

Simplicity and Spirit: The Legacy of Korean Minimalist Art

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ABSTRACT

The Korean minimalist art movement had a significant impact on the art world. This specific style appeals to the public due to its ability to exemplify both abstract and straightforward ideas while remaining grounded in traditional Korean aesthetics. Over time, it has evolved, and its significance within the art world has remained strong.

This research paper explores the Korean minimalist approach to human creativity and self-expression. Understanding the background and essential nature of Korean minimalist art reveals deeper meanings embedded within. Furthermore, from one culture to another, various artworks over time have demonstrated the existence of hidden universal themes and timeless beauties revolving around this movement.

As the discussion on Korean minimalist art reveals its inner beauty and hidden historical messages, it is time for this movement to gain recognition for its transformative power. The movement reveals how art is intertwined with culture, history, and experience while also celebrating the space, time, and continuity that have defined the Korean minimalist art movement.

Keywords: Korean, minimalist art, culture, history, Dansaekhwa movement

1.INTRODUCTION

From its inception in the 1960s to its growth of recognition in the 1970s and 1980s, Korean minimalist art has evolved to affect the art market

and its development into other contemporary art movements. Although the artists' approach to their works has shifted significantly over time, through the use of more textures and technological developments, this change has allowed the evolution of Korean minimalist art to become a part of history itself. Hence, the influence of the arts on the broader world reveals the interaction between artistic novelty and cultural context. By examining Korean minimalist art through a broader global lens, this style can be demonstrated to persist as a relevant movement within the international art world. The chronological analysis of the development of Korean minimalist art from the 1960s to the present reveals the growth of this art style and its corresponding changes in the relevant future.

2.BEGINNING OF KOREAN MINIMALIST ART

2.1.Lee Ufan

One of the most renowned Korean minimalist artists is Lee Ufan. Famously known for his contributions to the Mono-ha and Dansaekhwa movements, his works reflect the relationship between time, space, and the viewer. Born in Japanese-occupied Korea, Lee became a well-known figure within the Mono-ha movement, which focused on revealing ideas and objects without alteration; therefore, several pieces of Lee's works refute Western modernism. His first work, titled "Relatum," was published in 1968, and this marked the beginning of his successes. Stemming from his "Relatum" series, the works that followed brought his name into the limelight, and he soon became a representative of the Mono-ha movement. Starting from the 1970s, he began to create artworks such as his famous "From Point" and

“Front Line” series, which recognized him as a critical figure within the Dansaekhwa movement (commonly referred to as the “monochrome painting” movement) [1]. Artworks that followed this movement were painted using only one color, thereby accentuating the textures and patterns included in the pieces.

Lee was not only able to combine his inner thoughts with outer reality through his art but was successful in conveying such messages through various mediums. Although many of his artworks are paintings and sculptures, he also created installations and incorporated mixed media. For instance, his “Relatum” series was created using stones and steel plates to portray the spatial relationship between his installation and the surrounding environment. Every one of Lee’s installations contains a hidden purpose closely tied to his philosophical ideologies, and he was able to do so through the simplicity and the forced relationship between his work and the viewers. In terms of simplicity, Lee restrained his use of materials and primarily focused on essential features, using only stones and steel [2]. By conveying this sense of simplicity and directness, he evoked a sense of presence and awareness in the viewers.

2.2.Park Seo-Bo

Another well-known artist from the Dansaekhwa movement is Park Seo-Bo. Park sparked his interest in abstract art during the 1950s when unconventional techniques and abstract elements from North America were first introduced in Korea. During the early stages of his art career, he primarily worked with Hanji and traditional Korean paper, creating engravings with a pencil. His works often utilize repetitive brushstrokes to create intricate patterns. Through his unique materialistic and technical approaches, Park successfully created a fusion of traditional Korean spirit and Western abstraction. He was able to emphasize the conventional aspects of Korean art through the use of Hanji paper, yet his techniques were inspired by countries [3].

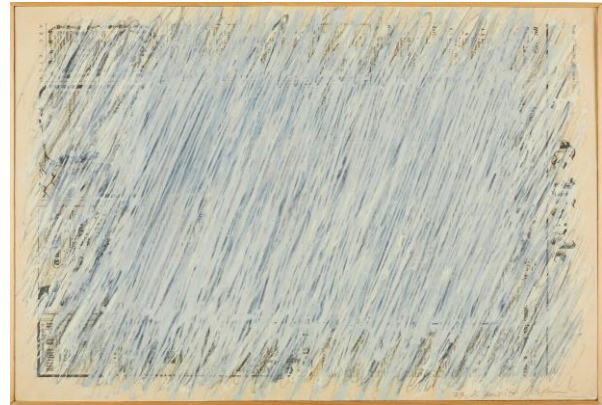


Figure 1: “Erécriture” (1977) by Park Seo-Bo [4]

As mentioned, Park is referred to as a significant Dansaekhwa artist. His most famous works, such as the “Erécriture” and “Kasa” series, are representative of his successes in the art world. In both series, the message and intention of Park’s art pieces are evident: by using repetitive marks, Park attempts to tie in a desire for tranquility. Additionally, by using only one color in his pieces, he was able to emphasize how visual space and emptiness can evoke a sense of peace in viewers. The “Erécriture” series contains his most well-known works of art, and this iconic series showcases Park’s experimental stage. It was in this series that he began using Hanji paper to add more texture to his pieces and enrich the seemingly monochromatic base. In comparison to using plain A4 paper, art paper, or parchment, the Hanji absorbed the colors and vividly represented them [5]. Despite the several experiments he conducted and the failures he faced, Park was able to find the most efficient technique to display his message correctly, and his paintings have served as a stepping stone to the development of Korean Minimalist art.

2.3.Chung Sang-Hwa

Similarly to Park Seo-Bo, Chung Sang-Hwa is a revered Dansaekhwa artist. Rather than utilizing unique materials and techniques, Chung instead relied on different patterns to make his monochromatic paintings pop. Despite his usage of patterns, the element that makes his artworks so special is his choice of colors. Many Dansaekhwa artists used vibrant colors to create a base; however, Chung decided to drain off the colors from his work and opted to use various shades of white in the background. By doing so, it allowed for his patterns and textures to shine through. To create his signature

grid patterns, Chung followed a labor-intensive process of ripping off the dried clay that he coats his entire canvas with. He then fills the empty spaces using acrylic paint. Although the process itself is relatively simple, the patience and precision required to create each piece are inherent in [6].

Two of Chung's most significant series are the "Untitled" and "Conjunction" series. Many Dansaekhwa artists, including Lee Ufan, Park Seo-Bo, and Chung Sang-Hwa, created series because each piece finds its beauty through restraint. The simplicity of each painting necessitates the inclusion of several others to achieve harmony between the painting's single color and textures. For example, all the paintings that makeup Chung's "Untitled" series follow a mosaic pattern that emphasizes the paintings' repetitive unity. On the other hand, his "Conjunction" series uses more organic and fluid pattern shapes in comparison to the precise geometric lines used to create the grid pattern in the "Untitled" series [7]. Despite the different patterns employed, the process followed was always the same, and this repetitive approach is a unique feature of Chung's work that makes his pieces so memorable. By creating a sense of unity within all his Dansaekhwa works, his patience, dedication, and precision are consistently evident.

3.GAINING RECOGNITION

3.1.Kim Soo-ja

During the 1970s and 1980s, Korean minimalist art began to gain recognition, bringing several new artists to the forefront, one of the most notable being Kim Soo-ja. Kim is an internationally renowned conceptual artist famously known for her culturally rooted installations. Described as an artist who manages to "capture humanity in a single knot" by Art Basel, many of her works revolve around significant moments in Korean history. She ties the theme of migration and social connection into many of her pieces, drawing on her personal experience as the daughter of a father who served in the military and was often required to move. To express these ideas, she created installations using Bottari, a colorful traditional Korean cloth used to wrap goods before transportation [8].

This material was primarily used in her famous "Bottari" series. By using Bottari, she successfully incorporated how one's identity can be represented by the few belongings tucked inside the bottom

during migration. Not only did they function as a layer of symbolism, but they also helped create a "three-dimensional painting," as Kim Soo-ja calls it. Its color and intricate patterns added a sense of humanity and intensity to her pieces, ultimately creating an abstract sculpture resembling one's story. Kim's "Thread Routes" series carries this message through her usage of batteries [9]. Every chapter of this series was located in a different part of the world, each country representing a facet of her life, and the presence of the Bottari emphasized her close connection to the material and the hidden message behind it.

3.2.Lee Kang-so

Lee Kang-so is another distinguished Korean minimalist artist of the 1970s. Many of his pieces, such as "Disappearance" and "Untitled-75031", were published during this period and contributed to his emergence as a significant artist in the realm of philosophical themes. Although his work is primarily created using simple geometric forms, he explores complex questions that are difficult to grasp, such as "What is painting?" or "What is the world?" This Korean philosophy is referred to as "pungryu," and its practice revolves around the belief in coexistence within the natural order. Through his creations, it's clear that he has his answer and attempts to portray them to a larger audience through structures in which his energy can mutually interact with the viewers. He is successful in doing so through the use of various mediums, including sculptures, installations, videos, and paintings.

As mentioned, his piece "Disappearance" is one of his most famous and well-known exhibitions, works showcased which explored the system of nature and its processes of becoming and disappearance. Everything displayed showed his ability to utilize various forms as he exhibited paintings, videos, performances, installations, photographs, and pottery. Although the original "Disappearance" piece was an interactive installation, his recreation 40 years later shares a story of his growth. During an interview, he explains that "there were many times that [he] felt unsatisfied with the space or environment due to the conditions of exhibitions that were unsuitable for [his] work" [10]. However, now that he is being granted more opportunities to reproduce his work in more suitable places, his recreations can properly convey his initial message.

Additionally, the growth he has experienced as an artist over the past 40 years is evident in the difference between his initial and new “Disappearance” pieces.

3.3.Ha Chong-hyun

The Dansaekhwa Movement is renowned for its clean and straightforward aesthetic, characterized by a monochromatic scheme; however, Ha Chong-hyun was able to accentuate its simplistic features through a method he developed through various experiments: bae-ap-bub. Translating directly to the “back pressure method,” many of his renowned artworks, such as the “Conjunction” series and “Concretion” series, have been created through this technique. From the early stages of his career, Ha experimented with geometric abstraction, drawing inspiration from traditional Korean architecture. Although his materials at the time were inexpensive, this limitation ultimately led to the founding of Bae-ap-bub. Ha turned to the materials around him and opted for the burlap sacks, which were dispatched for relief goods from the United States during the Korean War. The creations are simple, yet the process is rather labor-intensive as it requires one to push oil paint through the weaves of the sack and add intricate details to this base to differentiate each painting from the series.



Figure 2: “Conjunction 21-38” (2021) by Ha Chong-hyun [10]

This technique can be most easily observed through the “Conjunction” series. Some pieces, such as “Conjunction 21-38,” simply feature blue geometric shapes layered onto the white oil paint that has been pushed into the canvas. Others, like “Post-Conjunction 11-3,” have more added texture through scratches. The more he experimented, the more materials were incorporated into his artworks. As seen from the different titles of “Conjunction” and “Post-Conjunction,” those in the latter collection included a wider range of patterns, textures, and compositional rhythms. In these artworks, Ha would thinly cut wooden sticks and wrap each piece with a strip of canvas. After covering these canvas sticks in ink or paint, Ha places them in the canvas and repeats these steps until the ink or paint on the canvas is pushed through enough for the shapes to become more visible. To add more texture, he would scratch out some of the paint to create textures or add small streaks of different colors to bring flexibility to the movement’s monochrome aspect.

4.INFLUENCE IN THE MARKET

4.1.Global Recognition

Although the Dansaekhwa movement originated in the 1970s, it is currently under the global spotlight, and international art exhibitions have started to show this Korean minimalist art style. Through this exposure, independent curators like Sam Bardouil have begun to show more interest in Dansaekhwa artists and find most “fascinating about this group of artists is the true versatility in the language. It’s truly original and universal like music” [11]. Although Korea, especially in comparison to other Asian countries, doesn’t have a long history of abstract and minimalist art, the simple yet profound meaning behind each piece has caught the attention of many. This global recognition has led to Dansaekhwa paintings being sold at high prices during auctions and has resulted in their inclusion in several overseas exhibitions.

4.2.Auction Prices

The Dansaekhwa art style is still practiced by many; however, these pieces aren’t valued as highly as the authentic pieces that were created during the 1960s or 1970s. According to Art Market Monitor, a recent painting by Ha Chong-Hyun was sold for \$232,000 during a 2015 auction, compared to the \$1 million price his earlier 1970s work received [12]. Although more recent pieces aren’t selling at such high prices,

these statistics accentuate the rarity and scarcity of authentic Dansaekhwa paintings.

4.3. Market Expansion

The Korean Art Market has also caught the attention of several domestic and international artists. Especially since the 2022 “Frieze Seoul” art fair, traditional Korean artwork has become a widespread interest for many. Not only has there been an increase in attention, but also an increase in the Korean art market. Studies suggest that the market was valued at “around 400 billion KRW (Korean won) from 2018 to 2020 but nearly doubled to about 922.3 billion won in 2021” [13]. Such statistics suggest that the market will continue to expand in the future, and the auction market is, therefore, expected to undergo some adjustments as well. Although Korea’s art market has only recently begun to increase, interviews with inspirational figures, including Dansaekhwa artist Park Seo-Bo, suggest that these trends will continue to expand over the coming years.

5. CONNECTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY ART

Since its inception in the 1960s, Korean minimalist art has evolved over the years, and many other movements have stemmed from the revolutionary Dansaekhwa movement, to which many of the mentioned artists were a cornerstone. Within these newly recognized movements in Korean contemporary art, artists have expanded upon the original idea of the Dansaekhwa movement, using various mediums and art styles.

5.1. Kim Tschang-yeul

Kim Tschang-yeul is one of the most renowned Korean contemporary artists, having gained international recognition for his artwork. His paintings feature a minimalist aesthetic that emphasizes simplicity, purity, and clarity. Additionally, almost all of his pieces feature water droplets, reflecting his unique perspective on time and memory. Kim explains that “each clear, impeccable water drop is in its initial state since purification, as if it is a recurrence of absolute nothingness; the water drop is also what it finally returns to” [14]. His connection to liquid forms first stemmed from his exposure to international movements while studying abroad in Paris. The very first paintings he created focused on the simple geometric shapes of fluid forms, and they later developed to become his trademark water droplets.

Rather than wanting his viewers to focus on the droplets themselves, he hopes that people can understand the more profound meaning and call for contemplation that his paintings may induce.



Figure 3: “Recurrence” (2005) by Kim Tschang-yeul [15]

Kim not only used water droplets throughout his works but also incorporated Chinese characters, as they resonate infinitely and unfold without end. In many of his series, a mixture of these two can be seen to convey a mixed message. For example, through his work “Recurrence,” the repeated strokes of calligraphy positioned along the right side of the canvas are a process of training Kim to neutralize himself into a state of unconsciousness through repetitive actions; the process of writing Chinese characters ultimately ties back to the larger meaning behind the water droplets. To create such patterns, Kim Tschang-yeul typically uses traditional Korean Hanji paper as the base, with ink and paint added on top. He ensures that he always creates several layers of ink to create a space that converges the relationship between the water droplets and the characters [14].

5.2. Hur Kyung-ae

Alongside Kim Tschang Yeul is Hur Kyung-ae, a famous contemporary artist whose style emerged from the original Dansaekhwa movement. Her artworks typically feature bright colors, resonating with the joys of life. Rather than having a set plan in mind before creating her work, she enjoys the unexpectedness that comes with the process, as the final result reflects the wonder of the world. Hur’s scrupulous attention to detail further enhances the

creative process and establishes a blend between coincidence and control. As stated by Donghwa Odé Gallery, "Hur creates paintings in which both chaos and order coexist within a single surface" [15].

Many of her artworks are a blend of painting and sculpture, as she adds dimension to the canvas with various textures and materials. The method she uses to create this form involves applying 30 to 70 layers of multiple colors and varying thicknesses. Afterward, she uses sculpting knives or other materials to carve out pieces from the layers, revealing the hidden hues underneath. Hur will then pick up the fallen dust of paint or strips and repaste them onto the canvas. This allows for the lack of preliminary preparation to lead to a joyful process that enables the buildup of several coats.

Additionally, the layers underneath can still be visible when the layers are continually stripped off, and the different depths allow the final product to have a hidden story within that elicits a meditative atmosphere. Her notable artwork series, "No Title," was created using this exact method, allowing each piece to shine on its own [16]. Despite their striking similarities, the fine details are what set them apart from one another and thus unifies every piece. Moreover, their distinct depth and form allow for various perspectives and angles through which the story can be told.

6.CONCLUSION

From the pioneering works of Lee Ufan to the contemporary art styles of Hur Kyung Ae, every mentioned artist has made lasting contributions to the Korean minimalist art style. Through their minimalistic aesthetic and innovative usage of simple materials, these works invite a different lens through which society can understand the central message this art style has to offer. Whether the piece shares a personal memory and emotionally connects the audience with the artist or incorporates a mix of various cultures to accentuate the importance of identity, every one of them has left an indelible mark on the art world.

As more artists begin to recognize its beauty and more art styles emerge from this genre, it will allow for stronger global recognition of the Korean minimalist art style and its developments within our rapidly changing world. Hopefully, future artists will adopt this simple yet profound style to explore

new possibilities and pave the way for the next generation. As society develops, let us continue to admire Korean minimalist art and its ability to inspire, provoke, and enlighten the world around us through its modest works.

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