

Identity and Aesthetics: Some Thoughts about the ‘Koreanness’ of Korean Art*

Burglind Jungmann**

The concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘aesthetics’ exert, whether consciously or unconsciously, influence on any art historian’s work. However, we rather try to avoid to discuss them. The question of ‘aesthetics,’ understood as the exploration of ‘beauty’ or ‘taste,’ has entirely vanished from the art historical discourse. Moreover, in contemporary art the term ‘identity’ is not supposed to be applied to a ‘national,’ not even a ‘regional’ identity because contemporary art is understood as a global phenomenon. The two words ‘contemporary’ and ‘Korean’ together thus seem to be paradoxical, “for the ‘contemporary’ implies a sense of temporality shared globally, while the ‘Korean’ connotes specific knowledge and experience of the local.”¹

Thus, thinking about the two terms is like opening a box of worms. The reasonable approach for the art historian to get out of such a dilemma usually is to look at a work of art. ‘Staircase,’ an installation by Suh Do-Ho, was shown at several important galleries of contemporary art, among them the Tate Gallery of Modern Art in London.² I encountered another version of it installed at the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in 2013 (fig. 1) and was fascinated by its bright

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** Professor Emerita of Korean Art and Visual Culture, UCLA

¹ Moon Young-min, “South Korean Art since 1980: the Era of Democracy, Globalization, and Technology,” in *A Companion to Korean Art*, forthcoming.

² <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/suh-staircase-iii-t13344> (accessed 11/10/18)

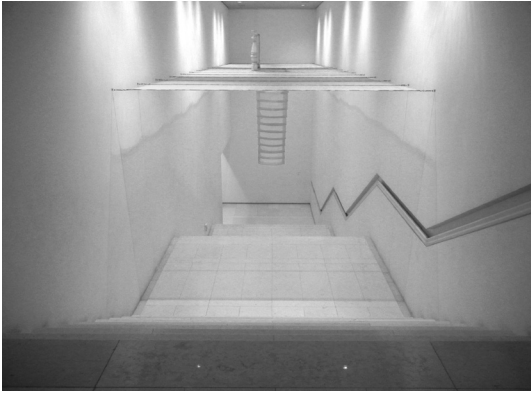


Fig. 1 Suh Do-Ho, Staircase, installation at the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in 2013. photo: Burglind Jungmann

color, the successfully composed relationship between sculpture and architecture, the tactility of the fabric in contrast to the hardness of the actual stairs, and the overwhelming emotional effect the work achieved through all of this. Is this ‘Korean’ art? Are we allowed to reflect on it in terms of Korean traditions of composition, color, material, craftwomanship?³ Or does the just mentioned paradox

forbid us to see this work in the context of, if not ‘national,’ at least ‘regional’ traditions? Are we only allowed to reflect on the ‘individual’ identity of the artist as it is shared and understood by a global audience without any Korean connection?⁴ We’ll come back to this question later.

Another complication of the matter arises, due to the multiple effects of globalization, from the increasing confusion in regard to an individual’s identification with a certain group, whether local, national, ethnic, or social, and the resulting loss of security. A good example of this confusion and insecurity is an event that was staged at the Boston Museum of Fine Art (BMFA). In 2015 the museum showed a work by Claude Monet, *La Japonaise*, depicting a blond French woman, the painter’s first wife, wearing a lavishly embroidered kimono. In addition, the museum provided kimonos for its visitors to dress up and be photographed in front of the painting (fig. 2). However, what was meant as fairly innocent entertainment for the public caused an outrage among Asian American woman (fig. 3). Protestors carried messages like “Try on the kimono [and] learn what it’s like to be a racist imperialist today!” An article on the Internet portal ‘news.artnet.com’ bears the subtitle “Japonisme, after all, was the result of Western aggression” and reminds us that “It was the result of American imperial expansion,

³ I assume that the sewing was done by women, because the work was created using the special traditional Korean sewing method for textiles known as *kkaekki* (까끼).

⁴ Suh Do-Ho’s staircases have, like his other installations that refer to architecture, a biographical background. In this case it is a ‘replica’ of the passageway between the floor of the artist’s apartment and that of his landlord above his New York City apartment.



Fig. 2 “Channel your inner Camille #Monet and try on a replica of the kimono she’s wearing in ‘La Japonaise.’” Photo: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, via Facebook, source: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/outrage-boston-museum-of-fine-arts-disgraceful-kimono-event-314534> (accessed 11/29/2018)

Fig. 3 “A protester at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston” Photo: via Amber Ying, Twitter, source: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/outrage-boston-museum-of-fine-arts-disgraceful-kimono-event-314534> (accessed 11/29/2018)

and came only after Commodore Matthew Perry threatened to burn Japan’s capital to the ground.” The article criticizes that “The event merely invites visitors to flirt with the exotic.”⁵

Reacting quickly to the protests, the museum shut the exhibition down. As art historian Christine Guth remarked in a discussion of the event in an email network, the BMFA could have taken this as a chance to sort out and discuss the different layers of history, artistic inspiration, and sensitivities with the protesters and other visitors to the museum. An opportunity was lost for a discussion of the flow of cultural currents and their specific adaptations, and of questions, such as: What do have contemporaneous Asian Americans in common with those Japanese (and French) women of Monet’s era? Can they claim any identity as successors to those who wore kimonos at the time? How about inspiration in art? Can the wearing of foreign clothes - or the depiction of it - be in itself an insult? And how about fashions? After the intensive and complex discussion of Orientalism in art, is it right to condemn the attraction of ‘the exotic’ merely as an imperialistic desire?

Coming back to the question of aesthetics and identity, a brief look at the historical development of its discussion within the field of Korean art history might

⁵ A group calling itself ‘Stand Against Yellow-Face @ the MFA’ commented that this was “...an insult not only to our identities, experiences, and histories as Asian-Americans in America, but affects how society as a whole continues to deny our voices today.” <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/outrage-boston-museum-of-fine-arts-disgraceful-kimono-event-314534> (accessed 11/29/2018).

be of help. In an article in *Korea Journal* of 2007 on “‘The Aesthetic’ in Traditional Korean Art,” Kwon Young-pil gave a historical overview over the most important theories of the characteristics of Korean art, based on his extensive studies of Korean aesthetics.⁶ To provide a brief summary: Andreas Eckardt (1884–1874), in the first comprehensive survey of Korean art, *Geschichte der koreanischen Kunst* (1929), identifies ‘classic beauty’ founded on ‘simplicity’ as distinct aesthetic characteristics of Korean architecture, sculpture, as, for instance, represented by the Sökkuram Buddha.⁷ As is well-known, Yanagi Sōetsu (aka Muneyoshi, 1889–1961) found in anonymous Korean ‘folk art’ and in ceramics the ideal for his Mingei movement, but also emphasized an inherent feeling of ‘sorrow’ in Korean art.⁸ According to Kwon Young-pil, Ko Yusöp (1905–1944) identifies ‘artless art’ and ‘planless planning’ as characteristics applicable to architecture, for instance in the use of naturally crooked timber as columns of Kakhwang Hall at Hwaomsa. Ko also sees them as characteristic of certain types of ceramics and of calligraphy, coupled with ‘imperfection.’ Yet, Kim Youngna emphasizes Ko Yusöp’s Japanese education of European aesthetics and links his ideas about the sequence of aesthetic characteristics of historical periods in Korean art to the Hegelian scheme: symbolic (Three Kingdoms), classic (Unified Silla), romantic (Koryō). Ko Yusöp saw the art of the Chosŏn dynasty in decline. His disinterest in Chosŏn painting, based on his efforts to align Korean art with Western and Japanese aesthetic ideas, is particularly interesting in contrast to the contemporaneous activities of other artists and intellectuals who dedicated their work to Korean calligraphy and painting traditions, such as O Sech’ang, An Chungsik, and Ko Hüidong.⁹

‘Naturalness’ is another characteristic that is often named, both in the meaning of ‘leaving the material in a natural or semi-natural state’ (like the crooked timber) and ‘creating a sense of harmony with the natural environment.’ This idea was planted by Ko Yusöp, but was

⁶ Kwon Young-pil, “‘The Aesthetic’ in Traditional Korean Art and Its Influence on Modern Life,” in *Korea Journal* Vol. 47 No. 3 (Autumn 2007), 9–34.

⁷ Andreas Eckardt, *Geschichte der koreanischen Kunst*, Leipzig: Verlag Karl W. Hiersemann, 1929, pp. 48–51, 114–117.

⁸ For a critical assessment of Yanagi’s activities on the peninsula and his ideas of Korean psychological characteristics expressed in art, see Kim Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 30–32.

⁹ Kim Youngna, “The Achievements and Limitations of Ko Yu-seop, a Luminary in Korean Art History,” in *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 60 (2010), pp. 79–87.

particularly emphasized by Kim Won-yong. Dietrich Seckel's strict formalistic approach in his two-part essay in *Oriental Art* on "Some Characteristics of Korean Art" of 1977 and 1979 were an effort to counter the emotionally charged and therefore difficult to grasp terms of 'sorrow,' 'harmony,' and 'naturalness,' which he calls "empty generalities and lyricisms..., all-embracing and therefore meaningless terms." The characteristics he repeatedly found in his own analysis of various objects, Buddhist sculpture, metalwork, lacquerware, ceramics, and painting were geometric shapes, linear graphic design, the repetition of elements, but he also acknowledged a "fantastic and playful strain."¹⁰ This approach was, of course, also a matter of *Zeitgeist*, a time when art historians in the US and Europe emphasized the formal aspects of a work of art above anything else. Apart from art historians and the two connoisseurs Eckardt and Yanagi, the philosophy and aesthetic professor Cho Yohan added to the discussion by pointing towards the Shamanistic character of Korean art, a certain freedom of expression and rhythm that he found in dance but also in calligraphy and painting, and towards humor.¹¹ Cho Yohan had, in fact, lost his professor's position due to his opposition to the totalitarian government of the 1980s. With the integration of 'shamanism' he included an element into Korean aesthetics that had emerged with the Minjung movement and gained momentum after the Kwangju uprising. This radically new approach of the 1980s of art historians who aligned with the political movement towards social justice saw folk art, peasant literature, and political engagement as the most distinctive constituents of Korean art.¹² Yet, in spite of the overall claim to build exclusively on indigenous Korean visual culture, such as Buddhist painting and shamanist rituals, the Minjung art movement also drew inspiration from various international sources. Woodblock prints, in particular, show connections with the political art of the European expressionists and with Chinese revolutionary woodblock prints of the early half of the twentieth century.¹³ We could dig deeper, like Kwon Young-pil does, and

¹⁰ Dietrich Seckel, "Some Characteristics of Korean Art," Part I in *Oriental Art* 1977, pp. 52 and 60.

¹¹ Cho Yohan, *Han'guk mi üi chomyöng*, Seoul: Yörhwadang, 1999. He gives as examples, for instances the calligraphy of Kim Chönghui and the well-known album of genre paintings attributed to Kim Hongdo.

¹² Yu Hongjun, "Minjok chök kamsöngnon üi ipchang kwa ku pip'an, yesul e issösö Han'guk chök in köt üt'amgu (Situation and Critique of the Aesthetics of the People: in Search for Koreanness in the Arts)," *Yesul p'yöngnon* (1982).

¹³ Albert and Burglind Jungmann, "Der Minjung-Holzschnitt - Versuch einer Annäherung vor dem Hintergrund westlicher und östlicher Traditionen" [The Minjung Woodcut - An Approach from the Background of Western and Eastern Traditions], in *Malttugi - Texte und Bilder aus der Minjung-Kulturbewegung in Süd-Korea* [Malttugi - Texts and

analyze the predecessors of such theories, for instance, the German and Austrian schools of aesthetics and art history, from Johann Joachim Winckelmann(1717~1768) to Heinrich Wölfflin(1864~1945), Alois Riegl(1858~1905) to Ernst Gombrich(1909~2001), and in Yanagi's case, the British Arts and Crafts movement, but this would only lead into further confusion.

When looking into those theories of the so-called characteristics of Korean art nowadays one feels exceedingly uneasy. Scholars of earlier generations were still able to 'believe' in finding a certain consistent set of aesthetic characteristics, a set that would either distinguish Korean art from the art of all other nations(or regions) or represent certain sensitivities with which Koreans themselves can identify. We have nowadays lost this belief, since we have trained ourselves in deconstructing all the edifices that art history, as part of modernity, has constructed over the centuries. Haven't we even lost the idea of what 'art' is?

We need, of course, consider the historical scenario in which most of the aforementioned theories of Korean aesthetics evolved, the time of Japanese colonial rule and the challenge of facing Western imperialism with all its intellectual and cultural implications. As is well-known, like many terms that were coined in early texts on Korean art, the term for aesthetics 'mihak' itself is a translation of the Japanese 'bigaku'.¹⁴ For Japan its rise as an imperialist power and major player on the world stage not only included groundbreaking administrative and military reforms but it also initiated a quest for a synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophy and understanding of cultural and art traditions. On the art historical front, a unique Japanese invention deriving from this quest is the system of 'National Treasures'(Kokuhō, Kukpo), first introduced in Korea under colonial rule in 1938.¹⁵ One might expect that the list of National Treasures provides the nation with points of identification but, interestingly, it does not. On

Pictures from the Minjung Cultural Movement in South Korea], exhibition catalogue, Kunstverein Heidelberg 1986, translated into Korean: "Minjung mokp'anhwa - Tong- Sōyang chōnt'ong ūi paegyōng e taehan chōpkūnjōk siron" in *Minjok Misul*, no. 4 (July 1987).

¹⁴ For an assessment of the challenges the Korean art world faced at the time see also Charlotte Horlyck, *Korean Art from the 19th Century to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2017.

¹⁵ The first one hundred Korean National Treasures are almost exclusively pieces of architecture and sculpture, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Treasure_\(South_Korea\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Treasure_(South_Korea)) (accessed 8/28/2018). The process of legislation for the preservation of nationally important historical objects started in Japan in 1897. In 1929, when the term Kokuhō was first used 1,100 objects had already been listed. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Treasure_\(Japan\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Treasure_(Japan)) (accessed 8/28/2018)

the Japanese side, apart from major works of Japanese art Korean and Chinese objects are included among the Kokuhō.¹⁶ In Korea the No. 1 Kukpo is Namdaemun(Sungnyemun), the South Gate of Seoul, undoubtedly a notable piece of architecture(in its original state) but certainly not the most representative work of Korean art. The lists of National Treasures rather have a slightly different function; they list what a committee of experts suggests to have specially preserved for future generations. Yet, the Kokuhō/ Kukpo lists are quite interesting in that they place particular emphasis on architecture and sculpture. One may argue that buildings, especially those of Buddhist temples, were particularly endangered to be destroyed by the modernization and Westernization processes of both countries. However, the choice and evaluation of the media of architecture and sculpture also reflect a collision with Western aesthetic ideas. The historical understanding of the hierarchy of the arts is, in fact, fundamentality different in Europe and East Asia. In Europe - in reflection of Greek and Roman antiquity - architecture has been considered most important, providing the fundament and frame to sculpture and painting. In contrast, in East Asia calligraphy, due to its intellectual and literary content on one side and the great value placed on its formal aesthetic principals on the other, has been evaluated highest. Moreover, ink painting, because of its use of the same tools and materials as calligraphy, has been seen in close connection with it as 'high art.'¹⁷ However, if we consider the evaluation of calligraphy in European art history it was hardly relevant, and in East Asian tradition architecture and sculpture were also not considered 'art.' We thus find that what is the highest evaluated category of art in one hemisphere does not even count as art in the other. When Andreas Eckardt found 'classic beauty' in architecture and sculpture first, he not only based his ideas and terminology on European tradition, but in his selection of works he also ignored Korean evaluation. Similarly, Yanagi Sōetsu's emphasis on Koryō and Chosōn ceramics is quite obviously based

¹⁶ Maria Roman, "Asian Values in Japan's Cultural Heritage: The Role of Chinese and Korean Ceramics," in *Shifting Paradigms in East Asian Visual Culture: A Festschrift for Lothar Ledderose*, ed. by Burglind Jungmann, Adele Schlombs, and Melanie Trede, Stuttgart: Reimer Verlag 2012, pp. 193-208.

¹⁷ One of the most influential artists of the Song dynasty, Su Shi, stated on his friend, the bamboo painter Wen Tong, that his virtue was the origin of his art, that his writing emerged from his virtue, overflowed into calligraphy, and transformed into painting. For further discussion see Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting, Su Shih to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang*(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) and Lothar Ledderose, "Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function," in *Orientalisms*(October 1986), pp.35-50.

on Japanese tea ceremony aesthetics. Only in conjunction with the tea ceremony and the extremely high value placed on the utensils employed in it could ceramics become 'art.'

Another example of the collision between the aesthetics of different cultural regions in terms of selection of art categories or media is the Japanese initiated annual Chosŏn Art Exhibition (Chosŏn misul chŏllamhoe), arranged by the colonial government since 1922, following the Japanese Mombushō Bijutsu Tenrankei, that had been inaugurated in 1907 with the 'salons' of the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture (Académie de peinture et sculpture) as the model. The juried exhibitions included 'Oriental' (ink) painting, 'Western' or 'Occidental' (oil) painting, sculpture and calligraphy, but later crafts were introduced and calligraphy was abandoned. According to Kim Youngna, the Chosŏn Art Exhibition, with its Japanese jurors, was a means to assimilate Korean artists into the Japanese colonial cultural sphere and to counter the exhibitions arranged by the Society of Calligraphy and Painting (Sŏhwahoe) which An Chungsik, Ko Huidong, and other leading painters had already started a year earlier in order to find new expressions for Korean art in a modern world.¹⁸ While integrating oil painting into their concept they saw themselves in the tradition of Chosŏn literati painting and calligraphy. In a similar way, O Sech'ang's political activities in the national independence movement can be linked to his compilation of the *Kŭnyŏk sŏhwa jing*, as an attempt to continue native traditions and to prevent his country's culture from being overwhelmed and distorted by both the Western and the Japanese impact.

Thus, we have now have effectively deconstructed what would be the basis on any discussion of aesthetics: there is no universal agreement on what 'art' is, which medium to include and which to exclude. As stated earlier, every theory of Korean aesthetics depends on the background of the author. And how about the changes of aesthetics within history, for instance, the great contrast between Koryŏ luxury and Chosŏn frugality? How could we talk about a consistent identifiable set of aesthetic characteristics of Korean art?

Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that there was on the Korean peninsula, despite the wide acceptance of elements of Chinese culture, from the writing system to religions, from state organization to materials, formats, and styles in art, a keen sense of identity throughout

¹⁸ Kim Youngna, "Artistic Trends in Korean Painting during the 1930s," in *War, Occupation, and Creativity: Japan and East Asia 1920-1960*, ed. by Marlene J. Mayo and J. Thomas Rimer with H. Eleonor Kerkham, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001, pp. 121-148.

history. Borders in East Asia were well defined from early on and diplomatic contacts among the different states on the continent and with the Japanese archipelago followed certain procedures. In this regard, a discussion of concepts of 'identity' provides a much better angle for our search. In an essay of 1998, John Duncan discusses theories of the formation of modern nations and their 'national identities' in relation to the Korean modern and historical situation, resulting in what he calls 'proto-nationalism.'¹⁹ Apart from the homogenizing organization of the modern state, its state-administered education and the spread of print capitalism, he discusses phenomena of 'shared identity,' in particular language, ethnicity, religion, and the state. A most important point in his discussion, in my mind, is the differentiation of how a person or a group may identify with diverse groups or communities. For instance, the Chosŏn educated elite shared their identity(proto)nationally and internationally, and with different levels of society. Duncan explains individual cases of *yangban* authors who wrote professionally in literary Chinese, yet left evidence of communicating in local dialects(mostly during exile). He remarks that their 'transnational' higher education did not prevent them from having "a sense of belonging to a distinct local culture." On the other hand, he also gives examples of how the propagation of Confucian values permeated lower social levels of Chosŏn society.²⁰

Interestingly, 'art' is not among the categories which Duncan investigates in his search for 'proto-nationalism.' Yet, art does, in fact, have a high political value in East Asian history. This is demonstrated by anecdotes, such as the one about the Tang emperor Taizong and his wish to take Wang Xizhi's famous calligraphy, the *Foreword to Poems of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion(Lantingxu)*, to his grave. Further evidence is given by the catalogues of the collections of Emperor Huizong compiled during the Song dynasty. Yet, it was the Manchu rulers who took art collecting and its documentation to unmatched levels. The Qianlong emperor, in particular, used art collecting combined with huge publication projects as means to propagate and stabilize his rule over China.²¹ While these are examples of the history of Chinese elite

¹⁹ John Duncan, "Proto-nationalism in Premodern Korea," in *Perspectives on Korea*, ed. by Sang-Oak Lee and Duk-Soo Pak, Sydney: Wild Peony, 1998, 198-221.

²⁰ More than half of the rewards for 'filial piety' or 'loyalty' were by the second half of the Chosŏn dynasty given to commoners and other low-ranking persons.

²¹ "Der politische und religiöse Charakter der Palastsammlungen im chinesischen Altertum" [The political and religious character of the palace collection in ancient China]. In *Zur Kunstgeschichte Asiens: 50 Jahre Lehre und*

culture, such stories and texts on art were also well-known among the well-educated in Korea and Japan, where members of this ‘international’ elite, in their own ways, sought to adapt similar values, both through practice and collecting. Moreover, we have enough evidence of how art was used in Korea for political means.²²

On the other hand, the idea of several coexisting ‘shared identities’ transgressing social boundaries can also be applied to Korean art. An interesting point in case here is a description of the art market at Kwangt’ong Bridge, the bridge over Ch’onggye Stream in the center of Seoul. The nineteenth century author who wrote under the sobriquet Hansan kōsa, lists in his *Song of Hanyang* (*Hanyang ka*) titles of paintings that had become popular among customers there. They include the *Four Greybeards of Mount Shang* of the Han Dynasty playing chess at their retreat, *Tao Yuanming Returning Home*, in addition to screens of *One Hundred Children* and the *Banquet of the Queen Mother of the West*, the *Nine Cloud Dream*, *Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang*, *Cranes and Peaches*, the *Ten Symbols of Longevity*, plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo and so forth. He also advises that cocks, dogs, lions and tigers are to be used for outside doors, whereas the ‘Four Gentlemen’ were to be mounted on sliding doors inside the house.²³ Such a mixture of topics would nowadays be subsumed under two very different - and in the discourse on ‘aesthetics’ certainly contrasting - categories of ‘literati art’ and ‘folk art.’ However, the text indicates that a ‘Seoulite’ commoner customer could identify with different groups on different levels, with that of ‘literati’ or ‘high’ art on an international East Asian level, and with local so-called folk beliefs and conventions.

If we acknowledge that ‘shared identities’ can consist of several layers and can simultaneously link to different communities, across national and regional borders and across social strata, we may also think of a shift in the understanding of an identity. Coming back to Suh Do-Ho’s installations, Miwon Kwon remarks on an interesting shift in the

Forschung an der Universität Köln [On Asian art history: 50 years of teaching and research at the University of Cologne], edited by Roger Goepper, Dieter Kuhn, and Ulrich Wiesner, pp. 153-59 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1977).

²² Unfortunately, such political intentions have during the Chosŏn dynasty often led to the manipulation rather than preservation of art. See my “Changing Notions of ‘Feminine Spaces’ in Chosŏn Dynasty Korea: the Forged Image of Sin Saimdang (1504-1551),” *Archives of Asian Art*, vol 68, no. 1 (April 2018), 47-66.

²³ Kim, From Middlemen to Center Stage, pp. 81-82, based on Kang Myŏnggwān, *Chosŏn sidae munhak yesul*, pp. 336-337.

reception of the artist's work.²⁴ While in the 1990s his *Seoul Home*, a replica of the Korean house he lived in with his parents, was interpreted in terms of the artist's 'otherness' - we might as well say as 'something exotic' - only a decade later a critic wrote: ... Seoul Home appears as a scrim onto which anybody may project his or her reveries about any absent home."²⁵ Kwon asks how it "is that anyone, presumably no matter what their cultural background or gender, can equally project personal fantasies or dreams about any absent home onto a work that is so unambiguously Asian, and uncommon even in the tradition of Korean domestic architecture?"²⁶ She explains the reinterpretation from 'exotic' to 'familiar' with a shift of the sensitivities of the audience who sees "through the signs of cultural specificity" seeing it as an "analogue for the destabilized but pervasive conditions of nomadism, migration, and cosmopolitan homelessness." In Kwon's words, "the attraction that Suh's work draws from a globalized art network of curators, dealers, collectors, and critics lies in the symbiotic fashioning of both the work and the artist within the logic order of mobilized identities."²⁷ Thus, even an art object itself may, in the eye of the beholder, carry multiple layers of identity. It can alter its meaning and interpretation based on the *Zeitgeist*, changes in its functions, or geographic and cultural transitions. Any work of religious art that is shown in a museum context strongly testifies to such a shift in identity. Therefore, the 'biography' of an artwork has also recently attracted the attention of researchers. This, again, draws the cannon of aesthetics in which to categorize art objects into question.

Lastly, it is also the motivation of the viewers that affects their idea of Korean art. 'What are the characteristics of Korean art?' Depending on the person asking this question, it can have quite a different meaning. For the Korean public it is a question of cultural identity, an object might be able to tell something about one's history and sensitivities. For the museum curator it is a matter of how to exhibit an artwork, for instance, whether to place it into the Chinese or the Korean gallery. For a person working for an auction house the question of the characteristics of Korean art is primarily one of financial concern: a work that carries the

²⁴ Miwon Kwon, "The Other Otherness: the Art of Do-Ho Suh," in *Do-Ho Suh*, exhibition catalogue (London and Seattle: Serpentine Gallery and the Seattle Art Museum, 2002).

²⁵ Frances Richard in *Artforum* (2002), cited after Kwon.

²⁶ *Ibid.* emphasis by Miwon Kwon.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

signature of Chŏng Sŏn or Kim Hongdo, who are widely considered most representative of Korean national character and aesthetics, could catch a much higher price (even if it is a forgery) than an old anonymous painting.

As previously mentioned, the question of identity and aesthetics has gained a new dimension in our age of globalization. In this regard, the question of 'national identity' that has dominated Korean art history during the twentieth century appears as a matter of construction and deconstruction. But we may also ask why the quest for the definition of 'Koreanness' in art gained such an urgency during the twentieth century. It seems that two different forces are at work in the formation of an identity, one that forms a collective, a 'shared' identity due to common conventions and rituals, and another one that reacts to the outside. The latter is particularly defined and enhanced through (national) borders. The stricter these borders are drawn and the more those who live outside these borders are encountered as a threat, the more the inner consensus in terms of conventions and rituals is formed and confirmed. Whereas for most of the twentieth century the threat on its borders has heightened Korean consciousness of a national identity, globalization as a promise of 'world peace' is weakening those rituals of inner consensus. In my mind, the processes of globalization, nomadism, the weakening of formerly confirmed collective identities, and the search for new regional and shared identities in art may have just begun. The parameters of construction or deconstruction seem to be in flux, depending on the circumstances of the individual, the collective, or the nation.