

Two “Compulsory” Genres in a Unique Reality

To talk about “North Korean art” might appear to many as unbecoming, or even provocative. In fact, any cultural expression produced in either of the two Koreas can be linked to the precise ideological value on which it is based when it does not express explicitly the will of its patron. After all, many volumes have been written on the historicity of art in general. In the case in point, the art presented in this catalogue, being the expression of a country with a Socialist regime, can be naturally suspected, *a priori*, of having been created with an instrumental purpose, subservient to the propagandistic needs of the regime. In part this is certainly true. However, we cannot forget that we are talking about a country, Korea, which, being an integral part of the complex Far Eastern reality, has a rich tradition of many centuries in which the relationship between art and politics has often been deeply different from the European one and, in general, from that of the Western world. There are two fundamental traditions that can be distinguished in North Korean art. One is decidedly political, justifying completely its dependence on a precise ideological model; and the other traditional, essentially free of propagandistic references, dating back to when the country was united. In the latter tradition, before obeying to the reasons of State, art preferred to submit itself to conventions established in a very ancient epoch in China, which was enriched in Korea by very distinctive and peculiar elements. This simple division is an almost obvious reality in a country like North Korea which, imbued in its everyday life by an authentic political mysticism, can only accept the neutral diversity deriving from tradition. In fact, the recovery and the defence of tradition represent (and only to a naïve person this can seem a paradox) one of the main interests of national ideology. It is true that the “apolitical” tradition includes also Western painting techniques, but on the whole it is clear that the North Korean artist prefers to draw using (even if perhaps reassessing) well-established stylistic elements that have become part of the collective consciousness.

I will definitely not talk of “official art”: nothing is worse than applying our mental schemes to others’ realities. In classical Korea, art was always “official” because the institutional leadership did not undergo those changes that would have assured a reshuffle of the classes and, therefore, a change in the tastes of the art patrons. In fact there have been artists with a “popular” appeal, as early as the 18th century. Among these artists Kim Hongdo (1745-?) stands out, although in his case his precise intention was to manifest his personality through a very peculiar style which now makes him unmistakable. Nothing in common, in other words, with the formidable push exerted in the West by “popular” or “subordinate” art, with an improbable perspective and with pitilessly realistic traits (cf., 3rd century Roman portraiture) that little by little would have substituted the idealizing motifs of “official” art arriving to replace the principles of ancient and medieval iconography. In fact, in the East, to repeat *ad infinitum*, artistic or literary styles never caused uneasiness or criticism. On the contrary, it was always thought that the beauty of a subject, if adequately treated and guided by the talent of a strong personality, can be loved and appreciated by countless generations.

The common man could instead be surprised by how “ideological” art and the art which is heir of the purest tradition can sometimes have striking points in common. In that respect it is necessary to remember that the North Korean political system is more similar than one could expect to that of classical Korea. It matters little to define it “Socialist Confucianism” or “Confucian Socialism.” What is important to call to the attention of observers of the North Korean reality is that many of those aspects that the West finds perversely grotesque have existed from centuries, and not only

in Korea, but in the whole Far East. Moreover, it is vital to recall that some solutions proposed by Confucianism—a lay ideology, for example—are well suited to be revisited in a socialist sensibility, inside an equally lay context. Thus, the so-called “personality cult” derives from the need of divinizing man in absence of a revealed god. In ancient times such honour appertained to the “Great Ancestors,” the founders of a new dynasty, a new moral and civil order.

The beginning of a new dynasty became a fundamental stage of the calendar, a reference point for the computation of time. It is exactly what happened in North Korea and nobody can doubt that the “Great Leader” Kim Ilŏng (1912-1994) made a radical political turn comparable to the foundation of a new course that apparently has assumed dynastic proportions, so far. At the same time, those who mock the legend that calls for the Great Leader to be taken by cranes after his death should know that it is not a North Korean invention: to ascend into heaven riding cranes is a *topos* of Eastern imagination reserved for prominent personalities and it has its roots in Taoist philosophy. This to say that Koreans (often without realizing it) draw from a well established cultural repertoire. Someone will object that we are in 2007: nothing could be more misleading. Korea is a country that for almost three centuries (from the beginning of the 17th to the late 19th) was hermetically sealed, in which practically “nothing” happened of historical significance if compared to the tumultuous events during that same period in Western countries.

The opening of Korea by force soon led to an unimaginable time jump for which the country was not in the least prepared. A series of catastrophes followed, from the Japanese colonization to the division of the territory and finally to the terrible civil war. The ensuing struggles only exacerbated for those in the northern part of the peninsula the mistrust of foreigners, thereby encouraging northerners to defend their sense of national identity by forging a particular compromise between Socialism and traditional culture. North Korea, in practise, has an internal clock still out of phase with respect to the West. But, this is true also for South Korea, where the American political model, imposed from above, far from solving some contradictions, in some cases has made them worse. Something almost inevitable for a country which, as a whole, never knew democracy and a further defeat for those who think that Western models are always and in any case a panacea regardless of local situations.

So far we have spoken of “art” in general but for the purpose of this catalogue introduction, we will concentrate on graphic arts, and on painting in particular. To treat them exhaustively would require too much space for a catalogue, so I will try to describe this collection’s fundamental motifs, and the interplay between the political and traditional.

Painting within a State Art

The art of socialist derivation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea does not arise from nothing. When the nation was established (September 8, 1948), the Korean peninsula had undergone three years of controlled administration preceded by thirty-five very long years of Japanese domination, during which even the most basic rights of the Korean people had been violated. In spite of their oppressors’ taste being imposed upon them, Korean artists and men of letters imbued their work with signs of their hardships and the enslavement of their countrymen. In that way, Korean art came to have shades of meaning and double meanings, almost imperceptible details but clear to those who had the common deciphering code represented by the discomfort with foreign oppression. Western painting had

established itself but, as in literature, it is impossible not to notice its tones of desperation as, for instance, in some works by Ko Hūidong (1886-1965) and Kim Kwanho (1854-?). But the period between the two World Wars was also that of totalitarianism, in which art to the service of the regime was rigidly controlled and utilized grandiose shapes to better represent the dominant ideology. Nazism, Fascism and Stalinist Communism had their totems but a certain gigantism had already appeared in the 19th century on the two sides of Atlantic as a tribute to the political-economic successes of the nations facing it: from the New York's Statue of Liberty (1888) to the Arc de Triomphe (1816-36) and Tour Eiffel (1884) in Paris. The world was enriched by monuments that certainly struck the imagination of the first Koreans who landed in the West. Certainly the gesture of the arm of Freedom stretched out to lighten the course of sailors and symbolically the way of all people is not an absolute first expression in Western iconography, however great is the debt towards that monument of the solemn gesture with which have been immortalized, both in painting as in sculpture, leaders of different countries, from Mao Zedong (1893-1976) to Kim Ilŏng, up to Saddam Hussein (1937-2006). And it was to the Paris arch, more than to the Titus or Constantine versions, that the architects of the Mansudae Art Studio drew their inspiration to build the P'yŏngyang Arch of Triumph(1982).

North Korean architecture and sculpture are, mainly, in the service of ideology; and yet even when such connections are conspicuous, just behind the thin Socialist façade, one can perceive more complex and articulate historical realities and cultural meanings. In fact the North Korean artistic "gigantism" (more precisely, the promotion of the *Chuch'e*— term that can be approximately translated as "autarchy"— eventually through the so called "personality cult") established itself in the beginning of the 1970s, a crucial decade for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, especially from the political point of view. The country was in satisfactory economic conditions, certainly better than those of its southern counterpart; but suddenly it found itself in an almost political emergency. China, its traditional ally, had in some way "betrayed" the Korean leader Kim, attacked and criticized by many *dazibao* during the Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese turn had ruined many figures of that country well known to Kim Ilŏng, starting from Peng Dehuai (1898-1974) who led Beijing "volunteers" during the terrible 1950-53 war and then became the Chinese Defense Minister. An old fashioned Communist, once praised in a poem by Mao, Peng had gained the hostility of the "Great Helmsman" for a series of objections to his policy, from the "Great Jump Forward" to the relationships with the Soviet Union. The Chinese criticism surprised the "Great Leader," while almost at the same time South Korean politics underwent a sharp turn to the right and the president of the Republic of Korea, general Pak Chŏnghŭi (1917-1979), took a decisively and unprecedented hostile attitude towards the North. It was then that Kim Ilŏng, mainly as a matter of national pride, decided to give his country an official "Socialist" statute, preparing his succession with the increasingly more open support of his son Kim Chŏng'il (1942-). Simultaneously, Kim Ilŏng began promoting his image at home as undisputable leader and abroad as guide of non-aligned countries (an attempt which would have failed). Of course, *Chuch'e* was more and more propagandized as an economic-political model with a clear nationalistic mark.

The Chinese "Great Leap Forward" of the late '50s had its counterpart in the *Ch'ŏllima undong*, the Movement of the horse that runs one thousand *li* (394 km) a day launched by Kim Ilŏng to accelerate the reconstruction of the country. That Stakhanovist movement, inspired to the mythical charger, reached much more successful results than the Chinese one, to the point that the 1957-61 5-year plan was completed two years before schedule. The event was celebrated in

1961 by building (in P'yŏngyang a bronze statue of the *Ch'ŏllima* that, placed on top of a tower, brings the monument to a height of 46 meters. Then however they had to affirm the precise identity of North Korea, of its role inside the Socialist universe and of that of its leader, against the lack of respect from abroad.

Kim's gigantic bronze statue in P'yŏngyang, 20 meters high, was built in 1972 in honor of his sixtieth birthday. The Confucian tradition reappeared: the sixtieth birthday (in Korean, *hoegap* or *hwan'gap*) is especially celebrated because it closes a sexagesimal cycle, at the end of which the names of the years are repeated. But at that crucial point in its history, North Korea had to demonstrate the originality of its system and its independence, and in the same year the gigantic *Chuch'e* tower (170 meters) was erected in P'yŏngyang. Other colossal works soon followed: from the Samjiyŏn monumental complex (1979), at the extreme North of the country, to the already mentioned Arch of Triumph, to the monument to the fiftieth anniversary of the Workers Party, built in P'yŏngyang as recently as 1995. A tendency, then, not interrupted after the *Great Leader's* death. Not even the civilian buildings were immune from gigantism: in that sense the Ryugyŏng Hotel is perhaps the most significant work. Probably designed for the 1988 Olympic Games, that P'yŏngyang hoped to co-host with Seoul, it has 105 floors for a height of over 300 meters. It occupies an area of 40 hectares for a total surface of 309,000 m². It was intended to have 3,700 rooms; but works were suspended in 1989 and today is only an impressive concrete skeleton surmounted by a pathetic crane that embodies the hope, or the illusion, that building might resume.

Political painting clearly dedicates much space to the leaders. The late president Kim was often portrayed among workers or in the company of children in order to underline his role of "Father of the Nation" that in classical Korea belonged to the king. With his son Chŏng'il, he was often portrayed examining plans for building roads, factories or monuments. Several works of painters like Chŏn Hakch'ŏl, Kim Ilgwang, Chŏng Yŏngman (?-1999) and Kim Wŏnsik (1959-), to mention just a few, illustrate such propaganda, a primary need of the North Korean political system. But the system is indirectly celebrated also through other subjects, the most common and important being work. Vigorous portraits of workers and miners, paintings of factories operating at full blast with their smoking chimneys seek to represent the industrious activity of a whole country devoted to the realization of peace and of common welfare. Colours are dramatic, and there are many references to fire, the dynamic and purifying element that hints to Socialist revolution.

The army too receives great attention as a pillar of society, not only as an element of national defence but also as indispensable support for civilian protection and help for the citizens' every-day activities. There are many references to the war of resistance against the Japanese or to the Civil War or, more simply, to moments of recreation and serenity in military life. Topical moments of national pride are also celebrated, like the so called tomb of Tan'gun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation, painted by Song Siyŏp (1934-) in 1999, or the great mural representing king Tongmyŏng, founder of the Koguryŏ kingdom, in a reconstructed wall of what is thought to be his tomb in Chinp'ari, not far from P'yŏngyang.

The invention of printing using metal movable type, painted by Ch'ae Pok (2001), represents another important tribute to that current of State Art immortalizing one of the inventions of which all Koreans are rightly proud. But perhaps it is

sport which receives the greatest attention, nor could it be otherwise in a reality where it represents an instrument even of political success and a comfort to the national feeling of community of all citizens. Football, in particular, is very popular in North Korea, certainly in the wake of the great and unexpected success gained by the national team that at the 1966 World Championship in England defeated Italy in the qualifying round before being defeated by Portugal in the quarter final. The legend of that team is still alive, and not only inside the national borders: Pak Tuik (1935-), the scorer of the goal that eliminated Italy, was proclaimed “Sport’s Hero” in 1982 and for a long time was (and perhaps still is) the most famous Korean in Italy.

Naturally, the “political” part of the North Korean graphic art is expressed also through xylography and, in particular, is featured in countless propaganda posters. Those are images, as it is well known, that aim to strike the observer’s conscience, almost always accompanied by slogans that to most foreigners appear inflated and rhetorical. Surprisingly few have realized that the political poster is, in a modern context, the closest product to the Eastern traditional painting. In classical painting, in fact, a picture acquired value thanks to verses in Chinese characters that exalted its contents. The painter himself was in fact a literary man who had turned calligraphy into a supreme art and an incomparable instrument in transmitting feelings, a transformation owing less to the meaning of the ideogram than to its graphic rendering. This led to an almost paradoxical result: it was painting that became almost a complement of calligraphy and not vice-versa. This development would be unimaginable in the West, the latter culture not enjoying that marvellous instrument of expression represented by the ideogram, authentic “thought through image”. Chinese ideograms have been abolished in North Korea, but the slogans on the posters, even if they are written in the *han’gŭl* alphabet and are, of course, printed, assume, *mutatis mutandis*, the same function: to explain in words what the eye sees, an operation possible only in a country with an extremely high literacy that has always put culture above everything else. The brush between the sickle and the hammer is not in the crest of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea by chance.

But when the North Korean painter wants to move away from the contingent political reality, he always has at his disposal an impressive traditional repertoire, if he decides not to cope with Western painting (regardless of how well the latter is actually known). The motifs are, in general, those of the traditional Chinese painting: countryside, flowers and birds, and the “four plants” (bamboo, plum, chrysanthemum and orchid, that are also called “the four gentlemen”) always revisited with the typical native Korean vigour so evident even in the works of the classical period. Today as then, the traditional canons of the Far Eastern culture, with its philosophical and technical concepts, are respected. Today as then, the North Korean painter who draws from tradition does not imagine himself “in front of,” but “inside” the picture, the centre of which does not coincide with the centre of the drawing but with the point in which the painter has decided to place himself. In the same way, painting of large landscapes shows how man is far from being “measure of all things”. In contrast, he is only an element of the great and ineffable scenery of Nature, and for this reason is portrayed, sometimes with his dwellings, in a subordinate and almost marginal position. Of course, an expert eye is able to perceive some details, as the clear preference for “coloured” paintings over ink on paper, the technique used for many masterpieces. The evolution of new tastes clearly appears from works of artists like Ri Sŏkho (of South Korean origin but who migrated to the North) whose work straddled the dramatic years of the civil war, i.e., before and after the Socialist revolution. On the whole, however, respect for tradition is very strong: for instance, young women in traditional clothes, starting from Kang Chŏngnim (1926-), only repeat, except for the hairstyle, the motif of the

“painting of beautiful women” (*miindo*) so dear to tradition. And the peaks, especially those of the Kūmgang massif (the marvellous mountain that cannot be forgotten even when dreaming) for centuries have been one of the preferred landscape subjects.

All the works illustrated in this catalogue represent an excellent example of what has been said so far. The absence of avant-garde paintings could represent a surprise, with a clear refusal of abstract expressionism and, in general, without the diversification of styles and of schools that characterizes South Korean art after the war. The reason is clear: North Korea did not have the confrontation between social classes, produced also by rapid economic development, that characterizes recent South Korean history. While the great South Korean “protest” art movements—like *The Imsul Year* (Imsul nyŏn), *Turŏng*, *The Art of Life* (Salm-ŭi misul)—then all merged in the great platform known as *Minjung misul* (Art of Masses) characterized by an extreme minimalism, in North Korea that simply had not been possible.

Nevertheless, these North Korean works are on the whole enjoyable, full as they are of a native sensibility and sometimes of a naïf though sincere trust typical of a country in many ways protected from a globalization able to alienate, homogenize and depersonalize. It is true that the brushstroke often goes back to the Soviet and Chinese Socialist Art, but the political meaning is often hinted and even the figure of the Great Leader, though always imminent, is not immediately perceptible. In some vigorous portraits of peasants, therefore, it is necessary to read the poem that accompanies the painting to find a direct reference to the guide of the country, a reference that is linked through the verses of a popular song. Similarly, the young girl who sleeps holding tight a gift she received [a 1978 work by Kang Chŏngho (1950-)] at the dawn of a New Year, evokes only very vaguely the magnanimity of the Great Leader, the true father of the Nation, who in comparable occasions used to give gifts to the children of the country.

While poster art forcefully and unequivocally presents political and ideological positions, painting emphasizes tradition, generally avoids slogans, and if some anti-American imagery is used it is done gently. The North Korean tigers are more naturalistic and more richly coloured than the classical ones. They are so dear to popular painting, and they testify to the unchanged respect for that animal, so important in the collective imagination. And if some contemporary works, like that of the station-master or the tractor driver feature subjects that were of course unknown to ancient Koreans, some bucolic scenes found in these works cannot fail to bring to the mind some scenes of “trades” of the great Kim Hongdo e Yi Myŏng’uk (17th-18th centuries).

In conclusion, one must not commit the mistake of dismissing North Korea as a country of aliens, inhabited by monstrous creatures. Unfortunately, however, it too often suits men with feeble minds and for highly partisan purposes, to characterize certain regions of our shared world as dangerous *terrae incognitae*. North Korean artists are not mysterious hyperboreans or manticores, cynocephalus or unicorns: like their Southern colleagues, they are heirs to an immense cultural tradition that sometimes was adapted to the contingent reality without however losing its characteristic and fundamental traits. To recognize their value and their historical importance will mean to have committed an act of intellectual honesty and perhaps even to have rectified some imprudent or hasty judgement.

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Maurizio Riotto

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Biography

Maurizio Riotto (Palermo 1959 -) teaches Korean Language and Literature at the University "L'Orientale" in Naples. Graduated in Classic Literature from the University of Palermo, he specialized in Oriental Archaeology at the University "La Sapienza" in Rome. Living a long time in the Far East, he was Research Fellow for four years at the National University in Seoul and as a member of a research team of that university he participated in the excavations of the tombs of the Sŏkch'on-dong site, dating back to the first Paekche period (IV-V century). In 1991 he was Visiting Scholar at the Doshisha University in Kyoto and in 1994 at the Hanyang University in Seoul. In 2002-2003 he was Visiting Professor at the Sŏnggyungwan University in Seoul where he taught graduate courses in Comparative Cultures. He has published more than 100 works on Korea, including *The Bronze Age in Korea* (Kyoto, 1989), *Introduzione allo studio della lingua coreana* (Naples, 1990), *Fiabe e storie coreane* (Milan, 1994), *Storia della letteratura coreana* (Palermo, 1996), *Mogli, mariti e concubine: affari di famiglia nella Corea classica* (Palermo, 1998), *Poesia religiosa coreana* (Turin, 2004), *Storia della Corea* (Milan, 2005). He is also translator and curator of classic and modern Korean works and in 1995 he was awarded the Korean Culture & Arts Foundation prize for the translation into Italian of the novel *The Poet* by Yi Munyŏl.