

Art

My Artistic Apprenticeship in Paris

by Nam Kwan

Painter Nam returned home recently from Paris, where he lived 14 years as one of the numerous foreign artists from all over the world. During his long stay there he participated in many exhibitions in Continental Europe, England and America. The following is the first of a series relating his experience abroad which Space magazine published in Korean starting from January 1969.

One has often been asked the question: Why and for what purpose do you paint? I used to retort by elucidating the theories of value of "the art for art's sake school."

My life as one of the many foreign artists in Paris started in 1955 when the abstract movement was so vigorous in post-World War II France that it may not be an exaggeration to say that it was the golden age of abstract painting not to say that of the *informel* movement, in which painters poured the whole paint can over the canvas, some painted with their own hands instead of using brushes, with the sole of the foot; others patched pieces of paper, patterned cloth, and burnt cloth on the canvas. All these methods were utilized without reserve. In other words, they did not hesitate to use any kind of method in giving expression to their personality.

Accordingly, the number of critics who supported them gradually increased, most of the newly-opened galleries catered to such trends, and collectors were more inclined to such paintings instead of conventional realistic paintings. Those were the people who respected the personality of artists. It was also collectors and critics of this time who replaced "art is a creation" by "art is an expression of the artist's stubbornness."

The group of *fauvistes* retreated to their studios to create their own school of painting a few years after they launched the movement; painters of Dadaism were disbanded after many experiments without success within a short span; and many surrealist painters turned back to abstract painting. Thus the abstract movement was suddenly invigorated in the

wake of World War II and formed the main current of world art, undergoing changes in its direction and modes of expression. I have lived in Paris, the center of the movement, in its golden age. To be exact, I arrived in Paris on March 22, 1955 and started my life in Paris with the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. In the morning hours I confined myself to the studio and in the afternoons I toured around the city to the Louvre, to National Museum of Modern Art and to galleries.

The museum of impressionist paintings (Jeu de Paume) which I longed most to see was under repair under a two-year plan. My disappointment was beyond description. The impressionist movement which originated in late 19th century France formed the basis of today's new art movement, pre- and post-impressionists transmitted the joy of life from the privileged classes to the bourgeois, and exerted great influence upon the artists of cubism, *fauvisme* and abstractionism. It may not be too much to say that few artist of our generation can expect any new development unless they study the spirit, life and works of these artists. The artists who have brought glory to this museum are pre-Impressionists Manet, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Pissarro; and post-Impressionists Gauguin, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat and Rousseau.

The reasons why I had a special interest in this museum were that impressionism exerted tremendous influence upon the artists of my generation, and I was dissatisfied with the

Japanese style academism during my student days in the pre-World War II period. Compared with today's new art trends, when impressionism had almost become a classic, many Japanese artists of late 19th and early 20th centuries studied in Europe (mainly in France) medieval or renaissance style painting.

They were more concerned with expressive techniques than with the spirit of oil painting. Not many of them correctly grasped the *esprit* of impressionism. Those Korean art students who studied under the Japanese teachers acquired, at best, a lop-sided view or at worst simply wasted time. Thus Korean academism was formed with the importation of the Japanese-style medieval or renaissance paintings from Europe. The Japanese painters were absorbed in Western painting technique, at the expense of the spirit of impressionism, hidden behind brilliant colors.

In the meantime, the Second World War ended. The Japanese again absorbed the new currents from the West rapidly and uncritically. When I went to Japan in 1951 to observe the post-War Japanese art world, I was surprised to find so many abstract paintings everywhere in Tokyo, which to my eyes appeared as an abnormal phenomenon, because they appeared more formalistic than those of their predecessors, who learned only the technical side of academism in Europe a generation ago.

Being in Paris at the height of the abstract movement, I could feel the close relation of this movement to the painters of cubism and impressionism, and post-impressionism in particular. Hence my desire to see the impressionist museum was more enhanced. Enlarged

to the present size in 1877 with the special endowment of Napoleon III, the museum is located at a corner of Rue de Rivoli toward Concorde from Champs-Élysées. On the opposite side toward the Seine stands a replica of this building, *Orangerie*, which treasures "Les Nymphéas," the masterpiece by the leader of the impressionist movement, Monet.

Thus my life as an art student started. Korean students at the time numbered about 10 in all, and the Korean legation was then in a rented private house in Boulevard Raspail, operated by one *charge d'affaires*. The time was immediately after the Korean War when the refugee capital in Pusan moved back to Seoul. Naturally Korean students abroad felt keenly the political and military insecurity at

home. Under such circumstances, we talked about affairs at home whenever we chanced to meet until deep into the night at cafés. Sometimes we talked over cheap wines until the café closed, and trudged home in the early hours of the morning.

I used to plan the day's schedule in bed every morning. In the morning hours I went to the stu-

dio, afternoons to museums, galleries and exhibitions and in the evenings to Alliance Française to study French. But never was my plan carried out as scheduled. Like many other foreign students from other countries, I also fell victim to the nostalgia of a traveler.

The plans formulated in bed in the morning were sure to go astray in the day time whenever I met a compatriot on the street. We used to end up in a cheap café and dissolved our nostalgia in cheap wine. This kind of life continued for a time. Sometimes I woke up in the morning to find out the previous day thus passed was a meaningless waste. Why should I come in the first place to this land far from my country? It was good to talk about one's country in a foreign country with one's fellow



In his Paris studio

countrymen and to drink with the Parisiens in order to forget the traveler's melancholy. But was it not far better to do so in leisurely hours, while devoting myself not only to the study of art theories but also translating them onto canvas with the brush? So I reasoned to myself many a time.

I was sometimes gripped with the fear that if I continued this kind of life any further, I might end up as a mere sightseer, which I almost abhorred. One time I drew up the weekly time schedule and pinned it on the wall like a middle-school boy. Still it was hard to fight off various temptations, the more so in a city like Paris.

With the beginning of April, the climate of Paris starts to shed Utrillo's greyish sky and gradually becomes clear, and the number of foreign travellers visibly increases. The proper sunshine, spring breeze and the buoyant Parisien without top-cot—these are sights that never can be enjoyed except in Paris.

I made up my mind to paint, if only to forget the traveler's nostalgia. Then I knew that museums, galleries and exhibitions could no longer resolve my basic problems, although they could still provide me with a stimulation which nothing else is capable of. What I had to do was something very personal and peculiar that cannot be seen in their society. Because I am an Oriental, my experiences must be those springing from the fountain of the Orient, something characteristically Oriental. I have to explore and create by all means a world different from that of the West which, however, must not be one catering to the tastes of foreign tourists. I have to deal with the essential problems accumulated in the history of our nation. I know these problems are almost insurmountable, and it is very easy to create or fall back on conventional folk forms. The experiences I have undergone in my country can become a motif for my creation, but not the conventional forms. This I know very well theoretically. But nobody knows how these experiences shall be projected onto the canvas through the formless psyche of the artist. It is more difficult to express them by abstract methods than realistically.

Anyway, I made up my mind long ago that I have to express the spirit of the Orient or that of Korea by means of firmer and scientific materials of Western painting instead of

those of the Orient. I believed that these paintings will have something characteristically Korean and at the same time a true modernity, and that what is universal for us is not found in Europe and America, but can be expressed in works based on our national spirit and by unconventional methods.

I have nothing but the blank canvas before me with which I have to struggle. I began in a room so dark in day time that I could not work without electric light. Time passed so fast that I could hardly remember whether I was delighted or agonized in committing my ideas to the canvas. Every painter, I presume, will be content with himself being a painter, at least while working, nor am I an exception to this. Unfortunately, there was a limit for me to these delightful hours.

One day in late May I dropped in our legation office on some business. The *charge d'affaires*, Mr. Cho Wŏn-sŏk, was excited and produced several Korean newspapers before me and demanded my explanation. The story boils down to this: that I and my fellow painter, Kim Hŭng-su, participated in an exhibition under Japanese names, and the government spokesman threatened to summon both of us back to Korea. I was stunned and at a loss what to do against this fabricated story, but I could guess who the fabricator was. The worst stories were carried in the *P'yŏnghwa* and *Yŏnhap Shinmun*, both of them now defunct. The latter, which carried a caricature of me, was the crueler.

Let me explain how we came to participate in that exhibition. The Belgian and French Cultural Association sponsored an exhibition of foreign artists at the Petit Palais operated by the city of Paris. They asked the participation of Korean artists through our legation office in Paris. Thus we, the only Korean artists in Paris, participated in the exhibition through the good offices of our legation in Paris, I with "Old Men in My Home Town" and Kim Hŭng-su with "Hamhŭng Landscape." I still do not know how the Korean newspapers at home reported that we did so under the Japanese names. We were modestly praised by reviewers and critics. Ought not the government felicitate us, who for the first time since liberation made a debut in the Paris art world to receive critical approval? We went there with passports legally issued by the the govern-

ment which maintains its legation in Paris. The government should have investigated the content of the reports before they threatened to summon us.

Now it all appears like a dream. I was disappointed and distressed at the reports, because I was then aware of the fact that under the Syngman Rhee regime our government and the people branded the Japanese as well as the communists as aggressors. This incident so adversely affected me that one time I almost lost my confidence to create something original and universal based upon the spirit of Korea, and I more often than not found myself drunk on cheap wine by myself. I had nothing but formal greetings even for my friends, and their criticism of Korean politics sounded to me like "reading classics into a cow's ear." There is a saying that there is no national boundary in art. If so, there ought to be no national boundary in artists as well, because the artist is his own creation and his creation should be the artist.

How is it then that this incident so deeply affected me? Why did Korea, a small peninsular country divided in half in the Far East, and my nationality as a Korean, matter so much in this incident? I did not know, but one thing I was sure was that my mental shock was greater because the newspapers alleged that I had done what I would have abhorred to do. I found some consolation in letters from my friends inquiring whether the reports were true or false, especially those from the noted journalist O Chong-shik and the former Archbishop of Seoul, No Ki-nam. Mr. O came to Paris on his way home from a conference somewhere in Europe. He admonished me to forget everything as bygone, and be courageous. Shortly after, I met Archbishop No at our legation in Paris, who had dropped in there on

his way back home from a conference in the Vatican. He said, "You have to think it lucky to have survived." Their sayings sounded not like formal consolations but very much religious. Their consolation opened the window of my mind, which had been locked in life's disappointment.

Is not life a struggle to keep oneself from being trapped by fate?

I have seen with my own eyes my friends bombed to death during the cruel bombardment of Tokyo by B-29s at the close of the Second World War, and during the Korean War of 1950. But I miraculously survived, and thus able to come to Paris, which I had longed for.

Unexpected economic bankruptcy reduced me to a state of destitution, and the malicious and treacherous news stories inflicted a mental blow on me. At the time I had lived in anxiety and disappointment. What I needed most at the time was stronger spiritual support, and to become a more reasonable man in order to overcome physical as well as mental sufferings. I tried to forget, believing that what I wanted to do and the work given to me would ultimately become my spiritual support.

I started my creative life anew. If someone asked me at the time, "Why do you paint?" I would not have hesitated

a moment to say because I could forget everything while I was painting.

Art is said to be something unique, the common thing made unique by an extraordinary effort of the artist. The artist gets his motif from ordinary things which he makes unique by his extraordinary effort.

I was totally absorbed in creative work. My remittance from home was terminated, hence I neither had money to buy painting materials



"Furor," 1968

nor money to buy regular meals. If I had been an art student in my 20's or 30's I could have had a side job, such as washing dishes, to sustain myself. However, my character never allowed me to do such things. This way of thinking was very much Oriental. Because I was very sensitive to the lowly position I had in my home country, and because of my determination to maintain insubstantial "face," my economic life was very difficult. Still I continued to paint with confidence.

The painting materials I had bought upon my arrival in Paris were running out, and I naturally worried what to do after they were gone. But I had no way to replenish the stock, and I often painted day in and day out, sometimes missing meals and sleep. At times rays of sunshine shot into my dimly lit room. It was about five o'clock in the morning. The day was dawning. The sunshine, which penetrated once a day in the early hours of the morning into my dark and dismal room, suddenly illuminated my paintings. Then I would know that I had sat up all night, and the previous night's fatigue suddenly overwhelmed me.

I could not feel a bit of fatigue when I was absorbed in painting. But when I put aside the brush and looked at the painting with which I had struggled the previous night from a distance, to find the painting more or less approximate, to my original idea, I felt the more exhausted, perhaps out of my contentment. This contentment may be compared with that of soldiers who won back a position from the enemy after hand-to-hand fighting. After the victory, the soldiers may have felt fatigue, hunger and need for entertainment. But I felt hunger above all else. I drank cheap wine and ate bread and cheese with my paint-dirtied hands as if they were "rich viand and sumptuous fare" displayed on the table.

Noisy sounds of preparing breakfast came out of the apartments beside and in front of my dark room. Beside my apartment lived a couple working at the subway, and a factory-worker couple in front of my apartment. Usually they woke up at five in the morning and left home by six-thirty after a simple French breakfast. With my empty stomach filled up with cheap meals, I felt the more exhausted. I threw myself into bed in my working attire and with paint-dirtied hands.

I often felt keenly the reverse fact that I

slept at the time most of the people were leaving home for work, and that they had regular income to live on through their work, while I was using up painting materials which were about to run out. The only consolation was that I had freedom in which to paint and sleep when I liked, unlike these people who were enslaved in regular working hours. I tried to console myself that I was living a happier life than they. I was free from outside constraint and orders, but my inner behest drove me on. I know no other way of living except painting. Even though I did not like solitude, I could not escape from solitude in my living circumstances. I loathed to show my private life of economic destitution even to my friends from Korea.

The rumor that I evaded meeting Korean journalists who came to France and did not open the door to visiting friends started to spread at around the time when the Korean newspapers reported that I participated in an exhibition under a Japanese name, which almost coincided with my unexpected economic difficulty. At the time I never appeared in meetings at our embassy, and more often than not declined the offer to go to a café from friends I chanced to meet on the street.

The only person I could unbosom myself to was Mr. Hong Sa-kon, a graduate of French Literature Department of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Seoul National University, who was a self-supporting student at the Faculté des Sciences Politiques of Paris University. Living under the same roof, he used to drop in my apartment once or twice a day. He was my mental comforter. Together we went to see western films and music halls. These were the haven in which I could soothe myself whenever my work did not go well.

How could we afford such expensive entertainments, an economically destitute artist and a self-supporting student in Paris, where admission to such cinema houses and music halls was far more expensive than in Seoul? I still cannot know how we did it. But if you know the niceties of Paris life, you can buy at half price in certain places the same commodities—wine, entertainment and sometimes you can enjoy yourself without paying a dime.

Rue de la Gaîté behind Montparnasse, in which my apartment was located, was renowned for merry-making before World War II. Many artists who moved from Montmartre to Montparnasse lived in this quarter. A music hall in this quarter was a small theater, the

world-famous Bobino which was so close to my studio that I can almost say that it was next door. Admission at the time ranged from 1,500 francs (about 900 won in Korean currency) to 400 francs (about 70 won). The cheapest one called (in French) *Promenoir* may be sold to those standing in the aisles after the capacity admission was sold out, who must stand up for the two and a half hour performance. Whenever a new program appeared we used to occupy *promenoir* and sometimes we went there twice during the run of the same program, perhaps to the astonishment of the petite guide at the appearance of the same two Oriental faces.

In spite of his hard life there, Mr. Hong was so temperamentally gay that he favorably impressed the female guides and became their good friend. So the girls, whenever they found any seat unoccupied at the end of the first act, would guide us to these seats. Many world-famous *chanson* singers appeared in this theater—Edith Piaf, George Bressens, Yves Montand, Dalida, Jacques Vregel, Charles Aznavour, Gilbert Bécaud and others. After 10:40 in the evening, when the show comes to an end, the spectators from this theater invigorate the night life in nearby cafés, restaurants and cabarets. Some sipping cool drinks and others having late snacks, they act out the last scene of the performance by talking about individual singers at Bobino. Of course, Mr. Hong and I could not afford such a luxury. We usually come straight to our apartment under the same roof and consoled ourselves with a cup of Nescafé.

Among the many exhibitions I have seen in Paris, the Picasso Exhibition in 1955 and that of Rembrandt in 1956 were the most impressive. The Picasso Exhibition was held at the Musée des Arts Décorative from June to October 1955, with 112 pieces of work and the 14-piece series of "Les Femmes d'Alger." It

was a very significant exhibition, showing many artistic *isms* he has created in chronological order, which include his *période rouge*, neo-classicism, cubism, abstract and collage. The *période bleue* was excepted. The significance lies in his versatility in creative work and at the same time in his pioneer role in the first-half of the 20th century.

Included in the exhibition was his "Guernica," which the Republic of Spain commissioned him to paint to decorate the wall of the Spanish Pavillion in the 1937 Paris World Fair, and for which he chose the German bombing of small village called Guernica in the Province of Biscaye on April 28 of the same year. Measuring 7.82 by 3.51 meters, it is his masterpiece in which he expressed the tragedy of war by depicting bodies of an ox, horse and women in a pyramid-form composition on dark and grey background. Also displayed in the exhibition was a piece criticizing the Korean War of 1950.

A grand exhibition in commemoration of the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt's birthday was held in Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, from May to August in 1956 with some 2,000 pieces, including his early designs and his last self-portrait. In the exhibition room in which his masterpiece "La Ronde de Nuit" was hung, the guards were busy keeping order for the safety of the painting. So many gallery-goers thronged to the capital city of Rembrandt's home country that many *pension* houses mushroomed in the outskirts of the city, to accommodate the overflow of incoming visitors.

Originally Rembrandt was commissioned to paint portraits of the city deputies, but instead of drawing portraits the deputies could hang at their homes, he painted the other side of politicians' life with a rather ironic touch. As a consequence, he was subjected to attacks by his erstwhile patrons, the politicians, but he never attempted to justify himself until he died in 1669. In his late years he was so poor that



"Line Formation," 1968

he could hardly buy a piece of bread, but his brush and palette never left his hand.

I still vividly remember his unfinished self-portrait which he drew just before his death, the melancholy face suddenly illuminated by his magic treatment of light into a benign face, as if lit by God's light. And I felt anew the sad fact that the lives of the great artists have been at the mercy of illiterate politicians who lack understanding of art, in the Orient as well as in the Occident.

France which everybody acknowledges as culturally the most advanced country in the world was not an exception to this. In the aftermath of the month-long student demonstrations and labor strikes from May to June, 1968, many Frenchmen of culture were purged evidencing the above. For instance, Jean-Louis Barault who has been acknowledged as the pioneer of new theater movement not only in France but also throughout the world, was forced to leave the Odéon, and Bernard Dorival, the director of the National Museum of Modern Art, was also forced to leave the Museum which he virtually fostered during the past decades. This, of course, has been attributed to the cultural policy of André Malraux.

In Paris, the city of art, there are many things which only the artists can experience. Let me cite one such experience of miscarriage. An American art dealer proposed through our embassy in Paris that he would like to buy my painting displayed in the exhibition of foreign artists. I was, from the beginning, suspicious of his proposal because I was an obscure artist who had come to Paris only a few months before. But the charge d'affaires of the embassy urged me to see him anyway because he, though an American art dealer, must be a rich collector since he was staying at the Hotel Crillon (a first class hotel in Concorde). So I went to the Café Rotonde to meet the American accompanied by Mr. Cho.

The American collector praised my painting "Old Men in My Home Town" and asked the price. I asked U.S. \$500. With a surprised expression, the American said it was too high, adding that if I would sell the painting a little cheaper, it would occasion a relation between the two of us since he comes to Paris often.

Mr. Cho told him that I am a famous painter in my home country. The American said even

though I was a famous artist in my country, I am an unknown artist in Paris.

Anyway I did not want to sell the picture any cheaper than that; and not only that, I wanted to keep the painting because it was the first of my paintings ever shown in public exhibitions in Paris.

A little later when I met two Japanese painters, Tobashi Jun and Sato Kei who came to Paris a little before me, they advised me that until I made my own name in Paris I could not sell my paintings at that high price, and that one of the best ways to live in Paris was to sell cheaply only to those who really liked the painting. But it was too late to be sorry.

Shortly after this, my remittance from home was interrupted and I was in bad economic straits. My foreign friends in Paris urged me to bring the paintings to the galleries, which I refused because I thought and still think it a profanity for an artist to peddle around galleries. I never have breached this Oriental way of thinking. In fact, many foreign artists in Paris, from America, Europe, Japan and China start to peddle around galleries a few weeks after they arrive in Paris. I never have done such a thing.

My formal debut to the Paris art world was made in 1958 when I participated in the exhibition of Salon de Mai at the invitation of the sponsor. During the German occupation of Paris in the Second World War, Salon de Mai was organized in a small basement café by a group of resistance artists against the German occupation army, which became renowned in the wake of the War by organizing invitational exhibitions of new trend artists.

It seems that Salon de Mai invited me to participate in the exhibition, due perhaps to the fact that a review article in Figaro by Robert Brina, who favorably mentioned my entry in a small exhibition of foreign artists in Paris, came to the attention of the Salon de Mai. With this as a turning point, my work has increasingly been talked about by critics and gallery-owners, and there were some art dealers who expressed their desire to deal with my paintings through letters of inquiry, such as Galerie du Fleuve, Galerie de Neufville and Galerie Frecker. Although the result was not successful, Lucien Durand once was interested in my paintings. It was also due to this Salon that I came to know Facchetti and Jacques Massol.

I was then still in bad economic straits, but

my belief that someday a gleam of hope would brighten my Paris life provided me with mental consolation and a stronger motive which enabled me to lose myself in creative work, and at the same time my gropings for something Oriental and Korean gradually took concrete shapes.

In Paris at the time there were many artists who were renowned for their unique methods of paintings, such as Poliakoff who explored a new world by joining angular planes of intense colors; Fautrier, who poured turpentine-mixed light brown paint over the dried white *pâte* in the middle of the canvas and demarcated the picture plane by line to show movement; Atelen, who, with no money to buy new canvas, painted on the back side of the used canvas in calm black lines, which reminds one of sculptured images of negroes; and Dubuffet who fondly capitalized upon the exquisite beauty of *tache* by spraying over the orange and brown canvas. The unique techniques invented by these masters exerted great influence on younger artists.

On the other hand, some younger artists abused the creative spirit of these masters who poured their heart and soul into the invention. In other words, the younger artists seemed to think the idiosyncrasy of the artist something that naturally comes to an artist instead of a result which can be obtained through devotion. Thus they produced many paintings in imitation of master artists' compositions, coloration and lineament. This the gallery-owners who did not know abstract painting propagated and sold as works by hopeful artists to their customers. The American customers were taken in

by this trick.

Let me cite another episode of behind-the-scene dealings of gallery-owners. The owner of Galerie Facchetti was a photographer-trained Italian who was more a salesman than a connoisseur of art. Mr. Facchetti hung a painting by a young Netherlands artist who imitated the style of Appel. One day an American couple dropped in and repeated the word "wonderful" upon seeing the painting and asked the price. Mr. Facchetti kindly told them that it was not Appel but Lataster, a compatriot of Appel but much younger than he. But his kind explanation fell short of the excited American couple's ears. They bought it and returned to their hotel. The owner might have laughed inwardly at the ignorance of the customers but he also sold out his conscience for money. After this incident, the young Netherlands artist became a "contracted" artist of the Galerie Facchetti and sold his paintings for many years.

In this case the gallery-owner and the painter successfully abused the idiosyncrasy of another artist. Who knows, perhaps the American couple might have bought it knowing that it was not an Appel. Perhaps they wanted to enjoy the same Appel with less money, hanging it in their living room. Art dealer G. David was one who made millions by using Bernard Buffet. The reason why his paintings in recent years have become so conventional is also due to his adverse compromise with his art dealer. Even his friends derisively called his paintings "dentrifrice," meaning tooth paste. This kind of criticism is possible only in Paris where the critical spirit distinguishing true from false is very severe.

(To be continued)