

## **The Women Who Shook the World: Portraiture of the Korean Independence fighters in polychrome painting by Yun Suknam**

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Yun Suknam is a renowned artist who dedicated her life to creating art that relates to the autonomous life of women in the Korean society. For forty years, based on her experience and imagination she has depicted a broad range of women, such as actual people like her mother, women laborers in the arduous work fields, her feminist friends who have co-pioneered women's culture in South Korea, and including characters from history and mythology, like Heo Nanseolheon, Choi Seung-hui, Kim Man-deok, and Princess Bari. The pursuit for the sovereignty of women, coupled with feminist ideal of harmonious existence of all life forms, has been her principal concern; accordingly she has striven and refined her artistic idiom that could replace the male-centered impoverished imagination that has dominated the Korean art world. Her work that began in oil and acrylic painting in the nineteen eighties, shifted to the wood sculpture and installation in the nineties, and to the massive scale installation pieces with cut folded paper in 2000 that culminates in the chaesaekhwa (polychrome painting) of late. The artist is tireless in her search for the most apt style through which she can best express her aesthetics. Her versatile nature is owing to her separation and relative freedom from the established Korean art education. She therefore was able to sublimate her weakness to strength and with tenacity and conviction for feminist values she has served the role as a prime mover in South Korean art.

In 2016, Yun Suknam went through one more inflection point and commenced a new project, "polychrome painting of portraiture," and she is becoming adept at it. After her solo exhibition "Yun Suknam ♥ Heart" at Seoul Museum of Art in 2016, she undertook the long delayed challenge of pursuing chaesaekhwa. It was no surprise since she had always harbored keen interest in Korean traditional culture, not to mention how she had consistently incorporated shamanistic and ritualistic elements in her work. But in view of her age and for someone who had expressed herself through the medium of western painting for the most part of her artist life, it was bold and unheard of for an artist to start afresh with the Eastern painting method and métier. She has garnered the weighty title of the "Godmother of South Korean feminist art," therefore one would think she would cozily settle in it. In fact, there are many people who are curious as to why she would embark on that venture and take such a risk. The artist states her very first encounter with the Joseon Dynasty portrait of Yun Du-seo, as her motivating impulse.

In autumn of 2011, Yun Suknam was able to view in person “The Self-portrait” by Yun Du-seo (18th Century, color on paper, Nokwudang Collection in Haenam), the scholarly painter of the Joseon era in an exhibition entitled “The Cryptic Portraiture,” at the National Museum of Korea. The self-portrait shows a man with sharply discerning eyes with his beard pointed in all directions; it is rare in that the face is frontal for it defied the common Joseon Dynasty code of portraiture painting. It is considered a masterpiece among all the Joseon era portraits for its remarkable expression of the person’s inner disposition. With the passing of time, the lines over his ear, shoulder and attire faded and unveiled his distinctive aura. The artist described the moment of her encounter with the self-portrait of Yun Du-seo as being struck on the head with a hammer, professing her shock at how a work of art can stir and awaken one’s soul.<sup>1</sup>

In order to comprehend her particular experience, it might be helpful to refer to the Jewish French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, and his emphasis on the significance of encountering the face of the “Other.” According to Levinas, the face is the means by which one discloses his or her being and the countenance is also the manifestation of the “Other” to me; more than anything, the eye, he argued, is the most singular conduit that allows one’s presence to be definitive.<sup>2</sup> In respect for the ethics of the “Other,” Levinas stated one could not gauge the “Other” by way of a picture; however, with someone from the past who no longer exists in this world it is only possible to do that through a self-portrait or a photograph. Yun Du-seo who lived in the past time frame confronted the artist with the face of the “Other.” Her encounter with his face of the painting was a once in a life, momentous incident that shook her consciousness vis-a-vis the “Other.” Her recent portraiture work of the women could be seen as the “future” outcome of that awakening.

Beginning late 2015 and for the next three years, Yun Suknam took lessons in Korean polychrome painting once a week from Kim Hyunja, the master artist of Minwha designated as the twenty-eighth Intangible Cultural Asset of Gyeonggi Province. During that time, she worked on countless drawings of self-portraits, striving for accurate rendition and fluidity. These self-portraits were first done in ink on colored hanji (Korean rice paper) and she later attempted partial coloring to progress toward freely applying all colors in her portraiture. In the self-portraits done during her experimental stage, the hyper-realistic delineation of her facial wrinkles, consequently revealing the artist’s age is quite striking, not to mention her powerful gaze that captures the viewer’s attention. In particular, the lifelike representation of her rhythmic and animated hair is reminiscent of Yun Du-seo’s beard that springs in all directions. The artist who became inspired by Yun Du-seo’s self-portrait discovered two things in the course of studying the history of Korean portraiture painting. First, it was done traditionally through polychrome method and second that there was a

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with the artist at her Hwaseong studio, January 15, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> See Gang Yeung-an, *The Face of the Other: Levinas’s Philosophy*, Seoul: Moonji Publishing Co. Ltd, 2005, pp. 176-185.

strong emphasis on a lifelike depiction of the person during the Joseon Dynasty. Yet, there were hardly any paintings of women done because of Neo-Confucianism as its governing ideology, which banned immediate contact between men and women.

Meanwhile, after the liberation of Korea from the Japanese Colonialism, the convenient dichotomy—of categorizing chaesaekhwa as belonging to the Japanese tradition whereas ink painting was original to Korean art—became grounded and as the pretext of eliminating all Japanese cultural remnants; thus, chaesaekhwa was shunned for a long time. It was only in the new millennium that a somewhat positive reevaluation of chaesaekhwa made it possible for it to be reinstated as a legitimate art form—with undoubtedly the boom for Korean Minwha contributing to its acceptance. This is how the portraiture of women and chaesaekhwa share their common history of being the forgotten “Other” in Korean culture. In the background of how the awakening of Yun Suknam, which began with her encounter of Yun Du-seo’s self-portrait, led to the polychrome paintings of women’s portraiture, one cannot but perceive the artist’s painful recognition of the history of the “Other” in Korean culture. Her portraiture, according to the method and material, can be called chaesaekhwa, or portraiture painting based on its genre or subject matter, and to be more specific, it is female portraiture. In short, it is “portrait of women done in polychrome painting,” but since there is not a most appropriate term for it, in this essay it will be referred to as “chaesaek portraiture” or “chaesaek female portraiture.”

Yun Suknam’s solo exhibition at Hakgojae Gallery in 2018 was a harbinger to her chaesaek portraiture project that would ensue. I was a witness to the artist challenging herself with polychrome painting in her mature age, and even for someone of her fortitude and artistic excellence, she has expressed anxiety over how the art world would respond to her new approach and efforts. Fortunately, she received positive reviews for her self-portraits that she exhibited in two solo shows in 2018. Encouraged, the artist began to earnestly investigate all the women figures whom she would paint thenceforth while working on mastering the chaesaek style of painting.

In 2019 the artist, who turned eighty years old, held the exhibition, “Yun Suknam, Portraiture of Her Friends,” at OCI Museum of Art, thereby introducing large portrait paintings of her twenty-two friends who have been her lifelong support network. Applying fluid ink lines with crisp color, she portrayed the women in a realist manner, disclosing their identity; it was evident that she endeavored to encapsulate the inner world of each individual, through their face and eyes, just like she had done in her other works. Because it took her months to complete them all, the ones that were done later came out more natural in the use of color and portrayal as the artist became more and more skilled at her painting technique. These women were artists, literary people, a

curator, a stage actor, a singer, and other cultural figures who have fought against the Neo-Confucian patriarchal system deeply rooted in Korean society, and who wholly engaged themselves in a struggle to realize a gendered egalitarian culture in their given domains. The twenty-two portraits were painted individually but once they were displayed together, it gave an effect of an immense group portrait. One could be an eyewitness to a phenomenon of the production and extended interaction of the women from diverse cultural milieu on an experiential and intellectual level being shown in the artwork by an artist who espouses feminist values. Yun Suknam's portraits of her friends are homage to the women who have walked on the same difficult path and a testimony to their long lasting friendship and solidarity of the women that is overlooked in a patriarchal society. They are somewhat similar but different from the women portraits previously done by the American feminist artists in 1970 to 1980, as in "Some Living Women Artists/Last Supper" (1972), a group portrait by the American artist and pioneer of the feminist art movement, Mary Beth Edelson.

Her exhibition entitled, "Yun Suknam: Women of Resistance, Becoming Historic," at the Hakgojae Gallery is a good opportunity to view the artist's portraiture project on their rightful track. It will show fourteen large-scale chaesaekhwa portraits of the Korean women Independence fighters and the installation work called, "Red Room." The novelist Kim E Kyung and the artist have worked jointly for several months in selecting the historical women for the exhibition. Kim E Kyung has taken on the task of dramatizing these women's stories, based on the records and literature extant and the artist, Yun Suknam, painted them by alluding to the writing of the novelist that will be published simultaneously with the exhibition.

The fourteen Korean women Independence fighters who will be brought to light are Kang Ju-ryong, Kwon Ki-ok, Kim Maria, Kim Myeong-si, Kim Alexandra, Kim Ok-ryeon, Nam Ja-hyeon, Park Ja-hye, Park Jin-hong, Park Cha-jeong, Ahn Kyung-shin, Lee Hwa-rim, Jeong Jeong-hwa, and Chung Chil-sung. They dedicated their lives to the women's movement and fought for the independence of Korea from Japanese Colonialism. These names could sound unfamiliar to many given that Ryu Gwan-sun is the single most well-known female independence fighter to most people in South Korea. Although many women have sacrificed their lives to the struggle alongside men for the independence of Korea, they were long forgotten and not properly acknowledged. Korean feminist scholars and activists are busily excavating the history of these women fighters. More than anyone else, Yi Yun-ok, the poet, has devoted her life to uncovering them and letting them be known to the public. She has published ten volumes of poetry (*The Wild Flowers of Seogando*), telling their life stories. Thanks to their efforts, the number of women fighters who have been newly recognized and had honors conferred on them by the South Korean government has been on a slight increase every year; however, it is still only two or three

percent of the men.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, the lives of these Korean women independence fighters were given a spotlight and reevaluated in a very popular Korean television drama, *Mr. Sunshine* (2018) and a blockbuster film, *Assassination* (2015), thereby enlightening the general South Korean public. The role of An Ok-yun in the movie, *Assassination*, which the actress, Jeon Ji-hyeon (Gianna Jun) played, was modeled after Nam Ja-hyeon, of whom the viewer will be able to see in the exhibition.

Against the backdrop of the nation-states of the world powers fighting for dominant hegemony, the people of Joseon Korea during the colonial period ardently aspired for a transition to a modern nation-state, and this zeal led to the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement in 1919. It was a struggle in which the whole nation participated. Countless women like the students, the educated women, gisaeng, and laborers willingly took part. The fervor for women's liberation, which was triggered by the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement, expanded to women of all levels. They took great pride in themselves, participating in the resistance struggle and other social actions and with the awareness that they too belonged to humankind and were an integral part of the nation. For them, the struggle against the Japanese were one and the same as their participation in the women's movement and to be acknowledged as equal to men in a patriarchal society and the national movement for liberation from the colonial rule.

When socialism spread worldwide in the nineteen twenties, the women who were members of the nationalist and socialist factions organized the groups and carried on their activism for the liberation of Korea. Of the fourteen women in the portrait series, there are several who were involved in the socialist liberation movement, namely Kim Myeong-si, Kim Alexandra, Park Jin-hong, Park Cha-jeong, and Chung Chil-sung. Among them, Kim Myeong-si, Lee Hwa-rim, and Chung Chil-sung have not yet had honors conferred on them because of their socialist affiliation. The women activists went all over the country and outside of Korea. It would boggle one's mind to know as to how very far the Korean women traveled for national independence. The Korean women who were active in the national liberation movement also partook in the education and conscientizing of women, fighting for their rights to survival, anti-Japanese resistance struggle, and armed efforts, thereby irrefutably contributing to the liberation of Korea.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There were 472 Korean women Independence fighters who were recorded in the published material of the National Women's History Exhibition Hall in 2019. Since some of the socialist women fighters shown in this exhibition are not included, one can speculate the number should be greater. Ki Gye-hyeong, et al. "Four Hundred Seventy-Two Korean Women Independence Fighters in Photographs: The Hundredth Anniversary Commemorative Record of the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement and the Establishment of the Provisional Government." The National Women's History Exhibition Hall, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Jung Hyun Baek, et al., *Korean Women's History in the Global Age*, Saramui Munui [A Person's Pattern], 2016, pp. 205-217.

Yun Suknam chose to unveil the identity of the fourteen women fighters through their faces and background information, which gives us a clue as to how each woman engaged herself during the Independence movement. For the artist, the face tells the existence of the other, and is an essential factor for rapport with the "Other." In short, it is impossible for the artist to do a portrait without a photograph or other material that shows the face. Moreover, she has always regarded the face, and especially the eye as the key to revealing the person's inner spirit most candidly. Next to the face, the hand is represented in a meaningful way. To start off her work, Yun Suknam would do a small drawing of the face to get a sense of the person's character; she then would move to the actual size drawing, of which she would transfer to the hanji and complete with polychrome painting. In the exhibition, the viewer can see the entire process of her work, for the very first drawing of the face will be shown alongside the initial small and the final large portraits.

The fourteen women fighter's means of struggle is shown through their attire, objects, setting or succinctly conveyed situation. The photographs taken at the site are rare, as the women were constantly on the move and in dangerous locations. Therefore, because of the lack of historical records or sources, Yun Suknam, the artist, had had to resort to her imagination based on what she read. It could possibly have been a significant dilemma for her to find the way to depict each of these woman's activities without much information, for the women's involvement in the Independence movement is just beginning to come to the fore. It is evident she has resolved the issue, notwithstanding a bit of deviation in the portraits. For example, for someone who is somewhat accustomed to deciphering images, it is possible to discern that Kang Ju-ryong was a woman who has a record of staging a struggle for the laborers atop the Eulmildae Pagoda, with the painting of her on the roof tile of the house with the gazebo in the background. One can intuit, too, the irresolute will of Nam Ja-hyeon for Korean Independence by her bandaged left little finger and a tiny bowl with blood around it—that she had cut off her little finger to write a declaration in blood. In the portraits of Kim Myeong-si, Park Cha-jeong, and Lee Hwa-rim, one can guess they were active in the armed struggle, while Kim Maria and Chung Chil-sung had something to do with education. Jeong Jeong-hwa, who was responsible for delivering the funds for the Independence Movement to the Provisional Government, is seen at the platform of a train station, dressed in Chinese attire. Painted in a realist style, the portraits of the fourteen women faithfully serve the foremost function of portraiture. The artist does not just stop short of representing them but she also has heightened the artistic effect by positioning the figures to the fullest in the given space, the energetic volume of the bodies that stands out on the flat surface, the interplay of omission and emphasis, the abstracted background, the fluid application of ink and color, and the dynamic range of lines.

In this exhibition that will bring to light the Korean women Independence fighters, the artist created a special installation called the "Red Room." This room will be filled with red paperwork pieces, symbolizing all things in nature and wooden objects for the nameless women, which is the artist's homage to the women activists who awoke Korea during the colonial period. The blood that these women shed for the sake of national liberation and their zealous effort for socialist revolution, their vociferous demand for the equal rights of women—all these and more resound in the "Red Room," and will move the viewer's heart.

Yun Suknam intends to complete one hundred portraits of these Korean women Independence fighters. I surmise we will see them in the next two or three years. Her work will help a wider spectrum of people to find out about the activism of the Korean women Independence fighters. When a greater number of these portraits shown, then the more effective it will be. They will ask what ethnicity and nation signify to the women of Korea and the true independence one must aspire to. The world has changed much but for those of us who live in the present, the question does not belong to the past but is an ongoing one. With the chaesaek painting that the artist has brought to another level, Yun Suknam brings us closer to the heart of the question. Furthermore, in the Korean art world where the ambiguous boundary between Eastern and Western art still remains, Yun Suknam's polychrome portraiture painting of the women Independence fighters could free us from this barrier, and can therefore be seen as groundbreaking.

Translated by Inyoung Choi