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IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF KOREAN PAINTING IN THE EARLY DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

ABSTRACT This paper attempts to compile the results of Korean and Western research on Korean paintings of the beginnings of the 20th century and analyze it using the theory of the ideological function of art. The main assumption is that Korean paintings of that time – their creation, as well as reception by audiences and critics – was influenced by the need to shape the national identity of Korean people and find a uniform way to represent it in art. The paper opens with an explanation of societal dimensions of art and its ideological role in particular. Attention is also given to the way art can influence shaping the national identity during times of difficulties. In later parts of the paper this identity-shaping lens is used to analyze the world of Korean painting, its main figures and their body of work, as well as the way 'local colors' were expressed through them.

Keywords: modern painting, Korean painting, *chosŏnsaek*, *hyangt'osaek*, national identity

INTRODUCTION[1]

Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula began in 1910 and lasted thirty-five years. It was a period of political control, but also of intense modernization and industrialization of Korea. As political and social changes were spreading, access to Korean language, culture and education had been limited. The purpose of Japan's cultural policy towards Korea was that of assimilation, but these actions seemed to have the opposite effect. In response to political repressions, national awareness began to grow and Korean people felt the need to not only acknowledge its presence, but more importantly express it in different ways. One of them was through art. Writers, filmmakers and painters, among other artists, took it upon themselves to express Koreanness using their chosen media.

This article focuses on painters and their need to define so-called 'local colors' (*hyangt'osaek* or *chosŏnsaek* – *'colors of Chosŏn'*), that began with the dawn of 20th century and remained a pressing issue in the later decades.

THE FUNCTION OF ART

The interest in the functions of art, different from its aesthetics, is as old as art theory itself and can be traced back to Plato, who put aesthetics and ethics in one category. There are a lot of functions of art described by different theoreticians. Those can change depending on the period of time, geographic location and the eyes of the beholder – be it artists themselves or audience. The many roles art takes on in relation to people are the proof that art is to be considered an aspect of social life and as such can influence it both positively and negatively.[2] Among them, one that is often invoked and links art with politics and social influence, is the ideological function of art.

There is a need to consider first and foremost the relationship of art and power, and admit that art can be – and has been – used to gain sympathy for those in power, be it political, social or religious among others.[3] Artists have the ability to, consciously or unconsciously, in secret or openly, promote ideas, support those in power and have their works used for furthering social agendas. It is important to note that more often than not, this propagandist role of art is frowned upon by spectators and critics and if an artist chooses to involve themselves in promoting certain ideologies, they often try to hide it.

Meanwhile, art can also be created in support of those not currently in power, for art is ideological even if it does not promote the officially sanctioned beliefs.[4] This kind of

[1] Author uses the McCune–Reischauer system of romanization for Korean names and terms. The only exception are names of people, especially artists, who officially use different spelling in their works. Korean names are presented following traditional convention, with the family name preceding the given name.

[2] M. Golka, *Socjologiczny obraz sztuki* (The Sociology of Art), Poznań 1996, p. 190.

[3] Ibid., pp. 203-204.

[4] Ibid., p. 204.

relationship between art and agendas of people not currently in power usually triggers much more positive feedback, as a form of socially engaged practice. It seems to take on an especially important role in the case of politically and socially tumultuous periods in the history of a given nation. At such times art can be used to shape and support the national identity of a given group, by creating necessary (in this situation) symbolism, especially in the form of commemorating national heroes, days of glory and political greatness.[5]

It should also be mentioned that art that is aesthetically pleasing, but at first appraisal lacks social consciousness, still can be used as a means of creating national awareness on the grounds of its critical acclaim. Politically and socially conscious artists are not needed for art to play an ideological role in social life. On the contrary, art that distances itself from ideology can be still used in a political way.

Different aspects of the ideological function of art are present in Korean painting of the first half of the 20th century. The difficult political and social reality of Japanese occupation played a key role in the evolution of Korean art, that seems to have taken the role of an identity-shaping tool in the hands of Korean artists. In the times that Korean culture was deprived of its identity and independence, the matter of defining features of Korean painting that could distinguish it from other examples of Asian art were especially pressing.

At the same time, one has to ask the question, what was the role of foreign influence in creating Korean identity? The involvement of Japanese art society on one hand, and the need of Korean artists to be recognized as equals on the global art stage on the other, are important factors that have to be taken into consideration.

KOREAN ART SCENE AT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CENTURY

It is a matter of academic discussion: at which point in its history did Korea embrace modernity and what exactly does it mean in the case of Korean history.[6] In this paper, modernization of Korean society is understood as a period of Korean history, when influence of Western ideology, technology and culture became apparent, turning into an important factor in the process of social transformation, such as urbanization, political change and technological progress. In the case of art and painting, 'modernism' is used to describe an artistic movement, characterized by growing alienation of traditional forms of art and need for change. Modern artists were prone to experimentation, and put special emphasis on individualism and subjective experience. In the case of Korean art, the same as with Korean society, an important part of modernism is the appearance of Western influence.

[5] J. Winnicka-Gburek, "O problemach z tożsamością narodową i sztuką" (On Problems with National Identity and Art), *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 9/10 (2005/2006), p. 261.

[6] Pyun Kyunghee, Jung-Ah Woo (eds), *Interpreting Modernism in Korean Art: Fluidity and Fragmentation*, New York 2022, pp. 3-4.

In the field of history of art, it became widely acceptable to consider the late eighteenth century an important milestone that should be understood as an overture to the reform and modernization of painting that shaped the first decades of the twentieth century.[7] The influence of Western painting is clearly visible in the art of artists of the late Chosŏn Dynasty, such as Yun Tusŏ (1668–1715) and Kang Sehwang (1713–1791), as well as in eighteenth and nineteenth century folk painting. Yun Tusŏ's self-portrait, Kang Sehwang's landscape paintings and *ch'aekkŏri* – an example of traditional still art, all display influences of Western art, especially in the cases of the perspective, shading and coloring used in watercolor painting.

Nowadays those early examples of Western influence are interpreted as proof of natural progression towards modernity in Korean art, which was interrupted by Japanese colonialism. From that moment onward Westernization and modernization of Korean society and culture was implemented under Japanese curation. That greatly complicated the matter, as elements of Western culture were introduced to Korean people in an already Japanized form. Japanese influence shaped the understanding of Western and modern art in Korea on all stages – starting with education and creation of art, and continuing on all the way to its consumption and criticism. It also compelled Korean artists to consider the problem of the native spirit and its presence in works of art, a subject that became the main driving force of change and experimentation in early modern art in Korea.

During the Chosŏn Dynasty, traditionally educated painters honed their skill by copying Chinese and Korean masterpieces and using painting manuals under the watchful eye of a master painter. Excluding professional court painters, painting was practiced by scholars, who hoped to prove their skill and erudition by creating art pieces referencing philosophical doctrines and other works of culture. They displayed their work only in front of a small group of people, usually in their homes, without the worry of criticism and interpretation of their art pieces.

Modernity brought with it a more institutionalized way of learning. The changes in the education system introduced artists to new art styles, mediums and techniques. From that moment onward Korean painters were not limited to traditional styles of court and literati painting, as well as using almost unanimously ink-and-wash techniques. Access to Western art enabled Korean artists to experiment with a completely new set of skills and draw inspiration from previously unknown art movements.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, with few exceptions, it was almost impossible for aspiring Korean artists to study art in their homeland. Still, in 1911 painters Cho Sŏkchin (1853–1920) and An Chungsik (1861–1919) established the Art Association of Calligraphy and Painting (Sŏhwamisurhoe) and along with it an education center for studying both painting and the art of calligraphy during a three year course. It is noteworthy for being the first modern institution that taught art in Korea.[8] As court painters well-versed in traditional art, with a mind open to moderni-

[7] Ibid.

[8] Pak Yongsuk, *Han'guk hyŏndae misulsa iyagi* (History of Modern Korean Painting), Seoul 2003, p. 75.

zation, Cho Sŏkchin and An Chungsik made it possible for young Korean artists to take inspiration in a wide variety of different styles; not only Korean, but also Western and Japanese.[9] However, the school was closed in 1918 because of a lack of both teachers and students, with only four groups of graduates completing the course.

The Art Association of Calligraphy and Painting, while still open for students, used teaching methods similar to the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō) – a Japanese institution that was the main learning destination for Korean aspiring artists. Lacking the required education facilities in Korea, young Koreans were forced to study abroad, with Japan being the most obvious choice for years.

By the time Korean students arrived at Japanese art schools, Japan had already gathered a fair amount of experience in the field of teaching modern art. Western realism had been taught since 1876 at the Technical Art School (Kōbu Bijutsu Gakkō), by foreign professors that came from Italy.[10] European academism found its just representation in Japan as early as 1899, in the form of Kawamura Kiyoo (1852–1934), whose *Ceremonial Robes Preserved as Keepsakes (Airing of Robes)* from that year are proof of the grasp the artist had on allegorical iconography, a sure influence of his studies in Italy.[11] On the other hand, one of the examples of introducing Impressionism in Japan was Kuroda Seiki (1866–1924), who was appointed one of the instructors in the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, established in 1887. Although his works are a blend of the so-called 'old school' and 'new school' styles of Western influenced painting,[12] it was indicative of a curriculum based on Neo-Classicist aestheticism that the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was known for in later years.[13]

In the 1920s and 1930s, depending on the art school, Korean artists had the opportunity to focus on studying different aspects of European painting. The Tokyo University of Art focused on the 19th-century Neoclassical trend, and the most important part of the curriculum was classes aimed at improving the ability to realistically and faithfully reproduce still life, landscapes or people. However, the teachers of private academies emphasized freedom of artistic expression in the education process and supported artists who wanted to familiarize themselves with unconventional methods and mediums. One such institution was the Imperial School of Art (Teikoku Bijutsu Gakkō) founded in 1929. Students studied art movements such as: Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism. It should be noted however, that many artists of the time favored decorative values of such creations.[14] They readily experimented with artistic style, but often seemed to miss the intellectual implications of those movements.[15]

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9 Chung Hyung Min, *Modern Korean Ink Painting*, Hollym 2006, p. 40.

10 N. Tsuji, *History of Art in Japan*, New York 2019, p. 379.

11 J. Winnicka-Gburek, "O problemach...," p. 387.

12 Ibid., p. 400.

13 Kim Hee-Young, *Korean Abstract Painting: A Formation of Korean Avant-Garde*, Hollym 2013, p. 15.

14 N. Tsuji, *History...*, p. 404.

15 Kim Hee-Young, *Korean Abstract Painting...*, p. 15.

The Tokyo School of Fine Arts was especially popular among Korean artists. Students – all of them male, for admission for women was made possible only in 1946 – could choose between two and three years long courses on painting, sculpture and design. The painting course was additionally divided into classes on Japanese and Western art. In the years 1896–1937 out of 228 Korean students who enrolled, only 65 graduated, 45 of which chose Western painting as their major.[16]

One of them was Ko Hŭidong who left for Japan in 1909 to study art at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. He is considered to be the first Korean Western artist.[17] Ko Hŭidong is probably best known for his figural paintings, especially his self-portrait, depicting the artist holding a fan (1915). Breaking with the formal canon of traditional portraiture, his pose is relaxed and he is wearing a loose shirt with its buttons undone, making the artist's chest visible. Behind the artist there are books in leather covers and a framed Western-style painting. In the upper left corner of the portrait Ko Hŭidong signed the painting with his name in the Latin alphabet. All those elements point to a Western influence, both in the case of the medium used, as well as the content of the painting. This carefree, shocking for his contemporaries get up, is in line with the Western Impressionists who tried to capture their art's subject in an unguarded moment.[18]

Starting a career as an artist was not an easy task and was not very profitable. That is the main reason why a group of mostly privileged men could afford to study abroad and pursue a career as a painter.[19] That did not mean that women had absolutely no access to an artistic education. Na Hyesŏk (1896–1948), a representative of the first generation of contemporary Korean painters, called the first Western-style female painter in Korea, is the best example of that. The artist studied Western painting in Japan at the Private Women's School of Fine Arts (Shiritsu Joshi Bijutsu Gakkō) in Tokyo, where she went in 1913, and achieved fame unheard of for women practicing this profession in Korea.

Although many of his contemporaries studied European art, it was Yi Chongu (1899–1979) who first breached the borders between the continents and continued his art studies in Europe. After graduating from Tokyo School of Fine Arts he moved to France in 1925. Yi Chongu's traveling to France sparked a lot of rumors in Seoul, a proof to how unusual and great of an endeavor it was to study in Europe – he was for example accused of running, with the help of his rich father, from debts, a supposed result of many visits to entertainment districts.[20]

Studies in Europe proved important to the development of his art style. Japan taught him Impressionism in the spirit of Plainerisme, and France, in particular his Russian teacher, showed him Classical Realism.[21] The influence is clearly visible in his works,

16 Yun Pŏmmo (ed.), *Han'guk misul 1900–2020* (Korean Art 1900–2020), Seoul 2021, p. 32.

17 Ibid., p. 31.

18 Pyun Kyunghee, Jung-Ah Woo (eds), *Interpreting Modernism*..., p. 26.

19 Kim Hee-Young, *Korean Abstract Painting*..., p. 14.

20 Pak Yongsuk, *Han'guk*..., p. 65.

21 Yun Pŏmmo (ed.), *Han'guk misul*..., p. 35.

while comparing his earlier art pieces such as his self-portrait (*Chahwasang,* 1923), with those created in France, for example *Nude Male (Nudŭ – namja*, 1926) or *Still Life with a Doll* (*Inhyŏng-i innŭn chŏngmul*, 1927). As a result of his artistic experimentations Yi Chongu was also the first Korean artist to be noticed by Salon exhibitions in Paris. Two of his paintings – *Still Life with a Doll* and *Portrait of a Woman* (*Mobuin-ŭi ch'osang*, 1927) were showcased during Salon d'Automne in year 1927.

The emergence of Western-style exhibitions in Korea was another important change artists faced in the process of Westernization and modernization. As was mentioned above, during the Chosŏn Dynasty most artists never experienced large groups of people admiring and criticizing their art. With the emergence of Western-style exhibitions however, that was completely changed – their art was made known to the public. Art, both Eastern and Western examples of it, was shown in public spaces and reported on in the media.[22] First introduced in 1905, in the 1910s exhibitions gained popularity and were visited by art amateurs and critics. One has to wonder how this awareness of art being seen by others influenced the artist's choice of the themes and motives they chose to depict.

Understanding that exhibitions were another way of influencing trends in Korean art, it has to be considered who curated those exhibitions, especially those most important and popular ones. The national art exhibition – Sŏnjŏn (*Chosŏn Misul Jŏllamhoe*), was part of the cultural program introduced by Japanese government. It was established in 1922 and remained the only official art exhibition venue up until 1944 when it was abolished.[23] The artists, half of them Japanese, had their art pieces evaluated by Japanese jurors. Closely tied to Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Sŏnjŏn mostly promoted traditional Academism, discouraging experimentation with different ways of artistic expression.[24] Although it was curated by Japanese art critics, it was also one of few occasions for Korean artists to gain recognition.

The influence Sŏnjŏn had on Korean art cannot be understated. It established the changes in terminology used to describe art in Korean language, at the same time changing the perspective on traditional Korean art. Up until that point painting and calligraphy were known under the joint name of *sŏhwa*. In the twentieth century there appeared a need for a different division. That need came in the form of Japanese authorities of Sŏnjŏn.[25] From Sŏnjŏn's establishment in 1922 onwards, ink painting that took inspiration from the Chosŏn Dynasty painting traditions was called `Eastern painting' (*Tongyanghwa*). On the other end of the spectrum was `Western painting' (*Sŏyanghwa*). Still used to this day, the term was first used during the late Chosŏn Dynasty period and referred to recently imported examples of oil painting. During the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula, the meaning of this term was expanded

[22] Pyun Kyunghee, Jung-Ah Woo (eds), *Interpreting Modernism*..., p. 22.

[23] Kim Hee-Young, *Korean Abstract Painting*..., p. 16.

[24] Ibid.

[25] J. Kee, "Jung Tak–young and the Making of Abstract Ink Painting in Postwar Korea," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 101, no. 4 (2019), p. 119.

to also include all modern oil paintings, also those created by Koreans, as opposed to traditional 'Eastern' paintings.

Sŏnjŏn became the ground on which the large portion of the discussion on the identity of Korean art was being held, under close curation of Japanese exhibition authorities.[26] Selecting the paintings that were showcased and prized during the exhibition, as well as displaying them under the names of *Sŏyanghwa* and *Tongyanghwa*, Sŏnjŏn shaped the Korean painting landscape. It also inevitably influenced the discussion on 'local colors' by prizing, displaying and popularizing works that remained in line with Japanese understanding of the Korean spirit. Sŏnjŏn judges favored paintings that presented subjects associated with the 'native color' of Korean Peninsula. The main subjects accepted by the jury were rural landscapes, thatched houses, earthenware jars, people wearing traditional clothes, women doing laundry with children on their backs or old men smoking pipes. It is important to note that such an approach answered the expectations of foreign critics and their search for exotic taste.[27] This conscious omission of colonial reality has to be understood as a way of using art in an ideological way, to support the cultural policy of Japan in regards to Korean culture.

'LOCAL COLOR' DISCOURSE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Korean artists, faced with the suppression of their nativeness on the one hand and the emergence of new mediums and methods of expression on the other, sought to translate the cultural identity of Chosŏn into a new language of modern art. The main problem that emerged at that time was one of balancing the inheritance and modernization,[28] as well as defining Chosŏn's 'native' or 'local colors'. As stated above, it was an especially pressing issue, considering the Japanese influence on the topic. For as much as Japanese critics tried to use art to create a new understanding of what is Koreanness in art, Korean artists themselves understood that through art they might be able to express their national spirit and use their works as a way to prove the existence of a distinguishable Korean identity.

That was probably the reason why during the first decades of the twentieth century in Korean art circles, it became a matter of utmost importance to establish the exact meaning of what was called *chosŏnsaek* (colors of Chosŏn) or *hyangt'osaek* (local color). Korean artists themselves were not unanimous on that matter. The search for a Korean identity in modern art was under constant danger of being used as a way of censorship under colonial governance, at the same time as it strove to represent the local landscape. Additionally, because of Japanese interference and the Sŏnjŏn exhibition influence, artists involved in the theory of 'local colors' could be easily accused of

[26] Chung Yeon Shim, K. Chung, Kim Sunjung, K.B. Wagner, *Korean Art from 1953: Collision, Innovation, Interaction*, London–New York 2020, p. 17.

[27] Cho Eun-jung, *Korean Painting: From Modern to Contemporary, 1945–1980*, Hollym 2015, p. 20.

[28] Ibid., p. 10.

playing into superficial sentimentalism and targeting foreign tastes, instead of fighting for independence with the use of art.

This search for a national identity expressed through painting seems to have been realized at the time in three ways that will be analyzed in the next part of this paper. First, a group of artists tried to prove the continuous, centuries-long evolution of Korean art by practicing traditional methods of painting, especially ink painting. Meanwhile, artists using oil paint tried to achieve the same result by painting objects and motives representing traditional Korean culture. Finally, some artists felt the need to translate Korean sensibilities into new modern art practices and so strove to find one art movement that would reflect Korean 'native colors'.

INK PAINTING – SEARCHING FOR THE TRUE KOREAN AESTHETIC

The need to protect the painting and calligraphy traditions of Chosŏn was present during the formation of modern art in Korea and was seen by some as a way of preserving the true Korean aesthetic. Many prominent artists of the time during their careers showed interest in ink-and-wash painting. Ko Hŭidong established the Paintings and Calligraphy Works Association (Sŏhwahyŏp'oe) in 1918 with the purpose of preserving traditional painting. Meanwhile Chang Usŏng (1912–2005) who went on to help in establishing the New Literary Painting Movement (Sinmuninhwa Undong), saw its main purpose in putting emphasis on spirituality and philosophical aspects of art.[29]

However, it was impossible to mindlessly imitate old ways. Even those artists that practiced ink painting were met with particular challenges that they needed to overcome, if they hoped to express their Korean identity through their art. One such challenge was the need to overcome the Japanese influence, which was threatening to tarnish the Korean spirit expressed through art.

Kim Ŭnho (1892–1979) was discovered by Cho Seokjin and An Chungsik. He began his career during the last years of the Chosŏn dynasty. He showed above all a talent for painting human figures, both in portraits and in genre scenes. He was commissioned several times to immortalize the likeness of the last Korean monarch – Emperor Sunjong. An interesting example of his early work is the sketch of Emperor Sunjong he made in 1923. This sketch proves the influence of European art on Kim Ŭnho's style – photorealistic attention to details, shading of the Emperor's face and bold brush strokes used to depict his silhouette, all point towards Western traditions of portraiture. Foreign influences, especially those of Japanese origin, are also visible in the artist's later works. *Portrait of a Beauty (Miin-do,* 1935) shows the coloring style and delicate lines typical for Japanese painting. The portrait of beauty was a motif present in the art of the late Chosŏn dynasty, and its most famous example is a painting attributed to Shin Yun-bok (1758–1813), one of the most famous genre painters. By evoking this painting motif, Kim Ŭnho enters into a conscious dialogue with the past. At the same time,

[29] Ibid., p. 26.

through the colors used and delicate contours, it proves the influence of Japanese painting on *Tongyanghwa* painting.

The vivid color palette, especially the palette present in ink painting of the twentieth century, was a big problem for Korean painters. Even though it was present in traditional painting, it was associated by many with Japanese painting. Fearing being accused of succumbing to the influence of the occupiers, Korean artists often decided to reject color and instead create monochromatic ink paintings. This is especially visible in landscape painting, where even if colors appeared, they were not overtly saturated.

Wary of Japanese influence, other artists chose to reject color and instead create black and white ink-and-wash paintings. One of them was Yi Sangbŏm (1897–1972). At first, he closely followed the traditional canon of landscape art, painting imaginary landscapes that reflected the mental state of the painter. As his career progressed, he became one of the most important figures associated with realistic landscape painting (*sagyŏng sansu*), a successor to *chingyŏng sansuhwa* of the late Chosŏn Dynasty. His style can be characterized as an accumulation of short brush strokes, creating the effect of blurred hills looming behind the fog. The clear and undeniable influence of Japanese masters on Yi Sangbŏm's painting is proven by his popularity among the Japanese jurors of the Sŏnjŏn exhibition, who accepted his works for subsequent editions of this artistic event. It should be emphasized, however, that despite the stylistic influences of Japan, Yi Sangbŏm tried to place his landscapes unquestionably on the Korean Peninsula – he not only painted actual scenes from provincial Korea, but also included characteristic thatched buildings and people dressed in traditional Korean clothes.

It is important to note the changing attitudes toward landscapes in the early twentieth century. In traditional art, *sansuhwa* was a term used for paintings of mountains, with water and traces of human activity often used in composition. This style continued on into modern art, but soon, it was joined by paintings that, instead of the natural environment, focused on urban life. On one hand, it was an obvious result of the urbanization of the peninsula, but on the other, it was a clear indication of Impressionist influence on the artist's style[30] – as with French Impressionism with the changing landscape of Paris, Korean artists similarly attempted to capture Korea's transformation and urbanization.

Other changes in relation to traditional landscape painting are the omission of the blank space *(yŏbaek),* an extremely important element of the traditional landscape painting and the absence of calligraphy – either in the form of the artist's signature or a short maxim or poem accompanying landscapes painted during the Chosŏn dynasty. Additionally, paintings were no longer viewed in the form of hanging scrolls, but rather framed. Those changes further demonstrate the transition in ink-wash painting, that was no longer supposed to show the refinement of the literati painters, but depicted the actual Korean landscape[31].

This drive to overcome foreign influence, coupled with the need to reform the traditional landscape painting style, were among the main obstacles that so-called Eastern

[30] Pyun Kyunghee, Jung-Ah Woo (eds), *Interpreting Modernism*..., p. 40.

[31] Ibid., p. 42.

painters had to overcome. The style of literati painting using ink continued, but it was altered by the influence of Japanese *Nanga,* as well as Western painting. Korean painters fought that influence. One of them was Pyŏn Kwansik (1899–1976). The artist studied in Japan and his teacher was *Nanga* master Komuro Suiun (1874–1945) whose influence was visible in the style of the Korean artist. His 1934 painting *Water Village* is an example of Western landscape style painting mixed with Japanese traditional style, a clear indication of Pyŏn Kwansik's education. However, in later years, he reversed to the techniques taught to him by his grandfather Cho Sŏkchin, especially the orthodox linear style of landscape painting.[32]

HANBOKS, PIPES AND THATCHED HOUSES – *HYANGT'OSAEK* AND OIL PAINTING

For Western painters, who used foreign methods of painting, one of the ways of depicting the 'colors of Chosŏn', was to showcase elements of Korean traditional culture in the composition of their work. Artists such as Kim Chunghyŏn (1901–1953) or Lee Quede (Yi K'waedae, 1913–1965) at one point or the other during their artistic career chose to showcase the Korean aesthetic in this way.

Painting of a Shaman (Munyŏ-do, 1941) by Kim Chunghyŏn is an oil painting depicting a female shaman in the middle of a ritual, dressed in a hanbok and holding a fan in one hand and bells in the other. She is surrounded by musicians playing traditional Korean instruments such as drums, *puk* and *changgu,* and behind her there is an altar with offerings for the gods. In the front there are two children dressed in traditional clothing. It is not only the subject of the painting that brings to mind times past. The colors used by the artist clearly refer to *obangsaek* – five colors present in traditional culture and art. This kind of invocation of traditional culture is typical for other works of Kim Chunghyŏn. The vivid colors and traditional clothing appear in his painting *Spring* (*Ch'unyang*, 1938), depicting a group of women sitting in front of a traditional Korean house, as well as in *Interior* (*Sillae*, 1940) – a portrait of a woman seated in a traditional style room. One might suppose that it served the ideological function of awakening national identity and pride in a spectator, and possibly giving the strength to resist the colonial reality.

Another important addition to the *hyangt'osaek* discourse is the works of Lee Quede. The artist, best known for paintings such as *Situation* (*Sanghwang*, 1938), *Korean Dancer at Rest (Muhŭi-ŭi hyushik*, 1937) or most notably the *Group of People* series *(Kunsang,* 1940s), attempted to *create dynamic anatomical and psychological tension of the figures and the situations*.[33] Still, similarly to the aforementioned artist he also used vernacular elements hoping to create a distinguishable Korean style of modernism. His famous *Self-portrait in turumagi* (*Turumagi ibŭn chahwasang*, 1940)

[32] Chung Hyung Min, *Modern*..., p. 79.

[33] Pyun Kyunghee, Jung-Ah Woo (eds), *Interpreting Modernism*..., p. 84.

shows the artist wearing the titular Korean overcoat in clear blue, holding a paint palette and brushes, with the Korean landscape visible in the back. Upon closer look, the artist is not the only person depicted – behind him, walking the winding road, are women wearing traditional clothing with jars on their heads. A clear indication of *chosŏnsaek* in his art.

An artist whose unique approach to *hyangt'osaek* distinguishes him amongst his peers is Yi Insŏng (1912–1950). Rejecting popular art movements such as Impressionism and Pleinairisme, he painted using the styles similar to that of Paul Gauguin and Les Nabis. Even though Yi Insŏng seemingly went against the common understanding of *hyangt'osaek*, he still was one of the artists selected for Sŏnjŏn, proving that despite depicting the actual landscape of Korea, he was still a part of the discussion on so-called 'local colors' of Chosŏn, overseen by the colonial government. He was even lauded as the best painter of *hyangt'osaek*.[34] His masterpieces, such as *One Day in Autumn* (*Kaŭl-e onŭ nal,* 1934) and *Valley in Kyŏngju (Kyŏngju sangok-esŏ*, 1935) brought attention to his interpretation of *hyangt'osaek* and in the case of *Valley in Kyŏngju,* first prize at the fourteenth Sŏnjŏn art exhibition in 1935.

Valley in Kyŏngju is a vividly colored oil painting that shows fields near the city of Kyŏngju. Its main characteristic is the usage of red pigment, imitating the color of clay, that was at that time associated with the Korean Peninsula.[35] There is a stark contrast between red soil, rolling mountains and clear blue sky. The main focus however remains on the children shown wearing traditional Korean clothing. An especially important part of the painting seems to be the boy on the left, who gloomily gazes at broken tiles lying on the ground.

The fact that Yi Insŏng's masterpieces were shown during the Sŏnjŏn exhibition could be seen as proof that the artist's style matched the Japanese tastes and lined with their policies concerning colonial Korea and its understanding of nativity.[36] It is, however, a clear break from the usual depiction of idealized elements of traditional Korean culture, that instead brings attention to the reality of life in colonial Korea and as such remains an important milestone in evolution of understanding of *hyangt'osaek*.

KOREAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND IMPRESSIONISM

In the Korean art scene, among the artists studying European art were ones that, instead of looking back at traditional painting or focusing on easily recognizable elements of Korean culture, tried to find an art movement that would best express Korea's aesthetic in a modern way. According to some of them, the painting school that was best able to combine traditional Korean art and modern painting was Impressionism, which was especially popular among Korean artists.

[34] Cho Eun-jung, *Korean Painting*..., p. 313.

[35] Ibid., p. 317.

[36] Ibid.

It would be perhaps too optimistic of an approach to think that Korean artists themselves chose Impressionism as the best way to express their nativeness. After all, this particular art movement was at that time one of the most popular styles at Japanese universities and practiced by numerous Japanese artists. Still, it can't be ignored that Impressionism found its way into the works of modern Korean artists and as time went by, gained popularity as one of the styles preferred by them.

In its vivid colors and fleeting light effects Korean artists found the point of contact between Korean traditional art and Impressionism. This sense of familiarity might be justified. After all, among other things, it was Japanese woodcuts, brought to France in the mid-19th century, that became a great inspiration for the Impressionists. European artists were inspired by styles and techniques that seemed unusual, especially the combination of vivid colors both in the foreground and in the background (Vincent van Gogh), a clear vertical or horizontal division of the picture plane (Edgar Degas) or asymmetric composition and dramatic use of foreshortening (James McNeill Whistler). It is impossible to ignore the high probability that these familiar elements from Japanese art influenced the sympathy Japanese artists had for European Impressionism and the subsequent willingness with which they passed it onto the territories they occupied.

Impressionist inspiration is already visible in the case of Na Hyesŏk (1896–1948). The painting depicting the palace Ch'ŏnhugung from 1926 shows a gray, slightly depressing view through the gate of the buildings of the titular palace. The atmosphere of the painting may bring to mind Dutch impressionist artists, in particular George Breitner and his works that mix influences of both Realism and Impressionism to depict depressing, rain-covered landscapes of Amsterdam. Even more striking is probably the most famous of her paintings, a self-portrait from the 1920s. It shows the artist in a hunched position, with a thoughtful expression and sad, dark eyes. The composition of the painting resembles the portrait of Berthe Morisot titled *Berthe Morisot with a Bouquet of Violets* (1872) by Édouard Manet. Despite clear references to Expressionism, at the same time Na Hyesŏk's brings to mind the works of one of the leading representatives of European Impressionism.

Impressionist influences can be found in the works of another pioneer of Korean modern painting – Yi Chongu. Known primarily for his portraits that combined the elements of style typical to Realism, Expressionism and Impressionism, he clearly leaned into the latter in the later years of his career. The painting titled *Garden* (*Chŏngwŏn*, 1953), both in terms of composition and technique, brings to mind the works of Claude Monet. The edge of the terrace follows the same line as the *Poppy Fields* (1873), as does the positioning of the figures on the picture plane. On the other hand, the grass illuminated with short brush strokes and the clusters of flowers falling in tassels bring to mind the *Water Lilies* series of paintings by the same artist.

The popularity and development of Impressionism in occupied Korea, however, is best seen in The Collection of Two Artists' Paintings (*Iinhwajip*), a collection published jointly by two painters: O Chiho and Kim Chukyŏng in 1938. Using the influence of the impressionist school, they achieved success in showing the unique scenery and sunny views of the Korean Peninsula.

Special attention should be paid to O Chiho (1905-1982) who is considered to be Korea's most renowned Impressionist.[37] A graduate of the Kawabata Academy of Art and the University of Tokyo, O Chiho liked the style of the French Impressionists, which, as mentioned, was very popular among Japanese artists of that period. He aimed to find through Impressionism a native modern style that would reflect the spirit of Korean art, something that Korean artists of the time had already been struggling with for years.

In an article included in The Collection of Two Artists' Paintings, O Chiho, who at that time also established himself as an art critic, goes back to the beginning of his career and explains his artistic choices and the reasoning behind his favoritism of Impressionism. He points out that traditional Korean art had for centuries reflected the Korean nation's sympathy for vivid colors and the role of the sun in depicting the Korean landscape in its full glory. He wrote: *Painting is the art of light. [...] All earthly beings grow thanks to the rays of the sun and heat. Absorbing the fullness of the sun leads to contestation of life, and the joy of the sun is equal to the joy derived from life. Painting is an expression of delight in the sun*.[38] It is therefore not surprising that it was Impressionism with its love for light, that, in his opinion, was best suited to reflect the traditional painting style and engage in a dialogue with vivid colors of Korean folk painting in a modern way.

In the early works of O Chiho there are already traces of such philosophy put into practice. *House Facing the South (Namhyangjip,* 1939) is a painting showing the artist's home in Kaesong. In front of the house lies a white Sapsal dog, the pet of the artist's daughter. Said daughter is also visible in the picture, peeking through the door of the house. The bright color palette used to emphasize the intensity of sunlight is the clear influence of French Impressionism. Although the method of applying paint to the canvas is reminiscent of the early works of Vincent van Gogh, the abundance of light contained in the work brings to mind the sunny Provençal slopes captured on canvas by Paul Cézanne. The work is considered to be one of Korea's impressionist masterpieces, focusing on Korea's climate and appreciating its landscape.[39]

The influence of Vincent van Gogh is much more visible in *The Apple Orchard (Sagwabat,* 1937), a work belonging to the already mentioned collection. It is strikingly reminiscent of *Orchard with Blossoming Apricot Trees* (1888) and other paintings depicting parts of an orchard by van Gogh. The blooming apple trees stand out clearly against the almost navy-blue sky of O Chiho's painting, and the short and intense brush strokes give the impression that both the tree leaves and the grass below tremble in the wind blowing across the orchard.

Finally, Kim Chukyŏng presents us with an inverted perspective of the same scene. In his version of the scene in the orchard, he shows a subjective portrait of his colleague

[37] Pyun Kyunghee, Jung-Ah Woo (eds), *Interpreting Modernism*..., p. 29.

[38] Pak Yongsuk, *Han'guk*..., p. 132.

[39] Kim Hyŏnsuk, Sŏ Sŏngnok, O Kwangsu, Yun Namji, Cho Unjŏng (eds), *Han'guk hyŏndae misulga 100in* (100 Modern Korean Artists), Seoul 2009, p. 60.

O Chiho (titled *O Chiho*, 1938), filled with warm, contrasting colors, applied with much calmer, longer brush strokes. The scene seems much more peaceful than that presented through O Chiho's eyes. Despite an almost Fauvist approach to colors, it is in line with the belief that only Impressionism could introduce the Korean sense of beauty and the aesthetic of Korean art to the new age of modern painting.

CONCLUSION

It is hard to judge how successful the artists that were voluntarily or involuntarily involved in 'local color' discourse were. Critics' expectations were high and almost impossible to satisfy. In addition to that, different artists were not unanimous in their interpretation of *hyangt'osaek.* The direct involvement of Japanese art society in art education, creation and its criticism, only makes the matter more difficult to solve.

What is important, however, is to acknowledge that the introduction of modernism into Korean art coincided with Japanese occupation in Korea and the rising need to form a national identity in Korean society. These circumstances had an impact on the direction of development of Korean painting. For decades maybe even more so than its aesthetics, art was critiqued based on its place in the discussion on 'local colors', usually called *chosŏnsaek* (colors of Chosŏn) or *hyangt'osaek* (local color). As a result, many artists that are considered masters of Korean painting today, included in their works motives that would bring to mind a spectator of traditional Korean values and so took part in shaping the Korean national identity and ways it could be realized through art.

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