

Artist Kwon Young-woo's works are on display at K2 of Kukje Gallery in downtown Seoul. The exhibit will continue through Dec. 6.

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

# Kwon Young-woo, artist of paper

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**K**won Young-woo (1923-2013) was an artist who experimented with hanji (traditional Korean mulberry paper) as material, medium and method throughout his life.

An exhibit underway at Kukje Gallery in downtown Seoul features some 30 works of the late artist, mainly colored paintings from the 1980s, showcasing how the artist experimented with paper — layering, cutting and ripping — and applied ink to explore the contemporariness of traditional ink-and-wash painting.

His works are regarded as Dansaekhwa, or the Korean monochrome movement which emerged in the 1970s, in a broad sense because the artist's work contained gestures, repetition and performance aspects of Dansaekhwa.

Kwon is an artist who helped shaping the nation's artistic style after Korea's independence from Japan in 1945. He was in the first class to study Oriental Painting at the prestigious Seoul National University in 1946, but he has defied a conventional approach to Oriental painting from then on.

The artist's earliest works in the 1950s were representational paintings depicting the Korean War (1950-53) when he worked as a military artist.

His interest on hanji was initiated unintended as he patched a worn-through canvas with hanji. The artist took notice of the subtle change in ink color when applied to layered hanji and began experimenting on the theme.

The artist once noted of his practice, "my work begins from creating canvas with hanji. After gluing together one, two, or multiple layers of paper, I rip, puncture and color them. I paint both on the surface and back of the canvas to have the paint bleed into the front. Since the number of hanji layers and the glue applied are kept consistent, the only variation comes from tearing and puncturing the surface, and the response to the paint application and how much it is applied. The result is from my yearning to seek new or accidental occurrences."

Kwon's works also share resemblances with those of Italian artist Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) as both artists explored intervention of time by physically deforming the surface of a canvas.

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Choi Eun-ju, director of Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, noted that Kwon worked with Oriental materials, mainly hanji.

"Kwon Young-woo is an artist who maximized the material properties. He had this experimental mind and such characteristics are visible even in his early figurative

paintings," Choi said. "More to the point, he kept the spirit of Korean painting while exploring the experimental nature with paper."

The artist once said that he chose paper out of three major materials for Oriental painting — paper, brush and ink.

"This means Kwon staked his life on paper. Traditionally, Oriental painters have concentrated on sharpening skills on brush and ink, but Kwon took a different path. It was the artist's autonomous, self-centered choice and he achieved the completion of formative and abstraction through endless pursuit," Choi said.

Kwon also had an international perspective while seeking the essence of Oriental painting. He participated in the "White Korea: Five Artists, Five Hisek" exhibit held at Tokyo Gallery in 1975. Organized by Japanese critic and curator Yusuke Nakahara, the exhibit introduced Dansaekhwa to the world.

Kaywon School of Art and Design professor Yoo Jin-sang said Kwon comes from Oriental background, but experimented in a contemporary way.

"He went to Paris in 1978 and stayed there until 1989. This Paris period brought a dramatic change in material and technique. That was when Kwon started using ink again," Yoo explained.

Kwon made thin incisions from the top and bottom or the center of the paper and let the ink flow down, absorbed into the layers of papers. He mostly used black, blue or gray ink which saturated the incision lines and created random variations, out of the artist's hands.

Most of the work currently on display comes from the family estate and since the artist worked with layers of thin hanji, some of the paintings went through a restoration process before they were exhibited.

The artist knew most about the material he dedicated his life to, including its fragility and possible transformation, and accepted it naturally.

The artist passed away in 2013, before the Dansaekhwa craze, but the boom sheds light on the artist and his works posthumously.

Kwon O-hyup, the artist's eldest son who manages the family estate, said he is glad that his father's works are rediscovered through the artist could not see the international attention on the Dansaekhwa art.

Mika Yoshitake, curator of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., the United States, referred Kwon as an artist who pursued a renewed sense of gravity and he never lost sight of the discursive terrain of "ink painting."

Yoshitake wrote "his work is governed by the synergy of brush, paper and ink" in the book "Dansaekhwa" published by the Grenfell Press earlier this year. "By locating the haptic shifts between these two perceptual effects, Kwon has continued to activate his unique form of ink painting along the thresholds of time and space."

She elaborated, "Kwon's practice straddled this conceptual engagement with paper as painting, but also bridged the space between the avant-garde experiments in ink painting (Oriental painting), on the one hand, and culturally specific associations of gestural abstraction and expressionism of Korean Informel in oil painting (Western painting), on the other," mentioning the artist's attempt to challenge the potentialities of ink-as-painting.

A quote of the artist might sum up his lifelong, tireless pursuit of experimentation.

"Tradition needs to keep flowing. Once it is stopped, it is dead. It is needless to say that a creator should not cease trying new things. An artist should keep moving."



Details of Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (1988) demonstrates the artist's signature puncturing of canvas

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

◆ Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (1982)

◆◆ Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (1984)

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