

exhibition review

ASATO IKEDA

The fascination of Europe: western-style paintings in modern Japan
National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 18 November 2008- 11 October 2009

An almost year-long exhibition at the National Museum of Korea, Seoul, entitled *The Fascination of Europe: Western-Style Paintings in Modern Japan* (original English title), has recently come to a close. The exhibition, situated in the museum's Japanese art gallery, displayed forty works by such artists as Fujita Tsuguharu, Koiso Ryōhei, Ihara Usaburō, and Kanokogi Takeshiro. The works are from the collection of the Yi Royal Museum, which acquired one hundred and ninety-eight Japanese works (Western-style paintings, Japanese-style paintings, woodblock prints, crafts, and sculptures) for display between 1933 and 1943.

The Yi Royal Museum collection is a controversial collection that has until recently been hidden from the Korean public. As Korean art historian Kim Hyeslin explains, work by Korean artists during Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) has often been dismissed for its defeatism and barely discussed in Korean art history; discussions of such art would always entail and be entangled with issues of pro-Japanese Korean "collaborators."¹ On the other hand, it has been feared that Japanese art from the colonial period in the Yi Royal Museum would reinforce remaining anti-Japanese sentiments among Koreans.

The Fascination of Europe, however, is not the first instance in which the collection has been exhibited since the end of World War Two. The first attempt was initiated by the national museum in 2002. Titled *Japanese Modern Art Collection from the National Museum of Korea*, the exhibition of forty-five Japanese-style paintings and twenty-five crafts opened at the national museum in Seoul, and toured Japanese museums including the University Art Museum at Tokyo University of the Arts and the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.² *The Fascination of Europe* is different from the 2002 exhibition in that it displays Western-style paintings, which were left out of the 2002 exhibition, and to my knowledge, there are no plans for the exhibition to tour Japan.

The message of *The Fascination of Europe* is anything but ambiguous; curator Sun Seunghye states that the goal of the exhibition is to "facilitate we Koreans rediscovering this modern art movement from our own cultural context,"³ but she fails to propose how. This is because the exhibition opts not to make an explicit reference to the impact of Japan's colonialism, which subordinated the Korean royal family and enabled Japanese authorities to administrate Korean art institutions. For example, as Taiwanese

art historian Hsin-Tien Liao has observed, landscape paintings of colonies by Japanese artists were embedded in Japan's exoticism toward the Asian continent and discourses of imperialist tourism,⁴ but the curator of *The Fascination of Europe* characterizes them instead as "globalized forms of artistic expression."⁵ Likewise, three sections of the exhibition ("Encounter of East and West: Western-style paintings in Japan," "The Female World: Figure Paintings in Modern Japan," and "Impressions of Light: Landscape Paintings in Modern Japan"), which are organized by subject matters for "visitors' convenience,"⁶ only explored the relationship between Europe and Japan, not Japan and Korea.

As the curator writes, "it is interesting to note that all but one of the human figure paintings in the collection depicts a female figure."⁷ Given this fact, the exhibition could have addressed complex identity issues of female/male, the colonizer/the colonized, and West/non-West. If, as Norman Bryson argues, images of Western female nudes were the entry point for Japanese male artists to share desire and thus come to be on equal terms with men of the imperial West,⁸ what does it mean that Korean King Yeongchin (1897-1970) collected images of Western female nudes painted by Japanese men? At the same time, I would also like to point out that the artists included in the exhibition did not exclusively paint women in their careers. Many of the artists (such as Fujita, Koiso, Ihara, and Kanokogi) were, in fact, official war painters whose depictions of Japanese soldiers in the late 1930s and early 1940s form yet another problematic collection: the collection that was once confiscated by the United States, is now housed at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, but is rarely displayed. Why were male and female images collected and exhibited separately? Why does the royal collection not include war battle paintings by the same artists? Instead of asking critical, provocative, or ethical questions about Japan's colonialism and its influence on Korean modern art and art collecting, the exhibition made colonial history as inconspicuous as possible. Considering the decades-long debate over historical consciousness between Japan and Korea, one may wonder why. This may be because of the emasculating effects of Japan's colonialism on Korean "masculine" (military) historical narratives, as art historian Hong Kal suggests in her analysis of the War Memorial of Korea.⁹ In addition, I would suggest that rapidly increasing numbers of Japanese tourists in Korea these days might have an impact on how history is addressed. As travel guides show, for Japanese tourists, both the War Memorial of Korea and the National Museum of Korea are "must-see" attractions.

Asato Ikeda is a PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, Canada.

Notes

1 Kim Hye-sin, *Kankoku kindai bijutsu kenkyū: shokuminchiki chōsenbijutsutenrankai ni miru ibunkashihai to bunka hyōshō* [Studies of Korean Modern Art: Cultural Control and Cultural Representation in Colonial “Korean Art Exhibitions”](Tokyo: Brücke, 2005).

2 *Kankoku kokuritsu chūō hakubutsukan shozō: nihon kindai bijutsu ten* [Japanese Modern Art Collection from the National Museum of Korea], exh. cat. (University Art Museum at Tokyo University of the Arts, et al, 2003),135.

3 *The Fascination of Europe: Western-style Paintings in Modern Japan*, exh. cat. (The National Museum of Korea, 2008).

4 Liao Hsin-tien, “The Beauty of the Untamed: Exploration and Travel in Colonial Taiwanese Landscape Painting,” *Refracted Modernity: Visual Culture and Identity in Colonial Taiwan*, Yuko Kikuchi, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

5 *The Fascination of Europe: Western-style Paintings in Modern Japan*, 135.

6 Ibid, 134.

7 Ibid, 135.

8 Norman Bryson, “Westernizing Bodies: Women, Art, and Power in Meiji *Yōga*,” Norman Bryson, Joshua S. Mostow, and Maribeth Graybill, eds., *Gender and Power in The Japanese Visual Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

9 Hong Kal, “Commemoration and the Construction of Nationalism: War Memorial Museums in Korea and Japan,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. <<http://www.japanfocus.org/-Hong-KAL/2880>>(accessed 24 August 2009).