



**DATE:** October 11, 2017

**SUBJECT:** B.G. Muhn on Contemporary North Korean Art

**MAIN POINTS:**

- B.G. Muhn’s new book, “Passion, Paradox, and Propaganda: Exploring North Korean Art through Chosunhwa,” will be published by the end of this year.
- *Chosunhwa* is a distinctive North Korean style of painting that utilizes the traditional art of brush and ink wash painting on rice paper.
- Despite the limited exposure, North Korean artists achieved a unique development of artistic style and expression in their artwork.
- The four main themes of North Korean artwork include: education of the people, government, ideology, and the idolization of the Kim regime.
- Individual expression within the artwork is evident through bolder brush strokes and careful renderings of facial depiction.

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**EVENT OVERVIEW:**

**Date:** September 9, 2017

**Time:** 1:30 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.

**Location:** The Art League – 105 North Union Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

**Attendees:**

- **B.G. Muhn**, Artist, Art Professor, Georgetown University

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**SUMMARY:**

**Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)**

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## HRNK Report

B.G. Muhn began his presentation by sharing how he began to study North Korean art. After completing a solo show/project on depicting a Chinese empress, as a Korean born artist, he felt the natural desire to visit North Korea and study North Korean art. Muhn was particularly drawn to the *Chosunhwa* technique, which is a unique art technique of traditional brush and ink wash painting on rice paper. Muhn has been on nine trips to North Korea in the last six years. His new findings and perspectives are summarized in a soon-to-be-published book, “Passion, Paradox, and Propaganda: Exploring North Korean Art through Chosunhwa.”

“Chosun” means Korea and “hwa” means painting. North Korea particularly reveres *Chosunhwa* as its national art form. Most, if not all, of the art in North Korea are pieces of propaganda of the regime. The four main themes of their artwork are: education of the people, government, ideology, and idolization of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un. All North Korean paintings of its leader follow a similar technique – soft renderings and detailed representation of expressions with certain uniformity. The leader is clearly focused in the center point while the rest of the painting is slightly more blurred. The common [Western] perception is that all North Korean figurative paintings look alike. Muhn wanted to explore whether there were other overlooked aspects or expressions in North Korean paintings that reflect individual desire or artistic expression.

Some of his findings include:

- Even in the works of propaganda, there are still various styles and varied expressions within limited themes.
- Bolder brush strokes and abstract quality of treatment within figurative paintings depict stronger expressions.
- Kim Sang-jin’s (also a People’s Artist) brought out a more contemporary look – being able to compose the image tightly and depict white spaces without it looking bothered.
- One of the most revered *Chosunhwa* paintings is by Kim Sung-min, 1980. It carries powerful and bold brushstrokes yet at the same time, shows the delicate facial emotions of smelters during Japanese colonial exploitation.
- In a painting of farmers, Muhn asked a North Korean artist whether the farmers are truly happy as they were depicted. The artist replied, “You don’t know the truth. If you come to the field of workers, they actually sing and dance to overcome hardships.” Muhn believed the artwork revealed the truth of the workers’ lives and true expression even if is a piece of propaganda.

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The technique of *Chosunhwa* painting is very meticulous. Since all of this is done on rice paper, the artists have to start over from the beginning if they make a mistake.



Tiger Dashing in Winter, Kim Chol, 2014 (Source: [Vice](#))

This painting (above) was one of the paintings shown during Muhn's presentation. He learned it took almost seven hours just to render the yellow iris. All of the white in the tiger's hair is not painted and is the rice paper itself.

Another distinctive characteristic of North Korean artworks is their huge collaborative pieces. These pieces are usually assigned to commemorate an event. In a short period of time, as many as 70 artists will work together on a 40-foot-wide painting. The painting (below) is a sample collaborative painting.



Sea Rescue in the Dark, a collaborative painting by Kim Son-kun, Kim Chol, Cha Yong-ho and Ri Ki-song, 1997, (Source: [Vice](#))

**Muhn:** This painting (above) is very interesting. It depicts a difficult rescue scene at night: North Korean fisherman rescuing a South Korean fishing boat, though of course it's not known to many people in South Korea. The detail of that painting includes simplified rendering of shapes and of the rescuers yet the artists still captured the necessary detailed expressions. One of my colleagues mentioned that North Korean *Chosunhwa* was probably influenced by French romantic painting (i.e. [The Raft of the Medusa](#), done in oil, by Theodore Gericault). Comparing the two, look at the angle of mast in both paintings and how the composition was made. Let's focus on raft of Medusa. In order to create visual movement in a painting, artists usually have to set up a visual focal point. In Gericault's painting, the focal point is through the dead body in the lower left corner, through the successive hats of the people which as a result, you can have striking dynamic movement in pictorial composition. Another way to see this image is the large set of triangulation stabilizes the shifting movement of the raft.

In response to his colleague's suggestion in being influenced by the style of French romantic painting, Muhn suggested that most North Korean artists are not aware of what occurs outside their society. The one magazine provided to professional artists by the Party is called the Art Magazine; this is where they get all or any information about Western art, such as Rococo and Reubens. It might have been possible they saw Gericault's painting in one of the issues.

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Regarding North Korea's art institutions, there are numerous art studios in North Korea run by the state. The most famous one is called the Mansudae Art Studio, founded in 1959. Mansudae Art Studio is known to have 4,000 members – 1,000 artists and 3,000 workers – and houses several different departments such as traditional Korean painting, oil painting, etc. At one point, Muhn had asked one of the workers how many artists were there. The worker said 700, because the other 300 artists were on overseas projects, building monumental statues and working on gigantic paintings in different countries. Since Mansudae projects are now prohibited by UN and US government sanctions, Muhn believed there would now be 1,000 artists back at the studio.

From early on, Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung showed great interest in art. Muhn showed a picture of Kim Jong-il attending an art exhibition in 2004; others are around him holding notebooks and pens to make notes whenever the leader gives his “on-site guidance” remarks.

Lastly, Muhn showed a picture of his exhibition at the American University last year. The exhibition included North Korean *Chosunhwa*, several large collaborative paintings, and individual pieces. Muhn shared that he had massive media coverage, not because the work is so great, but because it was so different from what is created and found more common within liberal societies.

### Q & A

*The audience was not directed to identify themselves so these questions are anonymous.*

**Q: Who is the main audience of the paintings you have shown?**

**A (Muhn):** The main audience of this propaganda art is the nation. All the art is revered by the community, society, and the people. Whenever I visit North Korea for my research and I say I'm an artist, they say, 'Wow! That's wonderful.' Yes, art exhibitions are held throughout the nation and throughout the year, especially to commemorate important events such as Kim Il-sung's birthday and when that happens, you are free to attend but pay only 5 KRW as admission fee, which is about 6 cents in American dollars. That comparison doesn't mean much because different sides carry different value of money so anyway, you have this tiny entrance fee and you are able to see the shows freely. I witnessed even elementary school students with their parents visiting to see the show – as well as school students and professional artists. Sometimes they can learn quite a lot from the show for their own work.

**Q:** I'm so excited, I've never thought I would be able to see *Chosunhwa*. This is a great opportunity. I'm so proud of knowing you as a Korean. My simple question is, **have you**

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**ever thought or planned to draw a portrait of KJU or have you already started to draw it?**

**A (Muhn):** Her question is have I ever seen a portrait of Kim Jong-un or has any artist done it before so far? No, I particularly had interest in finding out that information myself so I asked one North Korean *Chosunhwa* artist who is very high-ranking in the North Korean art community. He said no, the reason is not because there hasn't been an artist who has tried to portray his image but because they already submitted many preliminary works of Kim Jong-un's portrait but he refused to be portrayed [by the submitted pieces so far]. How interesting it is, so I don't know what he's thinking. Officially, it has yet to be made.

**Q: What kind of negotiations did you have to do to get these paintings?** [inaudible]

**A (Muhn):** Very interesting question about collection. How are you going to attain some of these images? Most of what I have showed you is not allowed [to be collected] because they are national treasures, which means they are collected by the National Museum in Pyongyang. So how it works, art in society in terms of collection: most of the images as I said are national treasures which means that artists submit their work for national art exhibitions, and then once their work is chosen for prizes, then their work goes to the museum collection. And you cannot purchase that unless you have several hundred, million dollars. But there are so many other really significant paintings, especially *Chosunhwa*. You can collect those by:

- (1) You can travel to North Korea although you cannot go at the current moment. Cheap “kitsch” pieces are easily attainable in North Korea – Korean barbershop paintings – cost \$100-couple thousands, as a souvenir. Your question is actually very interesting, because the collection is demanding these days, especially China and European countries. So because of that, there are lot of fake paintings, made in China. Some by NK artists, some by Chinese artists. How can you tell if it's fake? Very difficult. So this is my idea – if you like the work whether or not it's fake, you collect it. But well done *Chosunhwa* pieces are really beautiful.
- Other venues: famous Mansudae Art Museum in Beijing, you can get pieces from there. Price range: most expensive piece such as collaborative art goes for \$300,000. High quality paintings.
- Online purchasing windows – problem again is the authenticity, how can you trust it. Price determination is difficult because market is not yet \_\_\_\_\_. Prices are usually set by international auctions, gallery shows, exhibitions outside of NK but this hasn't been done widely yet so...undetermined.

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**Q: I noticed you compared one or two of the Korean paintings to Western art, I was wondering how much exposure the Korean artists get on Western art during their training or career?**

**A (Muhn):** Artists' exposure to the outside world is pretty limited but they are aware of abstract and hyper-realism. And very interesting concept for their minds is "we know that, but it doesn't work in this society." Because people don't understand, when they see artists depict sweat pores of the skin as hyper-realism, one of the artists told me that, it's a little too much, it's not poetic, so we cannot really appreciate it. As I said earlier, there is a magazine provided by the Party for the artists, which has general information on world art which covers mostly the Renaissance Period, Rococo, individuals like Van Gogh and Reuben, but not much of the contemporary art scene because we don't try to understand contemporary art here. As an artist myself, I don't understand exactly what goes on in all contemporary artists' techniques. One thing I want to make very clear is that we want to express as an artist or individual, whatever we feel is fair, meritable, as freedom of expression, which is great. Such a thing doesn't exist in North Korea, their purpose of art is to serve the people, to serve the nation, which means most of the people should understand, through the expressions the artists create so that is why we call it socialist realism instead of socialist abstract.

**Q: Thinking these are all reproductions in the exhibition that was in Washington DC, are these reproductions the same that we would see in the museum in North Korea?**

**A (Muhn):** The show I created last year at the American University, works compose of my own purchases and I incorporated with Choson National Museum because I wanted to show their national treasure/historical content but there's no way I can bring those out so what they do is, in very pristine concept they have. When they have their own art exhibits outside of North Korea, they can take up to only 3 authentic pieces. The rest of them, they copy – exact same, maybe 1 in or 2 in smaller. The copying process of national treasure takes months and it is officially approved, so when you see the copied work, it's almost the same as the original. That's not it, they take the copied work back and preserve it, store it very carefully for the next show. One instance I will reveal to you, if you go to Pyongyang there is one fine art museum called Choson National Art Museum, The image I showed you, Cho Young-ban's "Evening Glow of Kangsan" done in 1973, displayed on the wall on the museum- few people know but it is copy work. How do I know that? That piece was exhibited in Japan years ago. And Korean Japanese thought wow, so significant and a wonderful piece. How come you guys don't put glass on it? So we're going to frame it and put glass, and under the circumstances of NK economic situation – if you visit NK art museum, there are many pieces not glassed. Sometimes there is just plastic sheet around it to protect from dust.

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Since this piece was a revolutionary piece, considered the most significant piece in North Korean contemporary art history, when the piece was returned, they exhibited that on the wall on the museum. As a visitor, you have no idea whether it's authentic or a copied version.

Going back to your question, I had to work with the Beijing Art Museum Director for several years, finally he rented some of his collection which were the collaborative large scale paintings. The rest of them I got from the national art museum in Pyongyang (copied work).

**Q: This afternoon you've shown us images of heroism and courage but in your American University show, you also had very negative, bloody, or even gruesome images or depictions of American soldiers in American uniform torturing Koreans or Korean women. How prevalent are these negative images in your [travel]?**

**A (Muhn):** Yes, I am very much aware of the content of the show you encountered. That was not my show. That was a photo show of somebody else. It was a setup, wax sculpture- it mimics the true-to-life image. Unfortunately, that was not one of the images I created.

**Q: I'm wondering if there's any notion of time or modernity in North Korean art, are the artists ever struggling with that? And on the other hand, subjectively, in what time do the artists live: 2017 vs. 1970s or 1950. From the paintings, it seems very hard to imagine what time the artists live in.**

**A (Muhn):** You're very right about that. Time in North Korea has been frozen, they don't move forward. When time moves forward, it moves forward with the environment so information in the outside world is not penetrable to the psyche of North Korea. To answer your question with one word, you're right –we cannot really tell but in current paintings, we don't see the same intensity. Current means from about two/three years ago up to now. Now, artists somehow got influenced by South Korean culture secretly or semi-officially so the depiction of what they've done so far until two or three years ago was so intense. But nowadays, we don't see those images. Personally, as someone who has been studying North Korea art, I like the old images much better because it has the core essence of social realism, which is the only country so far, producing that image currently and still doing it.

**Q: We think of North Korea as a completely closed off society – here, it seems as though you're able to go back and forth, you're exchanging art, you're bringing things in and out of the country. How did this all come about? And in that context, are there any constraints or ways you need to conduct yourself to do all this.**

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**A (Muhn):** What do you think? (laughter) Do you think I did it smoothly? (laughter) No way. I had to overcome so many difficulties. You know visiting North Korea one single time- it breaks your nerves, physically, mentally. Especially travelling from North Korea, going through the time zone is very difficult, very down situation, and psychologically you don't know what's going to happen to you while you're staying there. So at the moment of taking a plane to North Korea from China – I had to have a very different mindset. “Ok this is my last minute.” I didn't tell my family about that- I'm a short individual with a big heart and a lot of ambitions. And I don't know why I got into this business of introducing/studying North Korea art but once I arrived there, it is so quiet, so calm. [I thought] I don't have to lose anything; I don't have to worry about being attacked by anybody like street mugs and gangs; no racial issues at all. So when you get there, you feel, don't get me wrong, you feel peace. Anyways, that has nothing to do with the transactions of art for the show last year at the American University. Actually I have to start talking about North Korean authorities, Mansudae Art Studios, and Pyongyang Art University and Chosun National Art Museum in Pyongyang so many times for at least 4-5 years, and the bottom line is I had to have money. I had to purchase whatever I need to bring it to America. But I was not able to do it, because I was alone, an individual as a college teacher and as an artist, I was not able to do it. But at moments I did something really to the museum...I'm an art lover and art creator, so I brought UV protection glasses for small pieces of their Lee Dynasty paintings, which was turning into bad shape without being protected from the environment. After I saw that and said, oh this is terrible. Can I bring some UV protection glasses for these pieces – and they were so delighted to hear that. The next year, I brought three pieces of glass. It was a really heavy, black portfolio case, and I was regretting every moment through the airport. Damn why do I have to do this? My fingers really hurt at that time...Anyways I got there safely, and as a result I built my credit and trust with them so that made me easy to work with them. It's the beginning of building up that human rapport with the art staff there. In the beginning, they weren't that sure of my intentions of showing their work and my intentions of studying their art. And through many years, those small efforts from me make my later effort toward exhibiting their work in America help a great deal. And also, through many trips, I got to know other people like the Director of Mansudae Art Studio Museum in Beijing- he helped me a lot. He actually visited AU at the opening last year so that's how it happened. Individual effort to have the show in America or the outside world is very difficult, but possible. You have to have lots of money or you have to visit many times to build up trust, that's one way to do it. Now, you and I are not allowed to visit North Korea. You can do it illegally but no one would do it illegally; it was great that I had a chance and was able to do it. I'm still thinking about having more opportunities to have bigger shows with North Korean art in America in the future.

**Q (Student from American University):**

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- 1) Since having had a few opportunities to visit your show, I've been curious, what do you believe made the American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center a suitable and appropriate venue to house this artwork?
- 2) Given the opportunities young college students in PUST or other institutions in Pyongyang have, do current young artists have the ability to sit in on lectures for Western artists? Do you believe that artistic theory will evolve or globalize down the road because of the experiences they have today?

**A (Muhn):** Why the venue of American University- At that time, at American University, the director, Jack Wilson and I had been working on this show for many years and he was fascinated with showing different art in his museum. He agreed with my intentions in showing North Korean art. As you saw with some of the images, social realism is well represented. This is the last socialist realism of the globe. As a Korean-born artist, I feel a human duty to do that. I know the culture, I know the language, I can communicate with them with ease. Somehow I was just attracted to their art, this is how it was all started. After a couple of visits, I started giving talks at many academic venues- such as Harvard, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, and other art centers in America. That's part of my activities through my studies of North Korean art. (There's no specific reason for that particular venue, referring to American University). Your second question about the influence of young artists... Artists in North Korea- are they going to stay in the same mode of painting forever? I would say, as long as the same social system exists, they'll probably continue what they've been doing. There is an interesting question to you, to everyone. If they have enormous freedom all of a sudden, what do you think they can produce image-wise? That question leads us to some questions we have in this society, is art for the sake of art possible in North Korea? If they break freedom, they'll have enormous freedom, just like you can choose on foot or by car freely here, if they have the freedom and opportunity to move around, think whatever they want to think and express what you feel inside, what do you think they can do as visual artists? They probably will do what they've been doing because they don't know much about other expressions. Deviations from what they've been doing are not allowed so far, so if freedom suddenly comes by, they cannot express such creative artwork that we can do here. But it's a human society, evolves, changes, and ultimately will lead to open society; at least first, open markets and free suffering souls, that's what I hope for, but I'm not sure about your question. I just interpreted and answered.

**Q (Elizabeth Yang, HRNK):** You mentioned a little about the UN sanctions- The Mansudae Art Studio has been listed specifically under the UN sanctions. How does this change your view of the artists there? Seeing that they're listed under UN sanctions, they have a direct link to funding the regime. How does that affect your research and pursuit of this topic when if we purchase more artwork from there, it just goes directly to the regime?

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**A (Muhn):** It's a very practical question. First of all, I cannot visit there anymore which makes my family feel so safe. I feel otherwise. I'm okay to visit there anytime. Anyway, Mansudae Art Studio has huge dollar earning activities outside their society, which are banned now. Now we have to see Mansudae Art Studio's function and structuring of it. As I said, they have nearly 4,000 members including artists and staff members, which means those people have family members to support, which means 10,000 people related to Mansudae Art Studio. The government doesn't support them, they have to support themselves so the money they earn from outside is mostly to support the Mansudae Art Studio itself and I don't know, the rest of it probably goes to support the government so my study/research regarding that situation will be changed but not dramatically changed because what I do is look at the artwork and I study from there. Also, the future shows I might plan to do in America or in other countries will probably still be possible, just not purchasing art from North Korea directly but through some other negotiations or in cooperation with other venues like Mansudae Art Studio in Beijing, so it is a cultural exchange and cultural importance I will try to bring to America. From now on, it will be great if I had enough money but it's not going to go directly to North Korea but to other human relationships, other organizations outside of North Korea.

**Emcee:** BG, thank you. I just wanted to let you know you're so prescient and actually answered the final question, which was about whether there was an artist exchange with Beijing. On behalf of the Art League and artists' community, thank you so much for coming today.

*Report by: Elizabeth Yang, Research Intern*