowned for its treasure trove of world-class architecture, the National Museum of Qatar, known as the "Desert Rose," stands as one of the city's most famous buildings. Designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel, it draws inspiration from the natural sand formations of the desert. The museum's stunning appearance, crafted from 316 interlocking circular discs resembling the petals of a rose, has made it a must-visit destination on many travelers' bucket lists.

Recently, a new attraction has further elevated the appeal of this architectural marvel. Last month, ten pieces by Choi Byung-hoon, the 72-year-old pioneer of "art furniture" and an honorary professor at Hongik University's College of Fine Arts, were permanently installed in the central square of the museum. Massive stones, each 5 meters long, have been placed right in the heart of the museum's square, a location frequented by visitors and where significant events are held.

These are not mere sculptures to observe from a distance; they are stone benches and tables for people to sit and rest on. The artist, who returned home after attending the opening event on Feb. 24, shared with excitement, "I had always made up my mind to someday visit this splendid museum designed by Jean Nouvel, but never in my dreams did I imagine I would come here to install my work," adding, "It's an honor not merely to have my works stored in the museum but to have them permanently installed in the square, available for interaction at any time."



Visitors sit on artist Choi Byung-hoon's "art bench" in the central plaza of the National Museum of Qatar. /Provided by Choi Byung-hoon

Choi is an internationally renowned artist for his "art furniture" using natural materials such as stone, wood, and metal. Art Furniture is a genre that transcends the boundary between art and design by adding artistic qualities to the inherent functionality of furniture. His fans include François-Henri Pinault, the chairman of Kering Group and an art enthusiast. Choi was the first South Korean furniture designer to hold a solo exhibition in Paris in 1996. His works are collected in prestigious institutions worldwide, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States, the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, France, and the M+ Museum in Hong Kong.

Choi Byung-hoon's works in overseas museums



Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany. Chair for meditation



Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris, France. Bench



Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA. Sculpture "Scholar's Way"

Graphics by Kim Sung-kyu

Choi's journey began in September 2022 when the museum sent an email. "A new design biennale will be held in Qatar in February 2024. We plan to permanently install outdoor artworks around the museum's exterior to celebrate the festival," it wrote. Leading artists from around the world submitted their designs, and after a selection process in February last year, he was chosen as the final artist. Choi said, "Initially, they proposed to install my work on the outskirts of the museum, but upon seeing my design, Sheikha Al Mayassa, the sister of Qatar's Emir and chairwoman of the National Museum's board, suggested that the central plaza, where most visitors pass through, would be a better location." He added, "It's also the first time that the National Museum of Qatar has acquired a work by a South Korean artist."

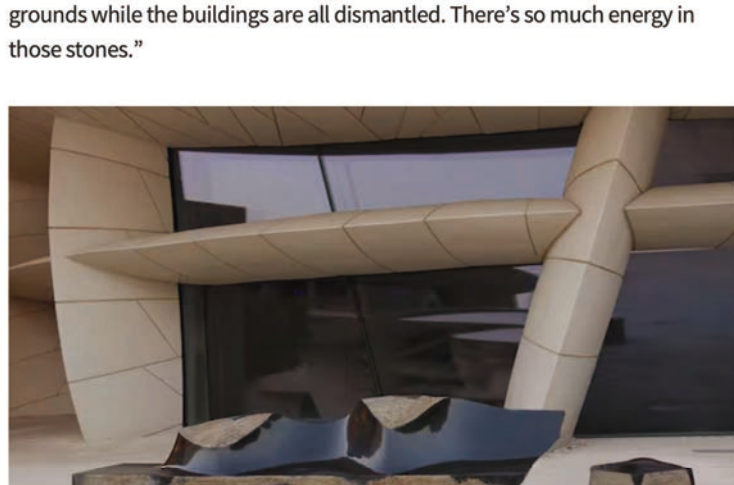


Attendees sit on Choi's "Art bench" during the National Museum of Qatar's opening ceremony. Front row, from left, Princess Sheikha Al-Mayassa, artist Choi Byung-hoon, and Qatar Ambassador Lee Joon-ho.

Ten pieces of Choi's artwork, which include benches and tables crafted from rough basalt, are currently on display. Princess Sheikha Al-Mayassa has commended his artwork for its time-worn, oriental features, particularly praising the texture of the stone that seamlessly complements the building's exterior.

Additionally, a documentary, spearheaded by the princess, is also in progress, shedding light on Choi's artistic endeavors. Princess Sheikha Al-Mayassa, a significant investor in the global art market, is known for her substantial investments, surpassing \$1 billion annually, according to Bloomberg. She is known to have a keen interest in Korean artists and their works.

"I was inspired by dolmen from the Bronze Age lying casually in Gochang, Noth Jeolla Province," said Choi. "I have always been fascinated by ruined temples and historic sites. Stones are scattered across the vast temple grounds while the buildings are all dismantled. There's so much energy in those stones."



South Korean artist Choi Byung-hoon's "art bench" in the central plaza of the National Museum of Qatar. /Provided by Choi Byung-hoon

With millions of years of history, the primal stones have been reborn with Choi's hands, leading to the title of the artwork, "Afterimage of the Beginning." Choi shared, "I found a five-ton basalt from Indonesia and ground it myself." "I stumbled upon this particular basalt a few years ago and brought it to my studio in Paju. Reddish brown outside, black inside. The stone was simply gazed at for a long time before an idea sparked in me."

Certain sections were grounded, while some were intentionally left untouched. The raw, rough, reddish-brown areas sharply contrast with the smooth, black sections, giving an eerie resonance. "The roughness and smoothness, past and present, heaviness and lightness have converged. When someone asks me how long it took me to create this artwork, I reply, 'millions of years' because I merely made subtle alterations to a stone with a long history.



During the opening ceremony at the National Museum of Qatar's central plaza last month, attendees sit on Choi Byung-hoon's "Art bench." /Provided by Choi Byung-hoon

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[Sheikha Al-Mayassa](#)