

## The Mansudae Art Studio

All works reproduced in this catalogue [*The Hermit Country, Petra, 2007*], were made by Mansudae Art Studio artists. Founded on November 17, 1959, the Mansudae Art Studio is located near the centre of Pyongyang, the capital of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The Studio occupies an area of 120,000 square meters, 76,000 of which is office space. With approximately 4,000 employees, almost 1,000 of whom are artists, it is one of the largest art production centres in the world and, of course, the most important in DPRK. Almost all official art works in DPRK were made by the Mansudae Art Studio, including the monumental ones like the 20 meter tall bronze statue of Kim Il Sung; the Juche Tower that, at 170 meters, is the tallest stone tower in the world; the great sculptures in commemoration of the resistance against the Japanese colonization and of the war against the Americans; and the large mosaics of the Pyongyang subway stations. As far as large-size paintings are concerned, Mansudae artists also produced the 82 meters long *The Year of Bitter Tears*.

The Mansudae Art Studio is comprised of 13 creative groups, seven manufacturing plants and over 50 supply departments. The most important creative group is *Korean Painting*, with about 150 artists doing traditional ink painting on paper. Other groups include Oil Painting, Sculpture, Xylography, Posters, *Jewel Painting* (a typical North Korean technique that uses pulverized gemstones), Applied Arts, Design, Embroidery, Mosaic. All forms of artistic expressions, from embroidery to monumental sculpture, are afforded equal respect.

The creative groups, and even the sub-groups, enjoy a fair degree of autonomy, including in economic matters. However all groups are required to share all information about their initiatives with the general direction that must approve them. In its international commercial relationships, Mansudae Art Studio is officially known as Mansudae Overseas Project Group of Companies, to reflect its organization in its name.

As befits a country with an instruction level higher than several Western countries (e.g., Italy), and having in its crest not only the Socialist sickle and hammer but also a brush, the Mansudae artists are almost all graduates of the highly competitive Pyongyang University Fine Arts Department. Mansudae also recruits distinguished artists who, having graduated from the university (founded in 1947, one year before the nation) have been working for other art production centres. An invitation to join the Mansudae Studio is an offer difficult for any artist to refuse and one that the other centre can hardly oppose.

The Mansudae is under the special guidance of Kim Jong Il, the leader, an enormous honour in a country in which the leader is an essentially hieratic figure. The Mansudae, like any other North Korean institution—be it a theatre, a factory, a school—emphasizes the exact dates it was visited by the leader and what he said on each occasion, sometimes giving what is called *on spot guidance*, that is, advice on a current situation. For example, consider the often-referenced remarks of February 11 1991 made by the Great Leader (Kim Il Sung): “The fact that comrade Kim Jong Il [his son and then his successor] has developed Mansudae Art Studio as a universal art creation centre is his great achievement in the development of Juche art.” For the Mansudae Art Studio members this comment is a particular source of pride and inspiration.

Some remarks by Kim Il Sung first and Kim Jong Il later have determined the course of North Korean painting. It was Kim Il Sung who, in the 60s, made oil painting acceptable, and, in the 70s, landscape a worthy subject. Prior to these endorsements, the traditional ink painting enjoyed virtual exclusivity and the subjects were almost only political and social. Moreover, it was Kim Jong Il who said: “A picture must be painted in such a way that the viewer can understand its meaning. If the people who see a picture cannot grasp its meaning, no matter how talented its creator, they cannot say it is a good picture,” thus barring the road to abstract, conceptual and similar experiments by North Korean artists. Those have instead become predominant in South Korean art, so that the North has become the main depository of the Korean tradition.

The Mansudae Art Studio Members are also very proud that their centre received many national awards and that it produced one Double Hero (Jong Yong Man); four Kim Il Sung Medal winners; eight Kim Il Sung Prize winners; 19 Heroes; 34 People's Artists; and 96 Merit Artists. It is particularly noteworthy that roughly half of all North Korean artists who have ever received such highly-regarded awards have been associated with Mansudae.

The atmosphere inside the centre is serene and industrious, and one perceives great reciprocal respect and solidarity. There are both functional and artistic hierarchies, but the feeling is that all people think that everyone has equal dignity. There also seems to be a tendency to share experiences, to make at least the members of one's group participate in the positive aspects, material or otherwise, of what one is experiencing. From an economic point of view the differences seem to be few: artists, like almost all North Koreans, receive a salary; and, in a country where money is almost absent and there is very little trade, their salary, by Western standard, is very low. However, the State satisfies, as well as it can given its limited resources, the basic needs of its citizens, so a merely monetary evaluation of a North Korean's income would be misleading, and, moreover, beyond the scope of these remarks.

From a structural point of view, the Mansudae resembles a college or a factory (which in fact it is): its division into “departments” is immediately clear and each of them is well equipped for the art genre it produces.

The painting department’s common work areas are full of light, and painters share the space, except for those who by particularly distinguishing themselves have earned individual studios. The materials used for oil painting are the same as used in the West: one finds oil colours tubes of good quality, mainly produced in China but also from France and Germany. The palettes, the solvents and the media are like ours: spirits of turpentine and oil. The support is always a canvas prepared through an industrial process (no one seems to do priming) and which is painted on without framing it first.

Perhaps this custom derives from *Korean Painting*, the ink painting on paper, traditionally performed on a horizontal plane, size permitting, like calligraphy. In *Korean Painting* the sheet is placed on a plane covered by a thick soft cloth, with the trays for the colours (variously diluted in water) next to it. The sheet is kept flat and steady using weights, typically some small metal bars but also small balance weights. The colour range is not very large, usually 10-15, and one works on a dry, very absorbent paper. The dexterity required is uncommon for us, and it is not similar to the one necessary for water-colour. Much is based on the ability to evaluate the absorption of the colour by the paper. Control must be exerted on spreading the colour and on its fluidity, especially to achieve the typical hazy effects of out-of-focus gouache and the firm colour signs spread with a drier impasto. Corrections and erasures are very difficult: it is a thought-in-advance painting discipline that must be correctly executed on the first attempt. Thus, much attention must be paid in selecting paper and brushes.

In fact, Mansudae has its own small paper-mill on its premises. With traditional procedures and cellulose often taken from the bark of a rather common indigenous, Acacia-like tree, (there are some inside the Mansudae itself), two types of paper are hand-made for internal use. Both are very absorbent and made with little glue. The rather dark, inferior one is used for study, drawings and sketches. The other one is more refined, good for *Korean Painting*. The sheets come in different sizes, even very large (200 x 300 cm), and in different weights, from the very light ones, which are the most common, to the heavy ones (300 – 500 grams per square meter). The frames to hold the cellulose, in contrast to ours, have a very thin cane mesh that gives the sheet its faintly ruled appearance common in Eastern papers. Given the characteristics and the quantities of the paper produced in that small mill, the Mansudae regularly imports Chinese papers, some types of which are considered excellent by Korean artists.

A different Mansudae shop produces brushes. There are the typical, round Chinese ones, for writing; and those for oil and acrylic painting. Like the brushes used in the West, they range from the stiff ones made of pork bristle, imported here as there from China, to the softer kinds made from ox or marten hair. There are also brushes, also typical of the Chinese area, with more than one kind of hair: soft in the external crown, to absorb paint generously, and elastic in the centre and in the tip to better manage the stroke.

The Plastic Art department is based in a large industrial warehouse provided with scaffolding to allow sculptors to produce large works. Production is decidedly monumental: practically nothing is less than two meters tall. Everything is done in an enlarged scale to be observed from a distance: works are mainly produced for public places or for propaganda, — and often they are extremely large. Many works are collaborated on by more than one artist, as it is common even here for works of that kind. One does not see many sketches or studies: sculptors work off the cuff, relying on observing models. They use very refined clay, perhaps a fortunate coincidence, but more likely out of the need to obtain fine, realistic details.

Marble and granite sculptures are made in another, smaller warehouse. Often many multiples are made, for public places and large buildings.

A particularly important department is Ceramics, a genre highly appreciated in the East, where a vase can be a gift of great value, presented to important guests. The Mansudae production range is very ample, both in shapes and decorations: There is a grey tone that is typically North Korean and well known in the region. And vases too are often produced in very large sizes.

Mansudae’s painters and graphic artists design and produce the propaganda posters which are often (but perhaps less often than one could expect) displayed in public places. They also make posters for movies, a national passion shared by Kim Jong Il. The creative process is the usual one: starting with a painting, normally a tempera or an acrylic, and then using photolithographic methods to produce the finished posters.

Artistic printing is represented exclusively by xylography, deeply rooted in the Eastern tradition. North Koreans do not practise, and perhaps they are not even familiar with, chalcography. Xylographs are often printed using shiny colours, almost enamels, on sized, glossy paper. They seem to be influenced, also technically, by Russian and Eastern European tradition, but the colours’ gloss is a typical expression of the Korean one. And probably the xylographs produced using matrices of irregular sizes pressed repeatedly on paper like stamps—as done in the West when printing on fabric—derive from the most ancient tradition.

The department that emphasizes fabrics is Embroidery. Works there are often made by more than one artist and reach a chromatic effect that oil painting can match with difficulty. Strangely, given how elaborate the work is, the embroideries, even the best, are often made on a synthetic material and not on silk. Particularly remarkable are patterns that are refined on both sides of the cloth, which in fact prompted Kim Jong Il, after having seen a “Pine and Crane” on February 23, 1997, to declare that that kind of embroidery had become superior to the Chinese one of which the Chinese were so proud.

Another separate department is *Jewel Painting*, a typically North Korean technique in which paintings are produced by applying coloured stone powders on rigid panels. It is the most time-consuming one: a work takes weeks to be completed. This technique was previously called *Powder Painting*; but Kim Il Sung changed its name to *Korean Jewel Painting* to underline the fact that it was developed in Korea using indigenous precious stones.

The Mansudae Art Studio also enjoys relationships with foreign countries, mainly in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Its works are highly appreciated abroad, especially in South Korea; and Mansudae artists have spent years in foreign countries, for instance in Namibia, to realize large monumental structures.

The Mansudae can also work on commission and realize works of profound artistic value. Even their handicraft work, with more decorative features, displays mastery of difficult techniques.

This catalog, and the series of exhibitions it accompanies, testifies to the willingness of the Mansudae Art Studio, and therefore by art of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, to be open to the West. To learn more about these aspects, please contact [info@dprk-art.eu](mailto:info@dprk-art.eu).

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Pyongyang 2006