

Art

My Life in Paris (II)

by Nam Kwan

Painter Nam is a senior artist of Korea who, during his 15-year life in Paris, participated in as many invitational exhibitions as he held one-man shows in Paris, London, Germany, Italy and Spain, starting with the 1955 exhibition of foreign artists in Paris. He won in 1966 the grand prix in the Biennale de Peinture held in Menton, France. His paintings are in the National Museum of Modern Art, in the City of Paris; the State Museum of Art, Luxembourg; and the Torino Museum of Art, Italy.

The following is the second of three installments, originally published in the April and May issues of Space Magazine in Korean.

Few nations are more conceited than the French people. They say that the atomic nucleus was first discovered by Joliot Curie rather than the German Otto Hahn; that they invented the airplane by the discovery by Duralmin of light metal; and that it was also Frenchmen who invented the submarine, which the Germans completed and the English merchants utilized for profiteering. It was, of course, Frenchmen who created the women's world fashion and cosmetics industry. And in Paris, the city of art, they say that Frenchmen created modern art. That is why the Italians say that the French nation is conceited. Unlike the Americans, they are unwilling to import new things made by foreigners.

When I said to an art critic, Henri Galy-Carles, that many art-dealers of such famous masters as Jacques Villon, Braque, Chagall, Miro, Picasso, Poliakoff, Dubuffet, Dufy, and Soulage were foreigners and the clientele for Mondrian, Kandinsky and Klee were also Americans, he said yes, but added that they could sell their paintings to Americans and Europeans because Paris first recognized

them. Paris is, indeed, a green house which nurtures foreign artists, he said. This we may acknowledge as true, but there is no doubt that he was saying so out of his sense of superiority of the French nation. They do not like Picasso, because they say that except those of his *période rouge* and *période bleue*, his works lack sincerity. That is why they say they prefer Braque to Picasso. When my friends said that the American art-dealers corrupted Buffet and that they severely criticized his works as *Dentrifice*, they meant that his works became daily necessities like tooth paste. However, they took notice of his post-World War II works and still highly value his works of that period.

Even though they do not like Picasso, they do not hesitate to highly praise his great creative spirit, and willingly acknowledge his pioneer role in the art history of the

first half of this century. They point out that Buffet's pre-War works are very conventional, but they do not hold grudges in highly praising Buffet's works during the period of 1945 to 1957. They also boast that only they are capable



Pen drawing of the author by Bae Yoong

of accurate criticism.

Buffet was awarded the Prix de la Critique d'Art at the Galerie St. Placide in 1948. He was then a young man of 20. Since then he held one-man shows with the themes "La Passion" in 1952, "Le Paysage" in 1953, "Les Nus" in 1954, "La Guerre" in 1955, "Le Cirque" in 1956 and "Paris" in 1957. These were the high points of his career. Since then his works have been degenerating to such a degree that some say that there is no possibility of improvement.

If an artist who has something essentially good in himself compromises with an art-dealer, he may be able to improve his economic lot and make his name known in the world, but he becomes in no time a mere popular artist who is estranged from the art world and unable to display his quality. We can cite a good example from the case of Buffet. So relentless was the criticism of the Paris art world. How many more artists are there in Paris, who, unlike Buffet, ended their life in solitude in a dark and dismal apartment house in Paris without making their own names, in spite of their high quality as painters? There are many who posthumously made names, such as, in recent years, Modigliani, de Staël and Pouigny.

(Here I am going to re-evaluate what I have seen, felt, and judged with my own reason in Paris. Therefore I would like to evade, so far as possible, quoting from books and abstruse theories of art, because these are apt to give rise to an argument for the sake of argument. I am going to write down what I have experienced in Paris without affectation.)

I was so captivated by the bold brush work of Nicolas de Staël (1914-1955), whose posthumous exhibition was held in the National Museum of Modern Art in 1956, that I toured the exhibition hall several times. Especially his seascape from the beach in southern France impressed me so much that I still feel it afresh. The seascape with boats is rather a realistic

painting which seems to have been painted in uniform blue-gray with a 15-centimeter brush at one stroke. The painting appears so effective that the onlooker is carried beyond the horizon.

It was said that he committed suicide at 41. But what I had felt in front of his paintings in the gallery was that he was a pure and genuine artist who was agonized in his world of creation. Therefore, I deduced that he might have taken his life due to his artist's agony.

Jean Pouigny (1894-1956) who started as a cubistic, non-figurative artist in a small studio in Montparnasse, turned to figurative painting, which became in the sixties popular in Europe as well as in America. Most of his paintings were small, ranging from 4 to 10 points in size. His favorite themes were still life, human figures inside a room, and garden landscapes. He admired Vuillard (1863-1940) very much. His seven or eight pieces in the National Museum of Modern Art, which his widow donated to the museum after his death, are very sensual and rich in color, something like combinations of a somewhat brightened tone of colors over those of Vuillard, and a little more controlled tone than Bonnard's brilliant colors.



Pen drawing by the author

Rauschenberg, who leaped into international fame by winning the Grand Prix at the Venice Biennale of 1964, was also in Paris, but neither the Paris art world nor the critics recognized him. But he participated in the biennale as an American painter with the paintings he painted in Paris which nobody recognized, although there were some disgraceful rumors in the aftermath. It was reported that after winning the prize he said in tears that Paris did not recognize him. Later, Michel Ragon wrote a rather long review on Rauschenberg in *Art*, in which he said that if he really liked the artist he should have known him before he captured the prize at the Venice Biennale. Indeed, the art-dealers in Paris made as many artists as they un-made. The same can be said of art critics. So the French collectors more often than not buy paintings without consulting art-dealers or critics. And even if a critic

in collaboration with an art-dealer tries to promote a certain artist, collectors scarcely pay any attention to their gibberish.

It has long been said in Paris that now is the time to start a new art movement, after 50 years of the abstract movement; a new movement on the basis of a new cubism, or realism. And it is the painters themselves rather than critics and art-dealers who should take on the responsibility for the present stagnancy and mannerism. For the young artists are insincere in their attitude toward their art. The French word "arriviste" has been in vogue long since, which is a synonym for young artists so christened by their elders, because many younger artists spend much more time in social intercourse than in their studios, driven by the urge to make their name known. It is, of course, not a phenomenon confined to Paris.

From the winter of 1958, I had a habit of taking walks to the nearby public cemetery or to the Luxembourg Park, or to the rooftop of my apartment. Most of the old houses are not centrally heated. Some use charcoal and others gas to heat the houses. So when I climbed up to the rooftop it was more to escape from the mixture of gases penetrating my room from downstairs than for a leisurely stroll. It was a kind of emergency measure to get fresh air because I could not go out in painting attire with paint-dirtied hands, and because I could not waste time in long walks.

Of course, one could not breathe fresh air even on the rooftop in the quarter of Paris where I lived, but still the outside air was fresher than in my room. On the rooftop which commands the view of the theater street of Bobino in the front and the public cemetery of Montparnasse at the rear, I inhaled and exhaled the not-so-fresh air, feeling like an animal confined to a small pen. But it was the most economical walk for me.

At other times, I frequented the Montparnasse public cemetery with a vague hope that I might get some kind of inspiration while walking around leisurely in what is sometimes called the graveyard for the rich Jews.

Baudelaire lies here. Many foreign travelers visit his tomb and lay flowers. I thought the flowers were from those who admire him and like his poems. One day I asked my landlady about the flowers. She said Baudelaire is the idol of young men and women of France, adding that she too placed flowers at his tomb on festive occasions. She once studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and still read Baudelaire's poems whenever she finds the time.

One day she told me to go to the Luxembourg Park in which stands his memorial bust



The author by photographer Lim Ung-sik

with an inscription of his poem written for the painters. Since then I used to go there whenever I could find the time for a leisurely walk, and take a seat on one of the benches in front of the Baudelaire's bust. On the back of the bust are inscribed "Les Phares" in his *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

Car c'est vraiment, Seigneur, le meilleur témoignage

Que nous puissions donner de notre dignité,

Que cet ardent songlot qui roule d'âge en âge

Et vient mourir au bord de votre éternité!

The painters Baudelaire referred to in this poem are Rubens, Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Donatello, Watteau, Goya and Delacroix who have shown man's dignity and anguish. They are, indeed, those who have writhed in human anguish, and master artists and magicians who have given expression to their noble spirits and their anguish without pretension, by use of their brush and palette. Thinking of their life spent to bequeath their masterworks to humanity, in front of their paintings, I reasoned with myself that my present sufferings and difficulties were trifling by comparison, and hurried back to my studio to paint before my excitement calmed down.

The largest cemetery in Paris, the Père Lachaise, is located in the 20th Arrondissement, in which lie such world-famous artists as Corot, Ingres, Sarah Bernhardt, Balzac, Oscar Wilde, Molière, La Fontaine, Alphonse Daudet, Chopin, Bizet and many others.

Another tomb I frequented was that of Van Gogh who died at the age of 37. His was such a brief life. From Paris Gare du Nord, one can reach in about one and a half hours the railway station of Auber-sur-Oise, in the vicinity of which he lies in solitude, in a small village not far from the station. As soon as I arrived there I asked my way to the boarding house in which he painted and died. The waitress greeted me by saying that I had come for Van Gogh. She surprised me, and continued on that many foreigners come to this village to pay their homage to Van Gogh. She immediately led me to the second floor, saying that I could, of course, have my coffee later.

A small attic room about two square meters in size was his studio and bedroom. He sat up many a night in spiritual anguish, and at times painted day in and day out, but he was finally overwhelmed by his anguish in this very room. The room was almost empty, with not even a sunflower, nor the simple vase he liked so much in his life, nor a reproduction of his paintings. The room was felt the more desolate when I thought of the paintings which might have hidden the walls. I could never persuade myself to believe that this room was the very room where Van Gogh lived and died. In order to reassure myself, I asked the girl whether it was really the room in which Van Gogh lived. She said the landlady who knew Van Gogh still lived there, but at the moment she had gone to the home of her relatives. I thought it not impossible to live such a long life to know Van Gogh, who died in 1890.

The house was named for Vincent Van Gogh, and the board above the gate had the following inscription: Le Peintre Vincent Van Gogh vecut dans cette maison et mourut le 27 juillet 1890.

I inwardly retraced the brief life of Van

Gogh with a cup of coffee before me in the spacious salon with innumerable paintings by anonymous modern painters on the wall. But I could not find a piece of Van Gogh's. I could well imagine that the landlady was one of those who took Van Gogh's paintings as something of lunatic playthings, as many her contemporaries did during Van Gogh's life time. His was indeed a life of distress. Even Gauguin, whom Van Gogh admired the most, left him alone a few months after he came to live with Van Gogh. It was also after his colleague Gauguin deserted him that he attempted suicide by cutting his ear off.

His tomb stands about two kilometers along the Oise River through the barley fields. Théodore Van Gogh, who died one year after his brother's death, lies side by side with Vincent. Many flowers were laid before Vincent's tomb, perhaps from Van Gogh's admirers, which

smelt the more fragrant against the spring sun. I thought there would be some who will lay sunflowers at his tomb in fall. It seemed to me that the deserted tomb cleared my mind. I offered a silent prayer for a few minutes.

In the sweeping fields in front of the tomb, I could find here and there farm implements he so lovingly painted, and a horde of crows appearing in his landscapes of this

barley field. On my way back through the cathedral he had painted, I thought the day was well-spent, and I was happy at being a painter. (See photo on page 31)

His masterpiece "Champ de blé et les Corbeaux," which he painted in this barley field the year he died, is executed through his burning passion between the artist and nature, like the autumnal golden waves of barley going up skyward under the spring sun. Still when I close my eyes the masterpieces by this genius pass before my eyes in confusion... "Océan," "Les Mangeurs des Pommes de Terre," "Coin à Montmartre," and "Portrait de l'Artiste," etc.

I received a stimulation and impression from Van Gogh's tomb different from what I got from that of Baudelaire in Paris.



Van Gogh's Tomb

Abstract painting still flourished in 1959. The voice of non-figurative members of the screening committee was so strong that the Salon de Mai could no longer extend an invitation to Buffet, on the grounds that his painting was figurative. I was again invited to participate in the Salon de Mai Exhibition of 1959.

Many new art galleries opened up for business, and almost all of them dealt in abstract paintings. All these galleries prospered. Many more artists flocked to Paris from all over the world. The Japanese and Chinese painters became more conspicuous, and the number of Korean painters was the greatest in this period.

In general, the artists of the Oriental countries won't leave Paris once they reach the city of art. They live day in and day out with a hope to see and to know more of Paris, because they had already made the expensive trip to Paris.

The Japanese painters in Paris were better off than their colleagues from neighboring countries. Not because they were rich, but because their families and galleries back home would send remittances to them, accruing from sales of their paintings produced during their stay in Paris. Some who were denied such privileges would take home the paintings they painted in Paris and hold one-man exhibitions, ostensibly to commemorate their homecoming from Paris. And then they could raise enough funds through sale of their paintings to launch them back on their way to Paris.

Few Oriental painters could live on their paintings, except those who made souvenir paintings for the tourists. The Japanese were the exception, as mentioned above. Not only that, but because they had no trouble in obtaining visas, some went back to Japan for a period and came back, and others who had economic difficulties also went back to Japan to raise money with which to live in Paris.

But it was preposterous for Korean painters in Paris to expect to earn their living expenses

through sale of their paintings back home, and they knew too well that, once they got back home, they could no longer afford the trip back to Paris, partly because of their economic difficulties and partly due to difficulties of obtaining a passport. Therefore, the Korean painters continue to work so much the harder under adverse circumstances. They very keenly felt the political and economic weakness of their country, and indulged in constructive criticism of the government whenever they chanced to meet. There were, of course, such occasions when the Korean painters suffered loss due to lack of government and social support, even though they were sometimes better qualified than the Japanese.

The European painters who come to Paris

with a big hope of making their debut will more often than not find it rather difficult, although their countries conduct vigorous propaganda campaigns. But their trip to and from Paris is easier than our trip inside Korea. So they frequently travel between Paris and their home countries where they would sell their paintings in order to secure their living expenses in Paris. Even some of the American art students who first came to Paris with one or another kind of scholarship or fellowship, which usually range from 6 to 10 and 12 months, come back to Paris with money raised through sale of their paintings in America. Although the American art world consciously tries to ignore Paris, it is still true



The author in his studio by photographer Lim Ung-sik

that many American art students take pride in the fact that they had studied art in Paris.

The number of artists thus lured to the city of art reached 100,00, according to the report of a weekly magazine, the figure, of course, including French artists who graduated from art colleges and work in the decoration section of French department stores. Competition has always been severe among them, and many more ended up in frustration than in success, and those who succeeded make their name posthumously as I said previously.

Then, what are the specific attractions Paris has for artists from all over the world?

The following three reasons may be given: 1) Paris has the tradition of art. (If so, Italy, which boasts the brilliant culture of the Medieval and Renaissance period; or Egypt, which inherited the culture of Toutankhamon; India and Tibet which were birthplace of Buddhism and Buddhist culture, should have attracted many artists. Otherwise, Paris seems to have some secret attraction.) 2) Paris has preserved the heritage of the efflorescent period of modern art, starting from French academism through the Barbizon School to Impressionism. (This period was so unique that we cannot find another comparable example elsewhere.) 3) Few other cities bear a more antique appearance than Paris, which is indeed a beautiful city of diversity. That is why Paris has been the great arena of art since the late 19th century.

Paris is also a modern city, but unlike the cities of London, Madrid, New York, Paris, along with Rome, retains many historic traces here and there, so many indeed that we can hardly call Paris a modern city. Still we can see crumbling ancient walls and half-collapsed houses in the city. For instance, in the quarters such as Quartier Marais and 5e, there are many old houses in which we can see and feel the old customs and atmosphere. The tilting historic houses are propped up by wooden supports and, in the Quartier Marais areas, which the city government of Paris is re-developing ancient walls are still preserved behind the newly-built modern houses as historic landmarks.

But I don't think that historic landmarks are the only attractions of Paris. Rather, such monumental historical landmarks as the Louvre, Opéra, Arc de Triomphe, Casino de Paris, Moulin Rouge, Rodin Museum, Jeu de Paume (Impressionism Museum), and the Modern Art Museum, combine to make Paris a metropolis of exquisite parks, and the Parisiennes are living a freer life than any other people in the world. Indeed, Paris is as symmetrically arranged

as a painting by a master painter so that you cannot find fault with any corner of the city, just as in a beautifully harmonized piece of painting. The people living in such a milieu are well harmonized with the city atmosphere, even though their behavior appears to be arbitrary. Anyone can fully enjoy the right of freedom, regardless of nationality, and no one interferes with others so long as he does not harm other persons. That is also one of the reasons why the freedom-loving artists who came to Paris from all over the world feel that Paris is more than the city of light and city of fashion, as they were taught before they came there.

One hardly pays attention to an old lady who is striding the streets of Paris in a long 19th century costume, nor does he think a man in the same old suit is out of fashion. Even a well-cultured and aristocratic looking young girl

sells crêpe on the street, she never seems to be ashamed of herself. No one points a finger even if a man carries a woman's umbrella or vice versa, or at a lady who wore a long woollen overcoat in hot summer, nor at a man who wore a summer suit in winter. In other words, these are extreme examples to illustrate the fact that nobody wants to interfere with somebody

else's freedom, or be interfered with by somebody else.

Some of the painters gathered in the city of freedom and art end up in failure because they abuse their freedom, failing to grasp the real meaning of the word. Instead of utilizing the freedom to their advantage, they indulge in a life of dissipation in cafés and bars, where they talk about art and end up with a beautiful girl at night. In the next morning they cannot get up at usual hours because they are too tired because of their heavy drinking and lovemaking. When they were well recuperated, it is already evening when the night life of the previous evening starts again. And in no time this becomes a pattern of life, from which they



Pen drawing by the author

can no longer free themselves.

In the meantime, he has not only wasted his study fund but also his travel fund back home, and some come back home with money borrowed from their friends. And those who were still unwilling to leave Paris either take up jobs at the decoration section of a French department store, or paint cheap gift landscapes along the Seine or portraits for the tourists in the Place du Tertre along the Montmartre. A few among them who have made some money start a second life in Paris with a hope to accomplish their original mission. Some of the lucky ones live under the shadow of a rich patron who happens to like their paintings.

These lady patrons may appear to the eyes of foreign travelers as Parisiennes, but they are more often than not tourists from England, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavian countries and America. Most of them come to Paris for sight-seeing and to enjoy their life in the city of freedom, maybe some of them with a hope of falling in love with one of these artists. Among them German, Spanish and Italian girls are working as nurse maids in order to learn French. The girls with whom foreign tourists fall in love are those foreign girls. Few native French girls fall into the hands of foreign tourists, and if there are any, either the father or mother is a foreigner.

One of my friends chanced to meet a French girl who liked painters at a ball of Bastille Day (Quatorze Juillet), and helped the painter start a new life by providing him with a studio and economic assistance.

During the Quatorze Juillet festivities from the evening of July 13 to the evening of 15, there is a custom that any one can dance and even kiss a strange girl in the balls arranged in every part of the city without offending the girl. Hotels are of course overcrowded and the bustling streets in ordinary times were so crowded that traffic was almost at a stop, especially in the streets from Saint Michel to Palais de Justice with spectators thronged there to see fireworks shooting up from the Seine. In this bustling crowd, there is heard neither fighting

sounds nor complaints. Everybody seems to enjoy his freedom to the full.

One Quatorze Juillet I went to Montmartre for sight-seeing with an Italian friend of mine. I had read in books and was told that I could safely shake hands or kiss a girl on the street, but I as an Oriental had no courage to court that kind of danger. Anyway we went into a café only to find there was no empty table. We decided to share a table already occupied by three girls. My Italian friend as a gesture to open a conversation asked no particular girl among them, "May I have a seat?"

"Well, what can I say when you have had one already?" One of them said with a smile.

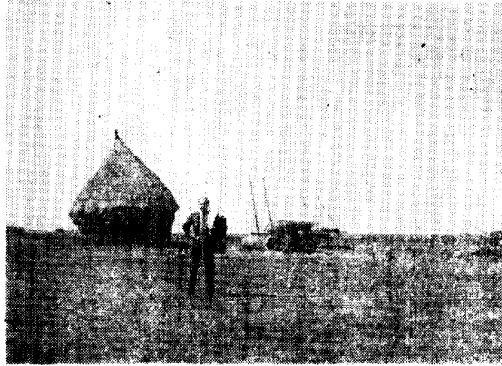
"Well," my Italian friend said, "I understand that almost everything is permitted on Quatorze Juillet, isn't it?" As they say, the Italian men are very skillful in dealing with women. In no time we became so familiar with one

another that we may have been passed for old friends. The Italian began to crack jokes and kissed a girl.

"It's been our custom on Quatorze Juillet," the girl said.

Whether it was true or not, it all appeared to me very natural. Of course their kissing has nothing to do with love, but for Oriental people it is very difficult to understand them. These are also

things which cannot be seen or permitted except in Paris.



The author in the famed barley field near Van Gogh's tomb

There were many painters who end up in failure because they saw the city of freedom only superficially. On the other hand, there were some who, utilizing this freedom to their advantage, became world-renowned for creating their unique style through experiment, freeing themselves from the fixed styles of academism. Indeed, the life of the city of Paris seems to lie in upholding freedom.

During my stay in Paris I have seen and known many such artists who have discovered their own world and established themselves in the world. Matisse died the year before I arrived there, in 1945, and Dufy two years before,

in 1953, but those who died after my arrival include Léger in 1955, Rouault in 1958, Vlaminck in 1958, Braque in 1963, architect-painter Le Corbusier in 1965, Fautrier in 1965, Giacometti in 1966, Zadkine in 1968 and Van Dongen in 1968.

Whenever the big stars fell, I felt my heart sinking, but what made me more sad was the death of Mr. Hong Sa-kun. Although he was not a painter, he loved the freedom of Paris so much that he died in the city undergoing tremendous hardships. And although he was a student of politics in Paris, his undergraduate study in French literature at Seoul National University perhaps enabled him to understand some of the anguish of the artist. Never have I felt more the frailty of life than when he died suddenly of a heart attack. I, who have believed in a God who will give light to those who have suffered the most, felt a grievance against God who had so mercilessly taken Mr. Hong from me. With him has gone the hope that some day God will shed light on our way

of hardship and suffering.

From the time I received the second invitation from Salon de Mai, I could sell my paintings occasionally, which helped alleviate my economic hardship. I made up my mind to move my apartment in order to free myself from the memory of my dead friend, and at the same time to devote myself to painting. I tried to comfort my sadness at losing a compatriot in a foreign land by the fact that I was being recognized and I could occasionally sell my paintings.

It was an infinite joy to sell my painting to a complete stranger. This made me the more reluctant to go back home, because the sad fact was that in Korea there were neither an art-dealer nor patrons of art in the true sense of the words, nor art museums which can house paintings into which the artist poured his blood and sweat. In other words, I resented and regretted the fact that our country has so far failed to formulate an adequate cultural policy.

The Green Chrysanthemum

(Continued from page 13)

on me afterwards."

The boy was the son of one of Kim-Dong-ji's tenants and knew all about Kim, who used to come down from Seoul and complain impatiently about the harvest. When he had delivered his message, he went on home.

Her mother-in-law would have liked to send Bun-i, but she went herself instead because Kim Dong-ji would have reproached her if she had sent the young woman to meet them alone. So she said to Bun-i, "I will go and you stay here." She tidied her clothes and went out.

Less than an hour later Kim Dong-ji, his adopted grandson the eunuch Pak, and Bun-i's mother-in-law come into the house. The garden

was swept so clean that not the slightest trace of steps was to be seen. The hoes, rakes and sickles were stacked in the place set aside for them. There was not a speck of dust on the wooden floor, so clean had it been wiped. The garden and the house stood silent. But there was no sign of Bun-i, either in the garden or in the house.

"Where has Bun-i gone?" Kim Dong-ji screeched furiously, in a voice like a cat's. Her mother-in-law was greatly taken a back. The eunuch Pak crept stealthily to the back garden to find Bun-i, whom he had missed so much. "Alas!" he cried in great alarm when he got there and looked at the peach tree. "Bun-i has hanged herself!"

The flowers under the hedge were a fresh and vivid red, bathed in the bright sunshine of the autumn afternoon.