**Tradition and Socialism** - Art & Archaeology in North Korea

April 10, 2014 – Philadelphia Museum of Art – Dr. Jane Portal

Reviewed by Gabrielle Gaulin

The lecture, hosted in conjunction with the Treasures from Korea exhibition, aimed to describe the current situation of art and art scholarship in North Korea. As a rare visitor to the country, Dr. Portal was able to start a collection for the British Museum and experience firsthand how art functions in the socialist state.

North Korea is a highly regimented country, with a strong political agenda for uniformity, “true democracy”, and collective values for all citizens. North Korea is also constantly at odds with its southern neighbor, the Republic of South Korea, because North Korea is determined to reunify these two countries. Traditional Confucian values are still present in the country as part of its historic heritage; women are expected to dress in traditional and modest clothes and submit to men in public and private life and there is a strong emphasis on filial piety. Political agendas and cultural vestiges heavily weigh on all of North Korean culture and teachings, and this is equally reflected in their art.

Several art forms are supported by the North Korean government and presumably the small elite class who can afford to purchase art pieces: choseonhwa (traditional ink painting technique), oils, drawing, calligraphy, prints, sculpture, ceramics, film, and mass performances. There are also some handicrafts intended for exports, such as lacquer products. Most of the above media are used in very structured and predetermined ways, including subject matter, rendering style, and even size. Almost all art is used to emphasize the greatness of the country and the government. Realism is the standard style, and very few deviations from that can be found. When the director of North Korea’s National Gallery went to England to visit the British Museum, Dr. Portal pointed out that the North Korean director professed to not understanding abstract art. No matter how much Dr. Portal tried to explain the historical relevance and cultural context of the period, he still couldn’t grasp the concept of abstraction. This (one could read as determined) ignorance of other styles strongly reflects the values of North Korea.

One of the most important values of the country revolves around the cult of “The Great Leader”. Much of the celebrated art of the current period revolves around the central figure of Kim Il-sung and to a lesser extent Kim Jong-il. It is, without a doubt, the strongest image in the eye of the North Korean public, as their portraits are required to be hung in every room, statues are placed in every major square and building lobby, and murals depicting Il-sung’s deeds abound. In accordance with this major tenet of North Korean life, art developed in a way that depicts the beauty and glory of North Korea (and by extension, its Great Leader). Landscapes depict the great works of man such as humming factories, scene paintings show happy children and dedicated workers celebrating their laws and government, and the natural beauty of the landscape is shown through paintings and historic landmarks. In accordance with the cult of worship is the Nazi style belief in Koreans as the perfect race under the perfect ruler. In order to match this conviction, archaeology is being rewritten and celebrated as objective proof of Korea’s dominance. Dr. Portal referenced the “reconstructed” tomb of Tan-gun, a mythical character who is supposed to have established the Koreas in 2333 BC, in support of this idea. Kim Il-sung had this tomb constructed in celebration of the legendary king, and all historical accuracy was sacrificed in order to make the site a glorious and imposing destination. This sort of behavior has been repeated at other historical sites, including a tomb that most outside archaeologists believe belong to a Chinese colonist, but the North Koreans firmly state is an influential Korean king’s. Some true historical relics that enforce the greatness of previous dynasties based in the North of Korea include the Daidong Gate (Koryo dynasty), an imposing entrance to the old capital of Kaesung.

Dr. Portal also tried to discuss the direction that North Korean art will take in the years to come. As she stated, every rule must come to an end, and the direction that art will take after the strict oppression is lifted is certainly intriguing and uncertain. North Korea’s government of the moment will only let outsiders see the “beauty” of the country, so it’s impossible to tell what, if any, subversive art movements exist in the country. If they do, their content and morals are completely unknown to us but likely critical of the country. The development of North Korean art and culture certainly tells us a lot about the country’s morals, but can give us very little indication of the future.

All in all, Dr. Portals presentation provided a chance to learn more about one of the most secretive countries in the world. Her first hand knowledge of the country was fascinating and gave listeners a much greater depth of understanding than most Americans can claim. It also gave the attendees a lot to think about: when the art of a nation is this shallow and manipulated, how can its people be faring? What kind of markets do these pieces even serve? Besides the arts, this peek inside a totalitarian society gives a disturbing view of life regulated in every way.