
Regional Characteristics of Art in Busan - Focusing on the Image of “Ocean and Women”

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1. Foreword

“What is your favorite subject matter?” “It’s the beach. Nobody who’s from Busan dislikes the serene hue, and such sound-of-ocean-tides-like characteristics cannot but appear in one’s works, *n’est-ce pas?*”¹

As was mentioned by Im Ho, the first-generation western painting artist who represents Busan, *the sea* in the Busan art has been at once part of its life and a major theme. Including Im Ho, Kim Jong-sik, and Kim Gyeong who centered their career on Busan during the modern and contemporary period, a number of painters wielded their brushes while putting in the background the port city as a refuge during the Korean War. And their paintings often include those women who carved vibrant vitality out of the sea.

In this essay, I’d like to explore the regional characteristics of the Busan art by focusing on the figure of women which was set in Busan since the modern era began. For ‘the sea and women’ at once makes a universal theme grounded in the matrix and taps into the identity of the city’s painting community. The purpose of this thesis is to get as close as possible to the independent voice of the first-generation painters, who organized exhibitions for the members of their artistic coterie and thereby aimed to realize the local colors peculiar to the city’s painting community.

2. Ocean and Women: from the Everyday to the Lyrical Scenes

Paradoxically enough, it was around the Korean War that many works themed to ‘the seas and women’ were created by painters in Busan.² *Jagalchi Ice Company* by Kim Jong-sik, *Motherly*

1. *Busan Ilbo*, Aug. 31, 1971.

2. During the Period of Japanese Occupation, many works depicting market scenes were submitted, and even Im Ho, later called the painter of ‘conch and female diver’, created mostly landscape paintings as late as in the 1940s. Meanwhile, most of Busan’s first-generation painters, except Kim Jong-sik, moved in from nearby regions like Masan and Jinju during the Korean War.

Affection by Yang Dal-seok, and *Peddler* by Kim Gyeong among others present hands-on descriptions of people who lived their time close to the sea. Breaking from the utopian spaces for escapism as depicted in *Jars and Women* by Whanki Kim and *The Family Hitting the Road* by Lee Jung-seob among others, those works faithfully carry the vestiges of everyday life including Busan Ice Company at Jagalchi and the women who sell hot meat soup with rice. For the first-generation painters of Busan who formed Tobyuk Club³ in 1953 when the war had yet to come to an end, and instead of following 'the light-minded trends', asserted that art "should reflect the solemn and serious actions"⁴ and called for work "which is not swayed by the sentimental emotions and remains based on reality", the contemporary 'sea and women' represented both the reproduction of life and the border that distinguished outsiders from natives and the center from the local.

Meanwhile, 'the sea and women' carried beyond the war as a perennial theme and nostalgic subject matter for the Busan artists. In fact, Kim Gyeong, who left Busan to move to Seoul in the late 1950s, once sat in a modern art exhibition venue and reminisced "*the female figure on the beach* that is limitless like the sea and mysterious like its depth, which is the eternal *theme* of my work and the nostalgic remainder of life ... something futile like the sad confession of a modern person who is tired of the city ... the sea I miss —".⁵ And the works of Im Ho, dubbed the artist of *conch and female diver*, often treat women with tanned skin and the blue sea seen behind them. "*Beach* (at Busan Museum of Art) is also a work that delivers a realistic presentation of female divers who are drying their bodies by the bonfire against the blue sea."⁶ However, the scene unseen in the works with the same theme, which describes persons in red or yellow skirts and jackets chatting up while braiding the hair for one another, adumbrates the local characteristics that the artist wanted to pursue beyond the reality of labor.

Those works depicting female divers led by *Female Diver* (1928) by Mito Bansho, and including *Female Diver* (1936) by Kim Gichang and *Female Diver* (1938) by Kim In-ji that were submitted to Korea Art Exhibition in the 1930s and later all described several female divers in their unique Korean swimsuits huddling together against the rough sea. When Korea Art Exhibition called for local colors, those sturdy women with dark skin exposed through their swimsuits constituted both the uncivilized primitive and local customs of Korea and a timely theme that revealed the unique strength, perseverance, and motherhood of the Korean women.

This is attested by the perception of female divers as the Korean-style theme left out of the precedents of the country's modernization which Goro Tsuruta, a Japanese painter who visited Jeju in the 1930s, exuded by commenting, "What the female divers are wearing would have nothing to admire about it if it were by Japanese female divers, but the female divers of Jeju are of an extremely modern type. [Omission] If one visits somewhere around Seogwipo and does

3. *Tobyuk*, which derived from the onomatopoeia of *tobagi* ('native'), reportedly referred to the group of artists living in Busan. In general, however, it was received as the Sino-Korean rendering of earthen wall.

4. Greeting in the pamphlet for the 1st Tobyek exhibition, dated March 1953.

5. Kim Gyeong, *Nostalgia for the Sea, the Female Figure on the Beach* in *Busan Ilbo* dated Jul. 21, 1960.

6. About Im Ho's *Beach*, see the Preface to the catalog for *Busan's Deceased Artists: 3. Im Ho* (Busan Museum of Art).

a painting on the local female divers, one should surely feel that they are quite remote from the modern culture, wherever it may be.”⁷ The healthy and primitive image of the female divers, who broke from the old female victims of exploitation and plundering and now began to be described as *the incarnation of mermaids and natural beauties*, presented the new woman that represented the local colors of Korea. And this image of the female divers was repeatedly used, mainly at National Art Exhibition of the Republic of Korea after the war.

But Im Ho’s *Beach* does not show the dramatic effect of the rough waters or the scenes of labor which were treated by his older works. And the scene in which women wearing yellow and red skirts and jackets instead of the black-and-white swimsuits chat up while plaiting one another’s hair against the twilight over the sea does not so much reproduce the energetic and brave life of the female divers as appears lyrical and idyllic. As is suggested by the artist when he intones, “Nobody who’s from Busan dislikes the serene hue, and such sound-of-ocean-tides-like characteristics cannot but appear in works, *n’est-ce pas?*” wasn’t poetically rendering the world beyond the reality in the sea-like bright tone *the local colors* that the artist envisioned?

This is further demonstrated by the coincidence between the artist’s transition from the dark and cold tone in his early period to bright and warm colors, from reality to unrealistic world, and the Korean War, his relocation to Busan, and his exploration of the local colors for the Busan art as a member of Tobyeok Club. And the tendency to express the world beyond reality in such bright tone and realistic painting style is identified in the works of the first-generation painters who worked in Busan in the same period.

3. The Local Colors of the Busan Art

We find not only the uniqueness of the artists but also the local traits shared by the regional artists in the works not only of Kim Jong-sik and Kim Yun-min who were members of Tobyeok Club, but also of Yang Dal-seok who worked for a long time in Busan. Kim Jong-sik, who mostly described the views in the south and the Gyeongsang and Jeolla provinces including the Busan Port series (1949-56), called his works ‘the new southern paintings’. The landscape depiction that is composed of strong strokes, bright colors, and simplification was the pictorial space of *élan vital* in the expression of inner thought, which he completed by internalizing the bright, warm, and transparent air and the affluent soils represented by the southern natural environment.⁸

Meanwhile, the works of Kim Yun-min and Yang Dal-seok unfold the innocent, childlike world that has the peaceful natural settings in the background. The immaculate innocence of the shepherds and children is the image of an autobiographical paradise that transcends this world and was experienced in childhood. The pastoral view of such a paradise which reminds one of the temperate

7. Goro Tsuruta, “Jejudo Sketch” in *Sea Paintings*, No. 364, 1935, p. 6 and p. 14.

8. Included in Ok Yeong-sik, “Kim Jong-sik’s Art World and the Busan Art”, *Special Exhibition Commemorating Kim Jong-sik’s Birth*, Busan Museum of Art, 2018, p. 236.

climate in the southern regions that is completed with its bright and clear colors differs from the abstractionist tendency of the painting community in Seoul metropolitan region which employed *informel* and monochrome painting in the 1960s and the 1970s.

While their themes and painting styles were different, the tendency among the first-generation Busan painters that tried to express the world beyond the reality mainly with bright colors and representation shown in their works was the outcome of their effort to "find the archetype of the unaffected and truthful national art that percolates from the physiological body odor of our people" instead of pursuing the light-minded trends, even though it was shock coming from outside.