

Understanding the Insides of Un-Soung Pai (1900–1978): Records of the Korean Artist's Work, and Life, Including Thier Identity

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Abstract

This presentation explores the role of identity, and the issues surrounding it, for Korean modern artists under Japanese colonization (1910-1945) by focusing on Korean artist Un-Soung Pai's work and life. I will mainly focus on his art studies in Europe and his relationship with Japanese culture and celebrities from various circles during that period.

Un-Soung Pai is one of the most significant figures in the history of Korean modern art. He was the first Korean artist to study in Europe, and the artist who stayed there the longest amount of time, a period of eighteen years (from 1922 to 1940). It should be noted that he was one of the only Korean artists whose unique style of painting was well appreciated by people there.

For Pai, Europe was an important place, both artistically and politically. Europe was the place where his work was born, developed and completed. Politically, studying in Europe provided him many chances to encounter various kinds of Japanese people and cultures, more than he would have been exposed to in Korea or Japan. In other words, studying in Europe was a journey to find and improve "self" for him.

By studying Pai's work and life, we can understand the implications of studying abroad for Korean artists under the Japanese rule, and witness the self-realization that may transpire through creating art in a different social environment.

Keywords: Korean modern art, Japanese Colonization, identity, self-awareness

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Introduction

This paper explores the role of identity, and the issues surrounding it, for Korean modern artists under Japanese colonization (1910–1945) by focusing on Korean artist Un-soung Pai's work and life. I will mainly focus on his art studies in Europe and his relationship with Japanese culture and celebrities from various circles during that period.

Who was Un-soung Pai?

Un-soung Pai was one of the most significant figures in the history of Korean modern art. He was the first Korean artist to study in Europe, and remained in Europe longer than any other Korean artist, for a period of 18 years (1922–1940). Pai acquired Western art (oil painting) techniques at the United State School for Fine and Applied Art Berlin (Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst Berlin)¹ in Germany from 1925–1930. It should be noted that he was one of the only Korean artists whose unique style of painting was appreciated in Europe. During his stay (in Germany from 1922–1937 and in France from 1937–1940), he held solo exhibitions all over the continent, and sent his works to various international exhibitions. It is also noteworthy that a number of his art pieces remain in various parts of the world, including Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland, among others.

Un-soung Pai's Self-Portraits and Identity

Un-soung Pai's self-portraits are a fascinating means by which to appreciate his self-awareness and self-recognition. Through the portrait, it is possible to discern his view of himself, his interests, and his personal situation. Four self-portraits by Pai—three oil paintings and a woodcut—have been discovered. Among them, one titled *Shaman (Baksu)*² (*1) is especially noteworthy.



Figure 1: *Shaman (Baksu)*, 1930s, Oil on Canvas, 55×45cm.
Ethnological Museum of Berlin.

¹ The name of the school was changed to Berlin University of Art (Universität der Künste Berlin).

² Male shamans in Korea are generally called Baksu Mudang, or simply Baksu.

In this painting, we can see Un-sung Pai wearing a Korean shaman's costume, against the background of a building or a temple from the Roman era. We can also discern an odd-looking statue in front of the building, along with an exotic mask. At first sight, it reminds us of a self-portrait by Durer, whose painting alluded to the depiction of Jesus Christ in his own image. Shamanism as a religion has a long history in Korea, akin to the history of Christianity in Europe, and of course, the shaman is as important a figure in Shamanism as Jesus Christ is in Christianity. Pai seemed to be attempting to portray himself in this painting as a great Korean artist endeavoring to harmonize Asian and Western cultures. The painting expresses his strong will not to lose his national identity as a Korean in the European art world. At the same time, the Roman building, the statue, and the mask reveal his interests in European civilization.

The “Orientalness” of Pai's Paintings and the Influence of Ukiyo-e

“Oriental lines and Western colors (東線西色)” is the expression that best describes the characteristics and features of Un-sung Pai's paintings. His paintings were recognized and accepted by Europeans as Oriental artworks painted according to Western techniques. Regarding Pai's solo exhibition in Hamburg in 1935, a German critic has pointed out that Pai's color choices and shadow expressions were somewhat underdeveloped. On the other hand, he evaluated Pai's *Children of Korea* highly, praising the attractiveness of the flat composition and the beauty of the line drawings (MRK, 1935, cited in Migeum, 2003). We can understand what Europeans looked for in paintings by Un-sung Pai from this critique. Pai also believed that maintaining the “Oriental classic” style was essential for mastering Western painting techniques. For him, line drawing was the most effective way to express this style. He often drew lines using calligraphy brushes on canvas. Pai transmitted the flavor of Asia through his paintings. His work titled *On the Way Home* (*2) is an example of that. This beautiful oil painting, entered into the National Society of Fine Arts (Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts) in France in 1938, is full of lyrical emotion and the Oriental sense of beauty.



Figure 2: *On the Way Home*, 1938, Oil on Canvas, 110×160cm.

The entire screen, which is covered with white snow and characterized by a simple composition, makes us empathize with Oriental aesthetics, known as “fullness coming from emptiness.” During his stay in Germany from 1922–1937, Pai was attracted to northern-European genre paintings, and he seems to have been influenced by this

genre.³ For example, the similarity of composition between his *On the Way Home* and Pieter Bruegel's genre paintings are often pointed out (Migeum, 2003, p. 81). However, I would like to propose another point. For me, the subject matter and composition of *On the Way Home* is very similar to those of *Ishiyakushi* from the 53 Stations of the Tōkaidō Road Series by Hiroshige Utagawa (*3). It would not have been too difficult for Un-soung Pai to gain access to Ukiyo-e in Germany at that time, because from the beginning in the 1910s, great interest in Ukiyo-e was accelerated by publications by Julius Kurth (1922a, 1922b, 1923) in Germany.⁴ It is believed that Pai studied Ukiyo-e as a form of training, and his affection for the genre is evident in his art.



Figure 3: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Ishiyakushi*, The 53 Stations of the Tōkaidō Road Series, 1841–42, 8.5×13cm, Published by Yamada-ya Shojiro.

It is not only in *On the Way Home* that the influence of Ukiyo-e on Pai's art is demonstrated. In fact, Pai was more renowned for his woodcuts than his oil paintings, where the former are attractive and clearly of a high standard. For example, his self-portrait in woodcut gained a reputation at the Autumn Salon (Salon d'Automne) in Paris in 1927. The lines are clear, while his face is filled with confidence and looks very impressive. In this regard, the book *Old Korean Stories Told by Un-soung Pai* (Runge, 1950), published in Berlin in 1950, is worthy of attention. Every woodcut image in this book is expressed with well-balanced composition, rhythmic lines, and accuracy. Pai conveys the Oriental atmosphere in a very sophisticated way.

Interests in traditional Korean customs

In addition to admiring Ukiyo-e's works, Pai was interested in various kinds of Korean customs. According to the Korean newspaper, the *Daily Cho-Sun*, Pai sometimes requested photos of old buildings, genre paintings, and precious artworks of Korea, and he drew pictures based on these (*Daily Cho-Sun*, 1936). At that time, as interest in Asia boomed in Europe, many Europeans visited Asian countries and brought back various kinds of artifacts for inclusion in Asian collections at museums.

³ Indeed, Un-Soung Pai's art is frequently compared with *Art of the Old Master in the Netherlands* (Ernst Sauder, cited in Migeum, 2003).

⁴ Julius Kurth (1870–1949) was a German independent scholar and author. He published numerous books about Japanese Woodcut (e.g. Kurth, 1922a, 1922b, 1923).

For example, genre paintings by Kisan Chun-gŭn Kim⁵ and postcards and photos of Korean folk customs were included. Europeans were attracted by the immediacy or frankness and Bohemianism reflected in the art of “uncivilized” peoples, and they searched for a new source of inspiration in them (Claudia, 1996, p. 70). Pai’s eyes were opened by the various such cultural phenomena around him; as a result, he became a producer and consumer of Korean folk art. Postcards or Chun-gun Kim’s genre paintings would have been good souvenirs for Western visitors to Korea. For Un-soung Pai, they triggered old memories and became a critical source for his art.



Figure 4: *Portrait of Family*, 1930–35,
Oil on Canvas, 140×200cm, Private Collection.

Many of his oil paintings reveal these preferences. For example, in paintings such as *Korean Bride*, *Portrait of Family*⁶ (*4), we can see that Pai mainly used five traditional Korean colors called *Obang-saek*, which were red, yellow, blue, white, and black. In addition, we can see that all characters in his paintings are Korean, with large and round faces, neat figures, and black hair. This kind of strategy by Pai is often interpreted as voluntary and internal Orientalism.

The Keen Attention Paid in Pai’s Art to European People

Europeans were fascinated by the Oriental feel and calm beauty characterizing Pai’s paintings. French critic Asian Rubinstein described Pai’s art as follows:

I think that the unique characteristic of Un-soung Pai’s art—which is very calm and powerful and a little ironic—comes from his motherland. ... I feel some kind of mysterious temptation in his paintings. His palette is always full of the “vision of a far-away land,” “poetry of Asia,” and “mysterious gift” of his childhood (Rubinstein, 1938, p. 4).

⁵ Kisan (箕山) Chun-gŭn Kim (金俊根, date of birth and death unknown) was a painter who specialized in genre paintings illustrating traditional Korean life.

⁶ *Portrait of Family* is one of Pai’s masterpieces and a Modern Cultural Heritage item in Korea.

Similarly, German critic Herbert Blanken described the Korean children or Korean folk customs in Pai's art highly exotic and absolutely fascinating, and added that Pai's subject matter and spirit could be attributed to his Korean origins. His views can be summarized in the following quote:

Without doubt, a work of art shows the ethnicity and the national characteristics of its artist. ... Korean artist Un-soung Pai painted black-and-white artworks on novel paper with delicate lines. All of the portraits of children and scenes of Korean folklore he painted are highly exotic and attractive. Although he was very far from his homeland, he never forgot Korean art and he worked with the memories and soul of Korean art in Berlin. ... He was an artist who looked for the sources and the spirit of his nationality, and who always did his best. (Blanken, 1936, p. 502)

French author and artist Edouard Sarradin also said that Pai portrayed the image of the extreme Orient with lively and delicate expressions. Pai's art was recognized as highly individualistic and unique (Sarradin, 1938, p. 2). In my opinion, he commercialized his own identity as Korean through his paintings. It was his choice to do so, of course, but it seems that he was "forced" to make this choice in order to fulfill his role as an "Asian artist in Europe." To better understand Pai's decision to do so, we need to look at his situation as a Korean under Japanese colonization.

Work in Europe: The woodcut *Baron Mitsui and His Works*

Pai's remarkable activities in Europe have no parallel in Korea's modern art history. During the 1930s, many artists in Germany were exiled and forced to abandon their art by the Nazis. Under these circumstances, Un-soung Pai completed his studies at the United State School for Fine and Applied Art Berlin safely, and even had a private atelier at his university. In addition, he lectured on Oriental painting all over Europe beginning in 1930, and in 1932 he joined the Association Porza and exhibited his work, *Child of Korea* in 1934 (Miguem, 2003). Embracing this aim, Un-soung Pai took an active part in the international art stage and repeatedly made headlines in Korean newspapers. Of course, his popularity in Europe was a result of his abilities and hard work, though these characterizations are also open to interpretation. I believe Pai's woodcut *Baron Mitsui and His Works* (*5) can suggest another possibility to consider Pai's success in Europe from another angle.

This work is a portrait of Takaharu Mitsui, a member of the Mitsui conglomerate (*zaibatsu*) and former president of Mitsui Shipping Companies and Mitsui Mining Companies. The work is assumed to have been produced between 1933 and 1935 during Mitsui's travels through Europe, and it is now in the possession of the Museum of Ethnology, Hamburg. Mitsui majored in transportation studies at the graduate school level in Germany from 1926–1929, and supposedly became intimate with Un-soung Pai during this period (Miguem, 2003). Mitsui also participated in cultural exchanges with various European countries and was involved in many national projects conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other diplomatic offices. In addition, he served as president of the Japanese–German Society, founded in Germany in 1934.



Figure 5: *Baron Mitsui and his Works*, 1935, Woodcut, 52×40cm, Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg.

It is difficult to define Mitsui and Un-soung Pai's relationship precisely. It is assumed that Mitsui supported Pai as a form of patronage and as a colleague in international cultural collaborations. According to Dr. Nora von Achenbach, director of the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg, this portrait of Takaharu Mitsui was commissioned by Mitsui himself (von Achenbach, 2011). Mitsui is thought to have supported Pai in many ways. For example, Pai is said to have produced paintings for the reception room of the Japanese Embassy in Germany at Mitsui's request (Frank, 1991). Pai's solo exhibitions held in Eastern European countries appear to have been linked to Mitsui as well. Mitsui is known for promoting cultural relationships between Japan and Eastern European countries such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Therefore, he must have had many connections that would have helped Un-soung Pai with venues for his solo exhibitions.

This striking woodcut by Pai was displayed for the first time in his solo exhibition in Hamburg in 1935. Subsequently, it was selected for the International Exhibition of Woodcuts in Warsaw in 1936, and in 1938, it was chosen for exhibition in the Salon National Society of Fine Arts (Salon Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts) in Paris. One German critic referred to the work as ground-breaking in terms of modern engraving. He pointed out the flat background, which is reminiscent of Ukiyo-e expressions, and the textures of skin, clothes, and medals. He also applauded the level of detail in the painting (UT 1935, cited in Migeum, 2003). There is one more point about this work that cannot be ignored: the image of the sun in the upper left and a cherry blossom motif in the upper right. It is well known that the rising sun represents Japan. When the work was produced, Imperial Japan was regarded as powerful, so the symbolism is important. For example, the expression "Country of the Rising Sun" (*Pays du Soleil-Levant* in French) appeared frequently in French magazines published during the same period. Furthermore, the cherry blossom was recognized as the symbol of Japanese militarism and of modernization and civilization during earlier periods (Sun-yeol, 2012). This work thus may have aimed to convey the public image of Japan and its political leverage at the time.

Work in France: Exhibition and *France-Japon* magazine

Pai's work in France from 1937 is also worthy of attention, because it shows the problem of his identity and his ideology. In 1937, he moved to Paris and stayed there for about two years, until 1940. It is also noteworthy that the Japanese committee Franco-Japanese (Comité Franco-Japonais) supported Pai's solo exhibition in Paris (*6), and that Pai was joining Japanese artist communities at this time. In 2014, I discovered some documents which revealed that Pai participated in the Exhibition of Japanese Artists in Paris (*Exposition des Artistes Japonais à Paris*)⁷ twice during his stay, and was the only Korean artist.

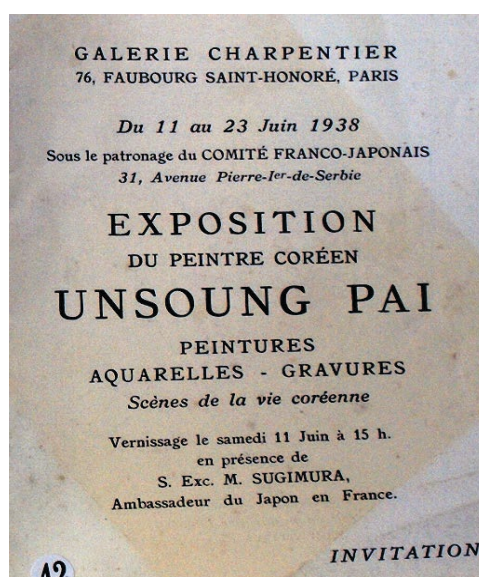


Figure 6: Pamphlet from Pai's solo exhibition

Exhibition of Japanese artists in Paris was an exhibition for Japanese artists who were in Paris, hosted by the Association of Japanese Artists in Paris and sponsored by Yotaro Sugimura (1884–1939), who was the ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary in France, and Jean Zay (1904–1944), the Minister of National Education and Fine Arts at that time. Some articles from Japanese art magazines conveyed detailed descriptions of this exhibition in real time, with the assistance of artists in Paris such as Genichiro Inokuma (1902–1993), Rikizo Takata (1900–1992), and Saburo Miyamoto (1905–1974) (*Art* 1939; *Atelier* 1939; *Bi no Kuni*; Hiroyoshi, 1939). Unfortunately, it is not easy to clarify what kind of work Pai submitted to this exhibition. Instead, I was able to obtain some information on Pai's participation from a magazine titled *France-Japon* (Kuninosuke, 1938; *France-Japon*, 1939), and other Japanese magazines (*Bi no Kuni*, 1939). According to these publications, Pai submitted his works both in painting and engraving form; one such work was a woodcut print titled *Round-the-World-Journey* (*Bi no Kuni*, 1939) for the first

⁷ The first exhibition was held from December 17–31, 1938 in Bernheim Jeune Gallery (Galerie Bernheim Jeune) in Paris, and 68 artists from various genres (painting, engraving, sculpture, crafts and commercial art) participated. The second exhibition was held from June 27 to July 13, 1939 in Charpentier Gallery (Galerie Charpentier) in Paris, and 52 Japanese artists participated.

exhibition and an oil painting titled *Voltre* for the second exhibition. It seems as though Pai was highly appreciated for his woodcut by the French people, and critics evaluated his art as highly unique (*Bi no Kuni*, 1939).

It seems ironic that he received help from Japan and participated in the exhibition for Japanese *Yōga*⁸ artists, even though he strongly criticized Japanese imperialism and colonialism. My guess is that he faced many difficulties living and working as a Korean in Europe. On the other hand, this situation shows that the Japanese and Koreans were able to be intimate regardless of the political condition in the Korean peninsula.

Pai's work with the magazine *France-Japon* cannot be ignored. This magazine, published in 1934 in Paris by Kuni Matsuo and Alfred Smoular, introduced the advantages and internationality of Japanese culture. Pai was the only Korean artist to whom this magazine devoted space, and he even participated as an illustrator four times and painted five illustrations. Details of these contributions are shown in the following table (*7).

	Publication Date	Issue	Type of contribution	Title Of Illustration	Page
1	3.15.1938	No. 27	Article	<i>Exotic Artists of Paris—Korean Painter Un-soung Pai</i> (by A.S)	118–119.
2			Illustration	<i>Child of Korea</i>	119.
3	4.15.1938	No. 28	Illustration	Cover illustration	Cover
4			Illustration	<i>Korean Children's Play</i>	195.
5	6.15.1938	No. 30	Article	<i>Exhibition of Un-soung Pai in Paris</i> (anonym.)	274.
6			Illustration	<i>Takugen TCHO dancing a Buddhist dance</i>	274.
7	1.15.1939	No. 37	Illustration	<i>Korean Children's Winter Play</i> (in color)	Frontispiece

Figure 7: Un-soung Pai's works on the magazine *France-Japon*

Conclusion: Experience of Europe and the Formation of Pai's Ideology

By joining Japanese communities, Pai was able to take advantage of opportunities to enter the international art world. How can we understand Un-soung Pai in the context of East Asian art history? Although historical circumstances marginalized Pai, he made the most of this situation. For Pai, Europe was an important place, both artistically and politically. Europe was the place where his art was born, developed, and completed. Politically, studying in Europe provided him with many chances to encounter various kinds of Japanese people and cultures—more than he would have been exposed to in Korea or Japan. In other words, studying in Europe was a journey to find and improve his “self.” However, even though Pai was involved with Japanese people under colonization, it seems that he never forgot his Korean roots. We can see

⁸ *Yōga* (洋画) or literally “Western-style paintings” is a style of paintings by Japanese artists, made in accordance with Western traditional conventions, techniques and materials.

that he always identified himself as Korean, and as a Korean artist, in many French journals or newspapers. In addition, he pronounced his name in the Korean way, as Un-soung Pai, not according to the Japanese “Un-sei Hai.” His appearance in his self-portrait also strongly appeals to his identity as Korean. These examples are noteworthy because they were expressions of his stance on history.

In view of discoveries thus far, I suggest that Pai as an artist made a rational decision regarding the situation at hand. His art was his declaration regarding his ethnic roots in Korea, and it shows his compromises with reality. There are various opinions regarding Pai’s identity and his activities in Europe. In Korea, he was known as a pro-Japanese and pro-Communist artist, who had gone to North Korea after the Korean War. It is necessary to understand, however, that he lived during a period that was filled with confusion over ideologies, value shifts, and compromises. Needless to say, young Korean artists were constantly at a crossroads concerning their activities and expression of their ideologies. Pai’s art bridged gaps between tradition and modernism, East and West, and the internationalization of Korean art and acceptance of Western art. By studying Pai’s work and life, we can understand the implications of studying abroad for Korean artists under Japanese rule, and witness the self-realization that may have transpired through their creation of art in a different social environment.

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