

Art

My Life in Paris (III)

By Nam Kwan

This is the third and last of three installments, first of which appeared in the June issue of this magazine under the title "My Artistic Apprenticeship in Paris," which was changed to "My Life in Paris" from the July issue. But this last installment deals with his journey back home by way of New York and Tokyo rather than his life in Paris. He says that however beautifully an artist speaks and writes, his true spokesman is his creation.

Paris has changed. It is no exaggeration to say that today's Paris differs from the Paris of the 1950's as much as black and white. They washed the dirt from the dark and gloomy buildings which had once characterized Paris. Such historical edifices as the Opéra, the Panthéon, the Louvre, the Hôtel de Ville, the Arc de Triomphe, l'Assemblée Nationale and Palais de Justice were washed so clean that they appear to be new to those who do not know the old Paris.

Paris has changed from a dark and gloomy city to a white one. You can notice here and there the sidewalks narrowed to make way for automobiles, but what is more surprising is the fact that the Seine was also narrowed to make a driveway, thus damaging the beauty of the Seine. Underground garage construction work began in front of the Notre-Dame Cathedral, but it was soon suspended by the historic preservation society when pieces of Roman relics were unearthed from the work site, causing confusion among tourists.

A dozen old, tall trees were felled during the last May student riots along the street of St. Michel, the kingdom of youths and students. Across the St. Michel river and between the Préfecture de Police and the Palais de Justice one comes out into the Place de Châtelet. When the central market, Les Halles, was removed from nearby, the residents of the area rejoiced because they were free once and for all from the early morning noise of various trucks coming into the market from the countryside, and because gone with the market were the nearby entertainment joints. Except for merchants, most of the residents welcomed the disap-

pearance of eateries open until five in the morning.

Also gone is the Montparnasse Station which was familiar to every artist. The wooden rental studios scattered in this area were dismantled, causing a severe shortage of studios and consequently many artists moved to the suburbs.

In the past few years Paris artdom has also undergone as many changes as the city-scape. Such new art movements as Pop, Op, Nouvelle Figuration, Nouveau Réalité became common terms for the artists. There were other movements such as *object*, kinetism, the Happening, technological art, *art naïf*, and the environmental art which was in vogue in the United States. Among them, *art naïf* was seriously re-examined among the artists. These are very interesting movements born out of necessity. I used to go to their exhibitions and meet these young artists. However, I did not want to join them, although I had a deep interest in them. Anyway, these are not the things I liked to do.

At the time when my economic life turned better, after I moved from the Montparnasse studio, I moved again to the Cité des Arts, the so-called artists village, which was operated by the French government and where I saw many younger artists active in these novel movements. Cité des Arts was located on the right bank of the Seine in the 4e Arrondissement, and was built by the contributions of the member countries. Only selected artists of the member countries were qualified to live there, about 120 painters, sculptors and musicians. I was disqual-

ified because Korea was not a member country, but the French government offered me its good offices. Most of the foreigners in this village were established artists in their respective countries who had an interest in the new trends of art. They studied very hard to grasp these new artistic trends with a view to contributing to their country's art after their return home. I also studied no less hard than did they. "The Riverside" (300×200cm) which was shown in my last exhibition in Seoul I painted in the fourth floor studio of the village, mostly between two and four in the morning.

The studio faced the Seine, along which stood centuries-old trees. From my window, I would look down on the winding Seine, appearing and disappearing between the old trees and under the street lamps, the Saint Louis Island across the river, and the Cité Island on the right hand side, on which stands the famous Notre-Dame Cathedral. It is a well-known fact that Paris developed from the Cité Island, on which also stands Ste. Chapelle, a beautiful Gothic temple built with huge stones and gold.

Like London and New York, Paris is a beautiful night city of electric lights, but the tall, luxuriant trees abundant in the streets make the city darker than London or New York. From about two in the morning the city falls asleep, although innumerable windows are still lighted, and the sound of speeding automobiles is heard ever louder. Looking out on the Seine between the luxuriant old trees and the Saint-Louis Island across the river, which seemed to float as if they were shadows, I was compelled to feel the infinitely deep space. In "The Riverside," I discarded the concrete concepts of trees, rivers and island, and instead I tried to catch the harmony of nature in terms of perception and plane.

Every work of art is made out of one's personal experience peculiar to each artist, and this experience cannot exist independent of nature. When the artist succeeds in catching nature in his mind, to analyze and synthesize it and when he creates another nature, then the artist's "inner portrayal" comes into being. Only through this process is the artist's creative world given birth. The next important thing to develop an artist is, I think, his sincere attitude toward his painting. If there ever was a rule in my Paris life, it was to be sincere and make constant efforts. Constant efforts lead the artist

in a sincere and honest direction, and the sincerity will give substance to the content of his painting. In other words, meant by the content of a painting is the artist's inner portrayal and the spirit underlying the work of art. This is why I called my works the portrayal of mind instead of abstract, and corporeal instead of incorporeal.



"Viollet," 1968 Nam Kwan

Paris is as much a hotbed of artists as it is a sickbed. If one has been intoxicated with Paris, he no longer can free himself, just like an opium addict. Many artists who have been intoxicated with the Paris chic, followed things superficial and fashionable, and ended up in failure. To study art in Paris, one must be equipped with unerring critical faculty,

a strong personality and constant effort. Without these qualities he will never be recognized in Paris.

As the *Arts* magazine reported a few years ago, there were in Paris more than 100,000 artists, every one with no less ambition than the others. How many among them would have ended in failure as artists, but still intoxicated with Paris? Nowhere but in Paris can you enjoy the early morning hours in cafés reading newspapers over a cup of *café au lait* and a

croissant, puffing a pipe. But it is very easy to be addicted to this habit. If you become addicted to the café life in Paris, sitting up all night, enjoying conversations with friends, you lose not only time but also will to work. On the other hand, those who have interest in everything new, not knowing their own direction and personality, will also end up in failure, without ever having a chance to do their own work. They do not know the simple fact that the newest is the most intrinsic which has an eternal life. Because they have an erroneous concept of things "new," they become easily addicted with the Paris disease.

In his letter recommending me to the committee of Salon de Mai in 1958, the curator of the National Museum of Modern Art, Bernard Dorival, said that of all the foreign artists working in Paris, I seemed to know best what Paris was. I have no intention to praise myself in this article, and I know the dictum that the artist must be humble toward his own works. But one thing I am proud to say is that I was under nobody's influence when I lived in Paris.

As the gallery-goers may well have noticed in my last exhibition in Seoul, the 56 paintings in the exhibition show the artistic evolution I have undergone in Paris from 1955 to 1968, and I believe none of them showed any resemblance to the works of other painters. Each of them bore the stamp of my personality, and was the revelation of my inner life.

In 1967 I entered into a contract with two galleries in Luxembourg and Germany for private exhibitions, and worked literally day in and day out. As a result I lost weight and contracted insomnia, for which the doctor advised me to take a long vacation. I knew my health was declining, but I was happy during the time I was preparing for the exhibitions. Anyway, I went to Majorca for a vacation and came back to Paris in September to find another

offer from the newly opened Galerie Vercamer for an exhibition in Spring 1968, which I accepted because of its good terms.

In the meantime, I was thinking of leaving the Cité des Arts. The reason was simple. The 100-odd artists who lived in the small community became so close during the years they lived together that it interfered with my busy working hours. I felt it very fortunate to work in such a well-equipped studio, the more so in Paris where it was hard to rent a studio, but to lose my working hours for the sake of friendly association was a loss as well as an inconvenience

to my life. I decided to move to where I could work in solitude.

So I approached the French government again through whose good offices I was able to rent a studio operated by the City of Paris. It was a seven-story house near Montmartre which commanded a view of the Montmartre. At night the Sacré-Coeur illuminated the area brightly.

I rented another apartment house near the studio in order to work by myself and through the night, for the preparation of my exhibitions in 1968. Once moved into the new studio, I made it a rule to leave home at eight in the morning and work in the studio until seven in the evening, but the evening hours have more often than not been extended to nine. On such evenings I was too tired to walk home, and wanted nothing but to stretch out on the bed in working attire in the studio. At such times my wife's worried voice would come over the telephone. Getting ready to go home, I opened the door of my seventh floor studio to find the round moon in the mid-sky and the Sacré-Coeur looking white and mysterious due to its illumination. I would take a deep breath without being conscious of it, and descend the seven flights step by step, as if I were



"Fête Orientale" Nam Kwan

walking down to earth from Paradise. The fresh air seems to refresh me. Through the Montmartre public cemetery where the famous Dame au Camellia lie asleep and down to the Place de Clichy, this place of entertainment is like an exhibition of many and diverse races. My apartment is located in the direction of the Casino de Paris in the Rue de Clichy.

This way of life continued until March 1968 when my Paris exhibition opened. From then on I was thinking of having a few months of vacation as soon as the exhibition was over, as the doctor advised me. At the close of the exhibition, held March 28 through April 25, two more offers came to me, one from Barcelona in Spain and the other from Hamburg in Germany, which pleased me, and my decision to leave Paris was wavering. Was it because I treasured honor as an artist more than my health? I persuaded myself to take leave of Paris for the sake of my health.

In the meantime, the May disturbances occurred in Paris which helped topple President De Gaulle's government. The labor strikes which were ignited on May 15 swiftly swept over the whole country, and in conjunction with the student demonstration, drove Paris into lethargy until mid-June. Every institution felt the increasing need for *piquet de grève*.

This disturbance gave me the decisive motive to leave Paris. I decided to have a few months tour in the United States and paid a farewell visit to M. Dorival, who had become the Chief Curator of the National Museum of Modern Art, one week before my departure. The museum was strictly guarded by the staff against the group of artists who swarmed there to occupy the Museum. I was led through these guards to the Office of the Curator, who met me delightedly. When I told him I decided to make a few months' trip to America, he was rather surprised. I explained that my trip to America was mainly because of my health, and

then he said it might be a good idea.

Arriving in New York on June 9, 1968, I started a busy tour of museums and galleries. There are in New York about 150 galleries if you count only those listed in the Art Gallery magazine and they are more spacious and well-equipped than those in Paris, but the paintings in New York galleries cannot be said to match the up-to-date facilities of the galleries. A few of the galleries deal exclusively with those artists who concerned themselves with new art movements initiated in America. This I thought was very American.

These American artists who, it seemed to me, are trying to deliberately ignore the European tradition, French tradition in particular, include Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Gottlieb. Their vital color works at a glance seem done in geometric technique, but the effect of paints spread on the canvas seems to give an impression of Oriental painting which camouflages the geometric elements in the painting. On the other hand, Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Tom Wesselmann and Rosenquist are the American artists who have advocated the establishment of a new Americanism



"La Grande Peine," Nam Kwan

in art. Lichtenstein, for example, challenged the Paris School by employing language in his works, as in one of his paintings which I have seen, which depicts a young man with a revolver in black monochrome and "Now, mes enfants, pour la France!" The sentence seems to imply: "Now, boys, let's go to attack France!" As a slogan, it goes too far, but they are plotting a new direction for American art, as a matter of course.

These I think are the attempts of American artists who have long suffered from the tradition-complex to justify American art by consciously challenging tradition. Anyway, one can unmistakably notice the American effort to form an independent world of their own by delibera-

tely attacking the Paris School as a means of finding their own proper direction and bidding farewell to their worship of European art. In this respect, the new American art movement which they advocate is proper and worth doing.

However, you cannot deny the fact that the works of master artists of the Paris School still dominate the museums and galleries in the major American provincial cities. The Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum, to name only a few, treasure works of master artists of the Paris School like the famous American art dealers who deal with the same. It is, in other words, no exaggeration to say that the American artists and art-lovers still worship the Paris School. In fact, the American artists who helped form the present-day American art have been influenced in one way or another by the painters of the Paris School. If I may be allowed to use harsh words, the American artists may be said to reside in a rented house. Still, I have to admit that the effort of those American artists mentioned above to initiate new American art in deliberate defiance of Paris is proper and natural.

Such movements as technological art, Kinetic art, the Happening, environmental art, Elementalism and other industrial solid sculpture are bold attempts which only the Americans are capable of doing in defiance of European cultural traditions. And they may well be proud of the fact that these movements are becoming international. If we can say that this phenomenon is a product of highly-sophisticated industrial civilization of the U.S., the answer may be that simple. But even if the French enjoyed as much benefits of industrial culture as did the U.S., I don't think the French, who respect tradition, would even launch such movements.

Among many museums in New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art was the

most impressive to me, which houses the masterpieces of one of the greatest American artists, Jackson Pollock, which cannot be seen in Paris museums, de Kooning's masterpieces and those of Noguchi. This museum which boasts of its modern facilities is a special one in that it patronizes only American artists.

As the Paris-based master artists of the Ecole de Paris have had close connections with the American art-dealers and collectors in New York, in order to gain economic security in the period following World War II, such mass-circulation Japanese metropolitan newspapers as the *Mainichi*, *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* began to have connections with masters of Ecole de

Paris after they successfully sponsored exhibitions of master artists, including Picasso, and in recent years, Mathieu and San Francis, who were then considered the young avant gardes. The money-wise Japanese art-dealers followed suit. As a result, many artists and foreigners in Paris who have longed to see Japan have already been in Japan, and some of them



"Dans l'Ombre," Nam Kwan

who knew something of world art trends chirped unanimously that Tokyo was no different from Paris or New York, as the Japanese artists in Paris did. But I never heard that the New York art world is the same as that of Paris, although I heard their criticism of modern American art that it is broad in scope but with neither content nor taste, just like American women.

Anyway it is unfortunate for the development of art in Japan to receive such a criticism. The director of the Louvre after his observation tour of the Japanese art world a few years ago was said to have praised only Togo Seiji. I am not in a position to comment on this because I did not hear him say so directly. But I may guess the meaning of the director who well knew that France

has exerted a great influence on the art of Japan from the Meiji period, and who had seen a panoramic view of Japanese art from the so-called Japanese academism to the modern trends. As the director of the Louvre, the home of classicism, he could not see any originality in Japanese classicism or academism, and my guess is that he may well have lost his interest in the modern painting of Japan.

I had a week-long stop-over in Tokyo last year on my way back home from Paris via New York to observe the trend of modern Japanese painting. To be frank, my impression was that the paintings of Japanese artists I have seen in the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and other galleries were neither those of Paris, New York, nor those of Japan for that matter. They appeared to me of obscure nationality. They, nevertheless, had a strong point, that is, their excellent technique which seemed to indicate a new direction and which was just as good as that of the other painters of the world.

In recent years, the Japanese artists won prizes in the Biennale de Paris, and I think it is mainly due to the fact that the jury recognized their excellent technique rather than the creative value of their painting. Other factors might have worked for the Japanese artists. The atmosphere in which the jury felt anxiety at the lost spirit of art at a time when the artists were trying to seek a way out of impasse of abstract art might have attracted them to the novel Japanese technique in comparison to other painters from other countries. Another factor might have been Japan's national power which made the Westerner to equate the Orient with Japan. The Japanese artists and critics are closely cooperating with each other in order to enhance their position in the international art world by capitalizing on the advantageous time.

The artists who have distinguished themselves in the long history of world art have lived in and become apostles of spirituality. The artists of the medieval age lived to uphold only the spirit of God, while the Renaissance artists tried to give expression to man's spirituality freed from God. In modern times, the expressionists laid so much emphasis on man's spirituality that they succeeded in expressing the dramatic aspects of man, and the artists of abstractionism which swept over world art in the period following the Second World War stressed the spirit of the individual and consequently the portrayal of the inner spirit so much that the paintings became too abstruse for the general

public to understand, because they ignored the *raison d'être* of objectivity. All this owed to the strong emphasis placed on spirituality.

On the other hand, the effort of modern American artists to construct a single plane space with strong original colors in defiance of dimensional planes, huge sculptural works based on dynamics, atmospheric sculptures utilizing néon signs and elements, environmental art and solid structures made with polyester—all these are not purported to emphasize man's spirituality but rather an effort to link man's physical body and the scientific phenomena.

That which results from

this has no other value than that of entertainment, and is too cinematic to be called artistic. If they insist on calling these works of modern art, they must admit that the electronic machines or Apollo Spacecraft are by far the greater and more living modern art. Therefore, if the spectators say that their works have no other value than a temporary entertainment, they may have no words to counter them.

Then, what direction should we Korean artists follow? Ours is far from the Am-

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"Monologue," Nam Kwan 1962

to play an important role. True, Japanese literature is mature and deserves a Nobel Prize, but the Japanese national power and economic prosperity are always there to back up the image of Japan. This, though indirectly, supports what I have said before, that modernization is being promoted in Korea for the sake of our art and culture, as well as other aspects of society.

What I can say for sure, as a novelist, is that we have so far been lucky to preserve to a certain extent the originality or peculiarity of Korean literature, due to its untranslatability. I have some experience in this line but the result was not satisfactory. For instance, if we translate a literary work which has strong local color, foreigners would have difficulty in understanding it; while, on the other hand, if we translate avant garde literature, it reads like an imitation of Western literature. This is a problem which demands our attention. We are still in the stage of developing and refining our language, not in a position to start hasty translation. If we perfect our side of the job, there will come sooner or later those who will take up the other side of the job, namely, translating Korean literature into foreign languages.

Lastly, I would like to recommend two things to the Ministry of Culture and Information. The one concerns the government policy

on domestic films to be entered in international film festivals. The government appears to be very reluctant to allow those films that depict poverty, misery, and the darker side of our life to enter such festivals. Some two decades ago we had seen the Italian movie "The Bicycle Thief," and few thought of Italy as a poor country, as the film portrayed, but many were impressed by the movie and might have thought instead that only Italy was capable of producing such an artistic movie as "The Bicycle Thief." The total effect is something more than the combination of individual scenes of the movie. The government and the jury are advised to judge a piece of art, whether it is a film, a painting, or a poem, in artistic perspective.

The other is about the attitude toward policy formulation. I do not think our society is a closed one as some say. Scholars, artists, bureaucrats and businessmen have the freedom to go abroad and do whatever they like and come back home again. When you meet one of those who has been abroad, they are open-minded and talk quite liberally and sensibly. But why is it that when they gather to formulate a government policy they more often than not end up in devising a strait-jacket policy? I think at the least the Ministry of Culture and Information among other government agencies must get rid of bureaucratism and help create a freer atmosphere for art and culture.

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erican reality and to compare with France, the history of Korea's modern art is far too short, and the Japanese artists enjoy better social position. In Japan those who have won reputation will not only be assured of their economic well-being, but also of social recognition.

It is difficult for Korean artists to be internationally recognized unless we get economic, social and governmental support. Nevertheless, we cannot sit idle until these conditions are provided us. It seems to me that the Korean art world is at a critical juncture, because the various art trends fashionable in Paris, New York and Tokyo exist in Korea simultaneously but not as an inevitable result born out of the given situation. We have no one to rely on,

but must find our right direction by ourselves. If we imitate one today and another tomorrow, we will never be able to free ourselves from foreign influence.

If some one asks me what is the right direction, I will not hesitate to answer that it will be naturally set if and when one is totally absorbed in his creative work, never losing the spirit of quest and without forgetting the artistic duty placed on him. This is the creative spirit, the substance which makes the work of art original. And it is only the original works of art that are internationally evaluated. We must work hard and unceasingly without words, for the true spokesman of the artist is his creation.