



Socialist Realism, *Juche* (Self-Reliance) Realism, and *Joseon*-painting

Hong, Ji Suk
(Dankook University)

North Korean artists are known to pursue realism. However, what constitutes North Korean realism? Many people understand that realism in art is paintings or sculptures that depict the reality as it is. In other words, if a painting, like a photograph, depicts real things, we call it a work of realism. However, North Korean artists believe that these paintings do not constitute realism in the true sense of the word. North Korean art critics have demanded that artists not paint the reality as it is but rather seek out the essential, the important, the basic, and the typical. Artists who have been engulfed in the socialist reality argue that they cannot see things in as cold a manner as machines—such as the fields where farmers work, mines where miners work, steel production plants, construction sites for socialist cities, and schools for educating children who will lead the future. They insist that one should not only feel the joy and enthusiasm of the people who work there but also gain faith in the bright future of socialism through artwork. North Korean art critics argue that artists should incorporate all of this into their works. They say that artists should put their own experiences and feelings into their own works to create works full of “revolutionary romanticism.” These critics reject the depiction of reality as an instant, like a photograph; instead, they refer to this style as naturalism, bourgeois formalism, and documentarism.

What constitutes North Korean realism?

The commonly used term for this kind of realism is “socialist realism.” Socialist realism art full of revolutionary romanticism is always bright, energetic, and full of joy. It is positive art or art for propaganda that educates the working class and shows their bright future. Of course, socialist realism is not an art ideology created by North Korean artists. It is an art ideology, form, and style that the socialist system, including the former Soviet Union, created for its own needs. After the liberation, North Korean artists created their own socialist realism art style by studying socialist realism art through various exchanges with socialist states, including the Soviet Union. Interestingly, socialist realism art is realism art, but it always seems out of touch with reality. Socialist realism paintings and sculptures produced by Soviet and Chinese artists always look too confident, bright, and powerful. Likewise, paintings full of optimistic smiles produced by North Korean artists do not seem to reflect the reality of North Korea. Of course, even North Korean artists are aware of this issue. Therefore, they have emphasized artists' active and individualized depictions of reality while criticizing the schematic depiction of a fixed subject in a fixed way. However, many artists who are conscious of this criticism and have portrayed an altered reality have been criticized as revisionists. As a result, North Korean art has a unique language that emphasizes the artist's opinion and individual thoughts while at the same time enforcing norms. The individual approach is always emphasized, but these approaches always respect norms, only to double the pressure on artists.

Although socialist realism is a sort of realism art, it always seemed far from reality so art critics under the socialist system had to emphasize the 'national form.' The ‘socialist in content and national in form’ presented by the Soviet literary discourse in the 1930s was a slogan that represented the socialist realism. The national form has been used in the socialist states for a long time. Being a form familiar to the public, it played the role of mitigating and concealing the unfamiliarity and unreality of 'socialist content' which is full of revolutionary romance. It was regarded as an understandable form which quickly and easily conveyed and disseminated socialist ideas and emotion to the people. In keeping with the slogan of ‘socialist in content and national in form', North Korean artists chose *Joseon-hwa* (*Joseon*-painting) as their national form in the late 1950s. Here, *Joseon*-painting belong to what is commonly referred to as “Asian painting” which are painted with ink or colored paints on paper or silk. It is distinguished from a western painting with oil or acrylic paints on canvas. Although some argued that *Joseon*-painting was an outdated form of the feudal era and favored by the ruling class, and therefore inappropriate as the national form for socialist realism, North Korean artists eventually approved *Joseon*-painting as their “national form.” Since the late 1960s when the North Korean leader Kim Il-sung demanded “to develop the fine arts based on *Joseon*-painting”, the status of *Joseon*-painting has been upgraded to a national form.

***Juche* (Self-Reliance) Realism on the basis of *Joseon*-painting**

However, they did not pay much attention to restoring and maintaining the original form of traditional painting. Rather, they processed and altered various elements of traditional painting depending on the changes in the social environment or by the demands of the ruling system. For example, until the late 1950s, plain ink-and-wash painting was more favored but after the 1960s, due to the industrialization, painting with intense colors became the norms for *Joseon*-painting. Art critics also argued that *Joseon*-paintings had a clear, delicate, and concise aesthetic, which reflects the virtues and attitudes that the ruling system desires from the public. Since the 1970s, *Joseon*-painting has enjoyed the status as "the basic of basics" of North Korean art. During this period, all fields of art, such as oil painting, sculpture, craft, and industrial art, were given a task to fit the unique characteristics of *Joseon*-painting into their own areas of art. Art education focused on *Joseon*-painting in both quantity and quality, and artists in each field of art were obliged to participate in the *Joseon*-painting class. In the 1970s, North Korea called the art developed based on *Joseon*-painting as so-called '*Juche* (Self-Reliance) Realism Art'. It is a very unique art that closely resembles 'socialist realism art,' but is not exactly the same. From the point of view of an art historian, *Juche* Realism is both a local and final alteration of socialist realism. ■

- **Hong Ji-seok** is Ph.D. in Fine Arts and Visiting Professor of Fine Arts at Dankook University. He is also Planning Director of Korean Society of Modern and Contemporary Art History. His research area includes study on Korean modern art history and North Korean art. His publications are *Art Historians and Critics Going to North Korea - A Study on North Korean Artists* (2018), *Dialogue for Art History Beginners* (co-author, 2018), etc.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

“Socialist Realism, *Juche* (Self-Reliance) Realism, and *Joseon*-painting”

Date of Issue: 30 July 2021 979-11-6617-190-1 95340

Typesetting: Kwang-min Pyo

For inquiries:

Kwang-min Pyo, Senior Researcher

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 203)

ppiokm@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr