

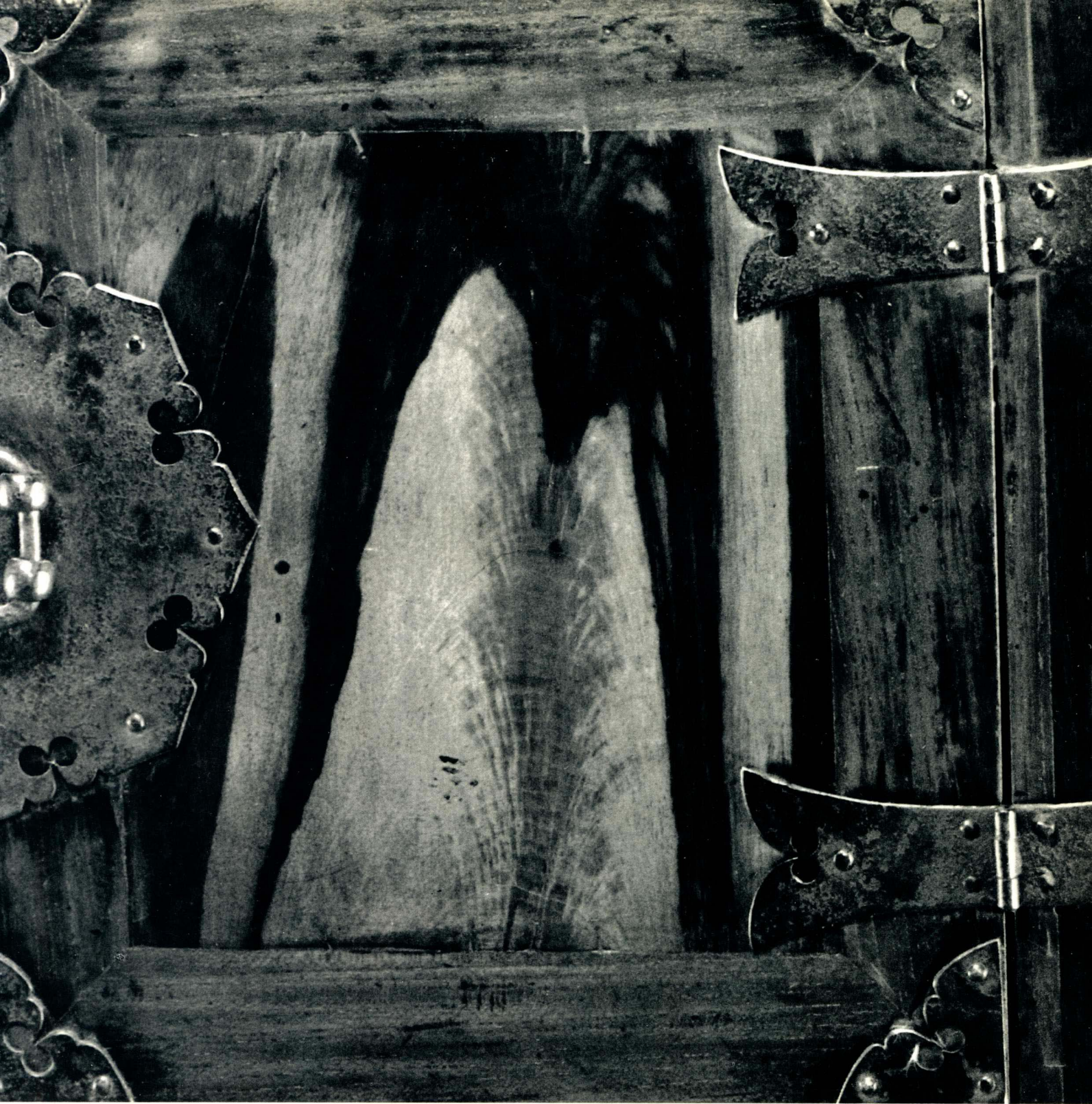
KOREAN FURNITURE

Elegance and Tradition



Edward Reynolds Wright

Man Sill Pai



FURNITURE

Elegance and Tradition

KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL LTD.
Tokyo, New York and San Francisco

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Kenji Miura: Plates 1-5, 8-16, 18-25, 27-42, 44, 47, 50-54, 56, 57, 59-65, 67, 69-79, 83, 84, 86-92, 98, 100-109, 117, 118, 125, 127, 131-139, 143, 146, 148, 149-152; pages 2, 3, 5, 6, 142, 182

George Mitchell: Plates 6, 7, 17, 26, 43, 55, 93, 110, 113-115, 128, 145, 147; pages 7, 12, 136-141, 152

Distributed in the United States by Kodansha International/USA Ltd., through Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York 10022.

Published by Kodansha International Ltd., 12-21, Otowa 2-chome, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112 and Kodansha International/USA Ltd., with offices at 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York 10022 and The Hearst Building, 5 Third Street, Suite 430, San Francisco, California, 94103.

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Printed in Japan.
First edition, 1984

LCC 83-48878
ISBN 0-87011-652-5
ISBN 4-7700-1152-0 (in Japan)

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wright, Edward Reynolds.
Korean furniture.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. Furniture—Korea. I. Pai, Man Sill. II. Title.

NK2673.6.W75 1984 749.29519 83-48878
ISBN 0-87011-652-5 (U.S.)



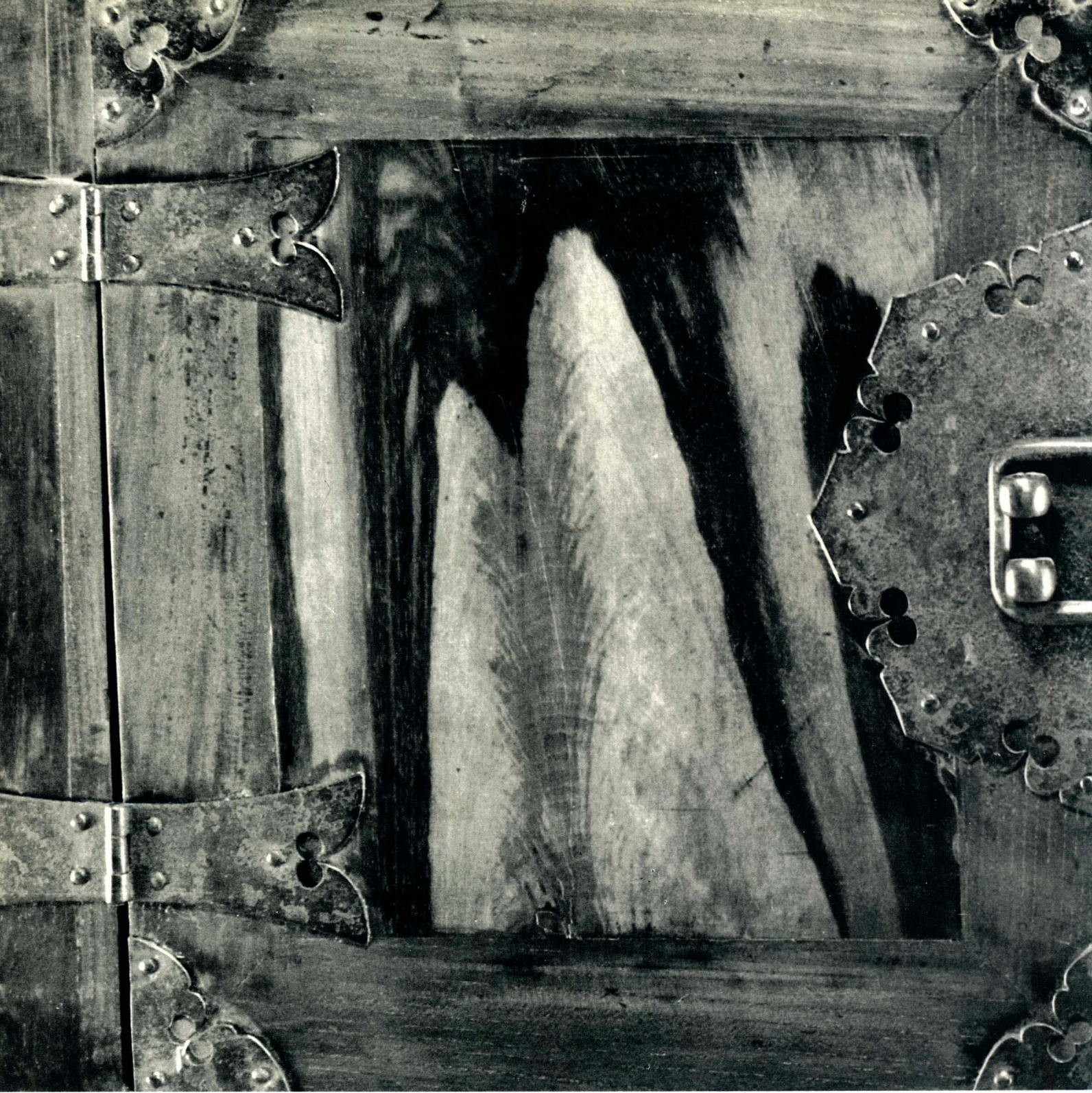
CONTENTS

Preface	9
Introduction	13
Plates	25
The Traditional Korean House and Its Furniture	115
Woods	135
Joinery	143
Finishes	149
Metal Fittings	153
Tools	185
Index	189



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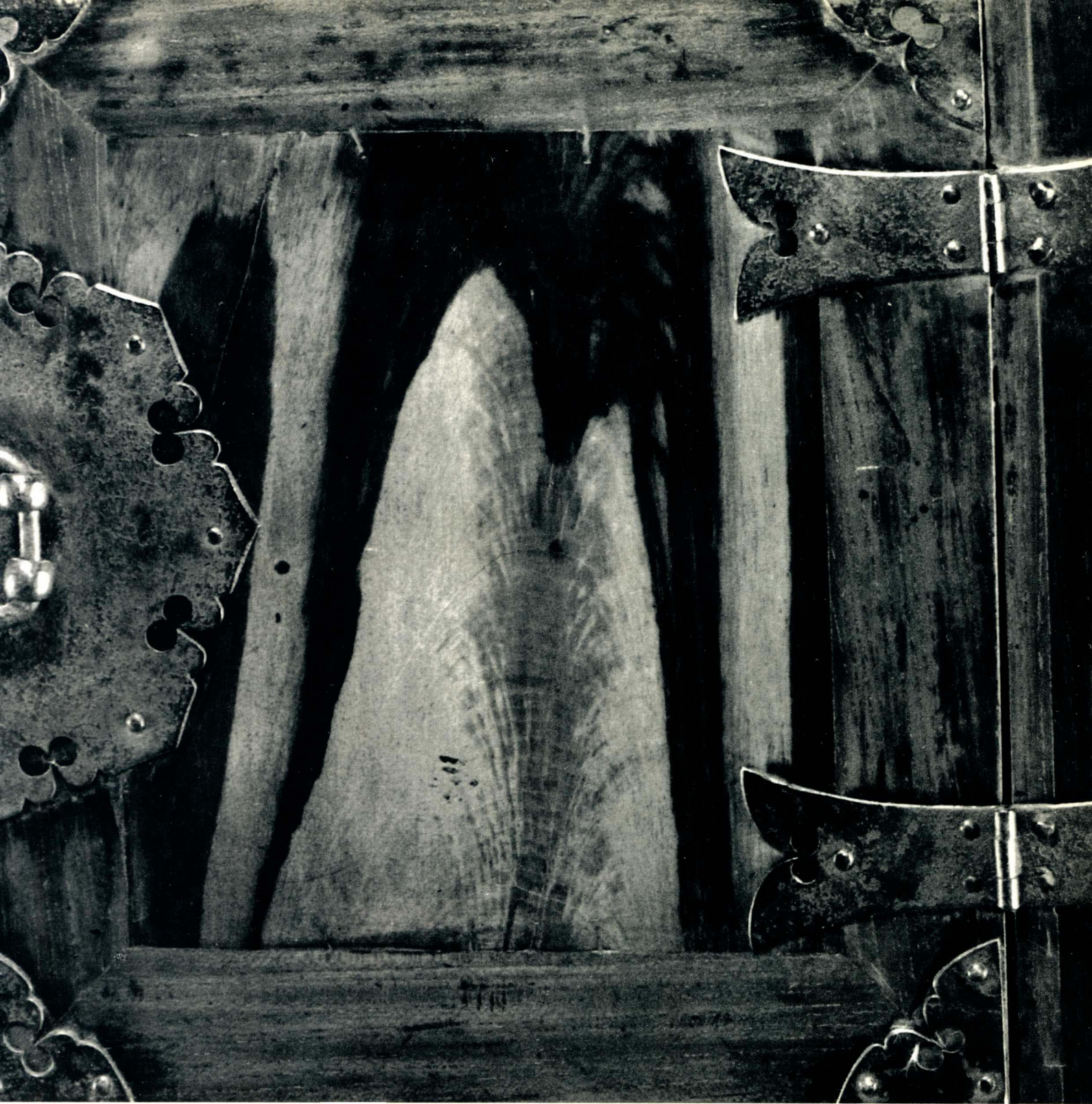
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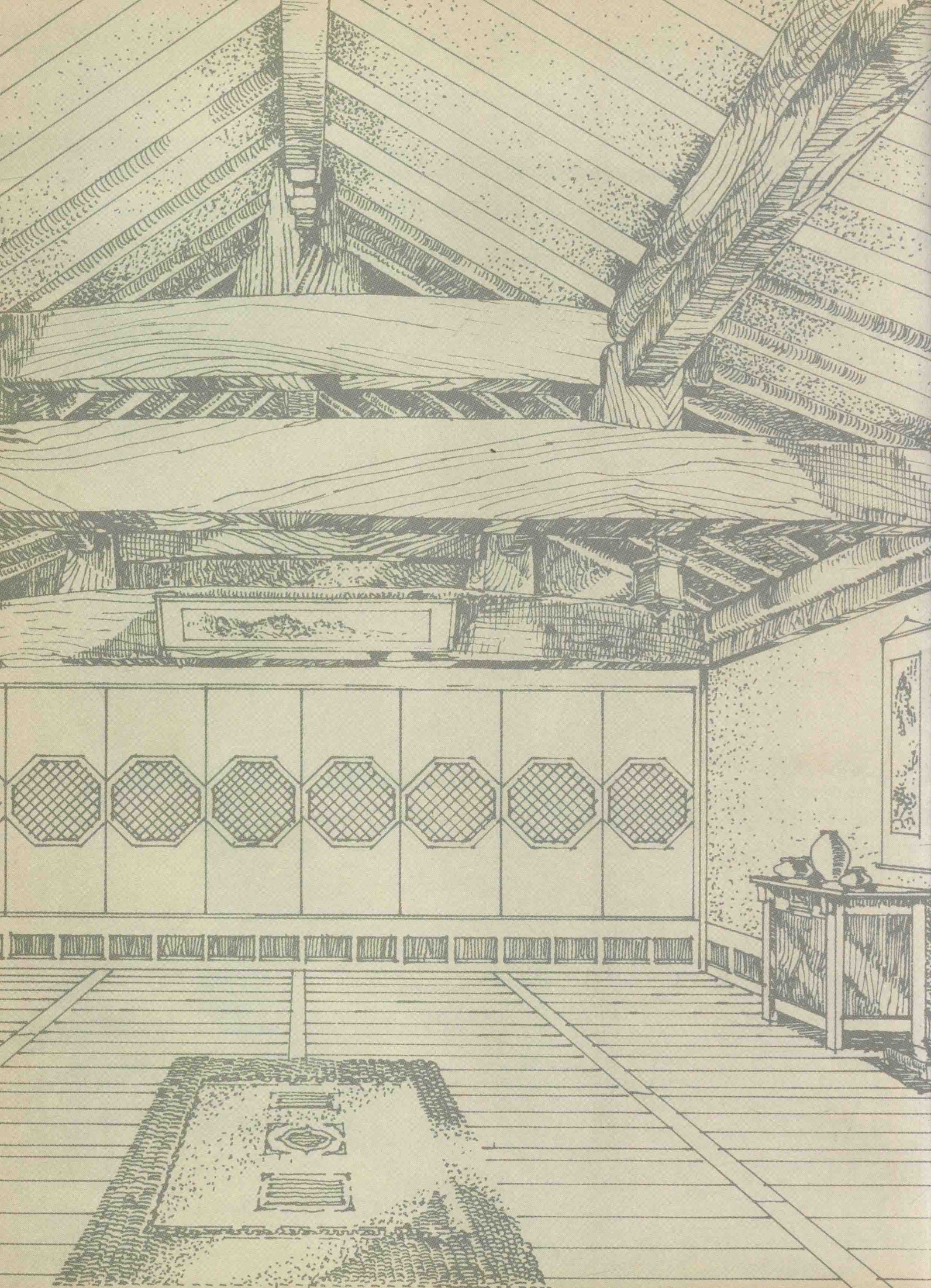
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Index	189









THE DECADES OF THE 1960s and 1970s saw a great surge of interest in the study and collection of Korean furniture. As a result, knowledge about shapes, styles, proportions, joinery, woods, and provenance has been broadened and is still increasing. There are recent works in these areas in Korean by Man Sill Pai of Ewha Womans University, Park Young-kyu of the staff of the National Museum of Korea, and Sunu Choi, Director of the National Museum of Korea. Some university museums, including those at Ewha Womans University and Koryŏ (Korea) University in Seoul, have undertaken studies of their substantial collections of Korean furniture. One suspects, however, that much more information is available than scholars have thus far been able to research, catalogue, and record. One of the problems is in trying to pull together information and opinion from quite diverse sources, including scholars, private collectors, museums, dealers, contemporary cabinetmakers, and the last generation of Koreans who actually used the furniture (in general, those fifty years old or more). Some gaps in knowledge will be filled by this book; at the same time, the authors acknowledge that more study and exploration is needed. Knowledge of the areas mentioned above can stand refinement, and there are other areas about which little has been written and in which substantial research is necessary.

For example, more exacting historical analysis is needed. Were styles of furniture of the middle and late nineteenth century of a more or less similar appearance to those before the seventeenth century? What evolution in furniture styles and function took place over the initial three centuries of the Yi dynasty (the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries)? Did commoners in those times use different types of furniture for specialized functions, or did they just store clothing and other possessions in simple boxes, or what? Perhaps historians have the information and tools to further explore and answer these kinds of questions.

Another area open to further study concerns lacquering techniques. Most Yi dynasty furniture was rubbed with oil, and the process is generally known and agreed

upon. Lacquering in Korea, however, was not common, so coherent knowledge of the art is spotty. It would fill a significant gap if someone undertook the task of bringing some consistency to the bits and pieces of knowledge and opinion about lacquering techniques in Yi dynasty Korea.

With regard to traditional symbolism, it would be good if someone would do a systematic survey before “modernity” completely takes over—especially in the countryside—to try to discern the extent to which people associate symbolic meanings with particular design motifs. In the context of this book, such a survey would relate to forms seen in the metalwork and decoration on furniture. It is not at all unusual to encounter different ideas about such symbols; it would be an important contribution if clarity could be brought to their perceived meanings.

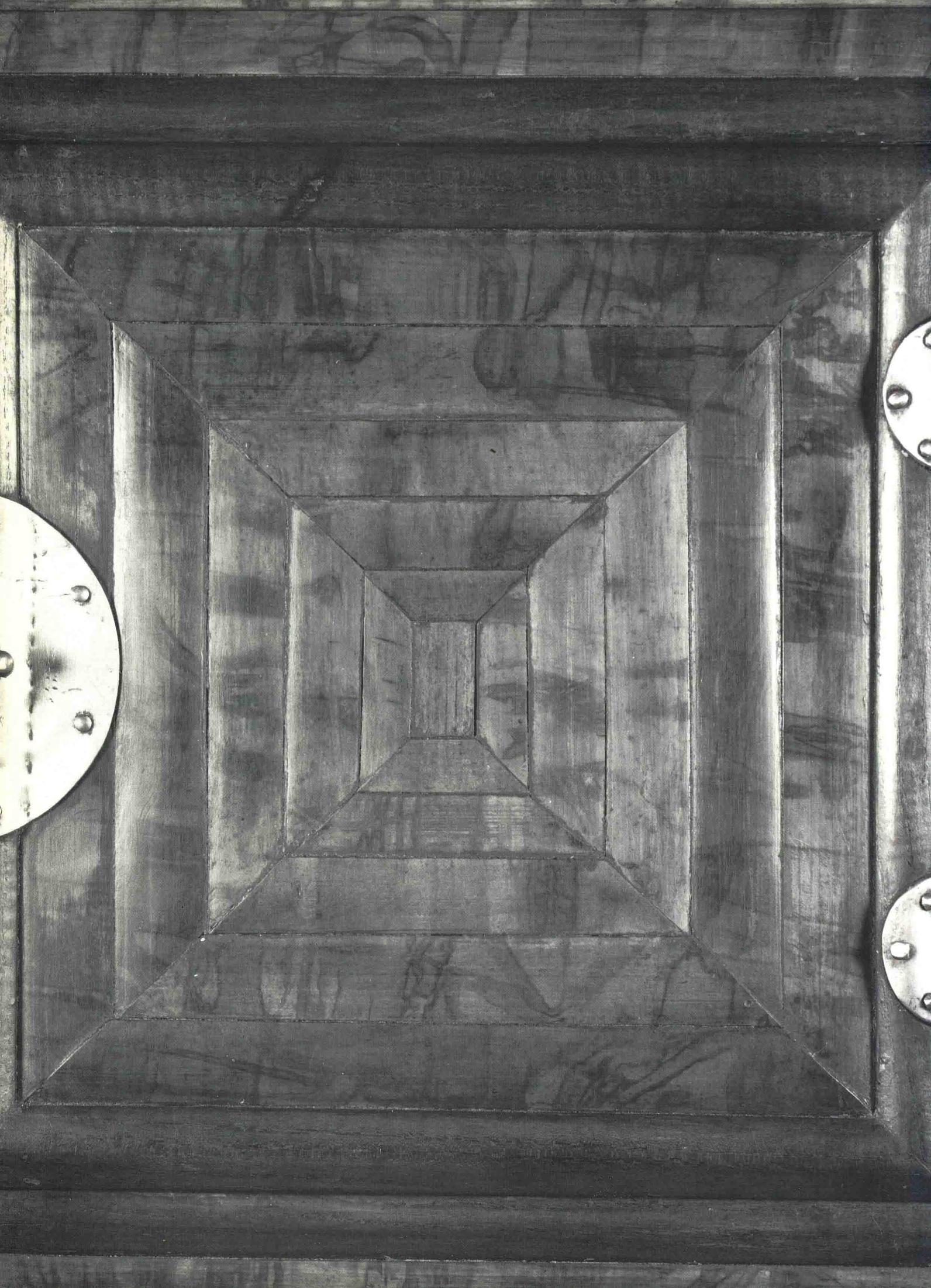
Despite these gaps in knowledge, much of the information in this volume will be new to many readers—especially those from an English-speaking audience. The drawings and photographs portray a variety of types and styles that should aid the reader not only to understand the similarities and differences among them, but also to gain an appreciation for the “look” of traditional Korean furniture in comparison with that of China and Japan. Drawings of construction techniques constitute an important portion of the book and should clearly illustrate that the “simple” appearance of Korean furniture is misleading—the hidden, underlying structure is quite complex; the craftsman surely worked very hard to convey a superficial impression of simplicity, while successfully concealing or downplaying the sophisticated construction techniques. One section relates furniture to the traditional Korean life-style, while others discuss woods and finishes used in cabinetry and metal fittings and their functions and shapes. It is the hope of the authors that this volume will provide a helpful and informative introduction to the subject and a stimulus to more widespread interest, study, and research.

In this kind of project, the division of labor between or among authors and editors is seldom clear. In general, however, it can be pointed out that the superb drawings and sketches of furniture, construction, and detail were provided by Man Sill

Pai, while the final text of the book in its English rendering was the responsibility of Edward Wright, who assumes full responsibility for all textual shortcomings. Photographs in Korea were taken by George Mitchell and the Yang Jöng-Hae studio, and those in the United States and Japan by Kenji Miura.

Wright wishes to express his genuine appreciation and indebtedness to his co-author and many, many others (they know who they are!) for his gradual enlightenment—however incomplete—on the subject of this book. It has been in process for eight years. He especially wishes to mention his mother, Eunice L. Wright, who shares his affinity for the arts and crafts of Korea; her encouragement and support have always been instrumental and deeply appreciated. Kim Schuefftan, editor at Kodansha International, has coaxed, encouraged, and contributed in a multitude of ways to render the text more readable and to make the book considerably bigger than originally intended. Kodansha's interest in and support of this project are gratefully acknowledged.

Kyoto and Seoul
February, 1984



A STARTLING REALIZATION that came while this book was being written is that not many nations or peoples of the world have a long tradition of making furniture. Further, even fewer have furniture traditions that have remained relatively unchanged for centuries.

The furniture of Korea is practically unique among the furnitures of the world: it is part of a tradition that goes back well over a millennium, and furniture designs have remained relatively unchanged from at least the seventeenth century. This monolithic tradition, immediately recognizable as Korean, was “discovered” by the West in the late 1940s and 1950s. Since then, what has captured the attention and recognition of the world is that Korean furniture is elegant, robust, and combines simplicity with beauty.

Korea’s cultural and artistic debt to China is substantial; even so, Korea’s cabinetry tradition is unique due in part to the insular and conservative nature of the society—until recent years Korea was known as the “Hermit Kingdom.” Furniture forms changed little after the seventeenth century, and some types originated long before then. The Koguryō dynasty (37 B.C.–A.D. 668) Dancing Figures tomb on the Yalu River, dating to the fourth or fifth century, has wall paintings showing a bed platform and small serving table not unlike some in use during the nineteenth century. Excavations from the Three Kingdoms period have uncovered lacquered woodwork in tombs of the Paekche (18 B.C.–A.D. 660) and Pre-Unified Silla (57 B.C.–A.D. 668) kingdoms. From the period after Silla unified the peninsula (668–938) there is an intact ninth century musical instrument preserved in the Shōsō-in repository in Nara, Japan. This twelve-stringed *kayagŭm* (a “zither”) is artfully shaped of paulownia wood and closely resembles its present-day counterpart. A great deal of lacquered woodwork was produced on the Korean peninsula during the Koryō dynasty (938–1392), and a few pieces are extant. A highly decorated tenth-century Koryō box is housed in the Hōryū-ji temple, also in Nara, Japan. Other Koryō boxes have intricate

INTRODUCTION