

Being Modern: Representing the ‘New Woman’ and ‘Modern Girl’ in Korean Art

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1. Introduction

“I was a doll
A doll as my father’s daughter
A doll as my husband’s wife
I was a toy for them
Let Nora go
Gently let her go
by knocking down the high walls
and throwing open the gates at deep inner
quarters walls
Let her loose into the air filled with
freedom

I was a human being
Even before being a husband’s wife
and before a mother of children
First of all, I am a human being...”

(Na He-sok, *Maeil Sinbo*, 3 April 1921; translated by Kim Yung-hee)

Before a woman is a wife, a daughter, and a mother, she is a human being. The content of this 1921 poem by Korea’s first Western style painter, Na He-sok, is significant as a manifesto of women’s liberation in poetic form. In a Confucian patriarchal family system in which the identity and social status of women were defined through their relationships with men, as mothers and

wives, this assertion of independence was an important change that rocked the country. By late nineteenth century, thought about the traditional woman was broadly challenged by the influx of modern Western thought. The first educational institution for women, Ehwa Women's School, was established in 1886. By 1895 the Chong-sin Women's School and other educational institutions for women had cropped up in various places. As women educated in this new system began to emerge, it appeared as though a fundamental change in the status of women were unavoidable. This New Woman — *Sin Yosong* — who was equipped with a modern education and sought a public role as she moved into the public realm, increased in number in the 1920s and became a very visible element of contemporary society. New Woman or *Sin Yosong* is of key importance in understanding the early modern society of Korea as it enables us to see society from the woman's experience, such as changes in gender relations and marriage, as well as changes in family values.

Research on the New Woman over the years has proceeded from various angles in the fields of education, women's studies, sociology, and literature. Discourse on the New Woman in art history, specifically what images the New Woman represented in the visual arts and what role the reproduction of the New Woman's image played in society is also important to this body of research. This art history angle will be the focus of my paper.

The representation of the New Woman in the visual arts can largely be divided into two kinds of media. The one is high art, both traditional brush painting as well as oil painting, which was introduced in the 1910s to Korea. The other is the mass media, such as newspaper cartoons, magazine covers or illustrations, photographs and advertisements. In the case of high art, it is interesting to see how artists went about transforming the image of the traditional woman to that of a modern woman. On the other hand, representations of the New Woman in the mass media, another form of new culture in itself, much more directly reflected society's reactions and social commentaries.

2. Who is the New Woman?

The first usage of the term New Woman appeared in Korea in the decade of 1910s. However, the term gained general recognition in March 1920 when Kim Won-ju and other graduates of Ehwa Women's School published a magazine for enlightenment and gender equality called *Sin Yoja*, another word meaning new woman.¹ Another magazine founded in June 1920 called *Pu'in* (Madame), changed its name in October 1923 to *Sin Yosong*. The writers for *Sin Yosong* were mostly men, and yet they contributed to awake one's interest in women's situation as they brought forth the issues on 'New Woman' in the society.²

The term New Woman, from which *Sin Yosong* springs, originated in the nineteenth century West along with the new discourse on women, and grew into popular use worldwide. As cities expanded in the United States and Europe and the demand for female labor grew, women broke from their traditional place in the family to take on public roles in society, thereby coming to seek an independent character. These women looked out for themselves not only in their economic and social life, but also in their private, male-female relationships, and traditional ideas of marriage were often criticized. The New Woman actively attempted to change herself not in thought only, but also in outward appearance and behavior. In the United States, for example, the image that spoke for the New Woman found expression in the Gibson Girl style, in which women sloughed off the traditional, tightly corseted figure of the body and embraced a free and easy style with a mannish jacket (fig. 1).

¹ In the 1920s, after Korea's March First Movement, a peaceful independence movement which was brutally repressed, Japan switched to a so-called Cultural policy. This led to the birth of many newspapers and magazines, among which were several women's magazines. It was in this era that the publishing world enjoyed its heyday.

² Park Yong-ok, "1920nyon dae Sin Yosong yongu (The Studies on New Women in the 1920s)," *Yosong: Yoksa wa Hyonje* (Women: History and Present), Kuk'hak Charyo Won, 2001, 127-161.



fig. 1

The term New Woman was first translated into Japanese in 1886 as *Atarashii Onna*. However, it was only a few Japanese women, led by Hiratsuka Raicho, who established a group called *Seito*, or Bluestockings, and thus distinguished themselves as true New Women. This group initially focused on developing women's creativity rather than on social and political reform, but later changed their direction towards the women's movement.

The term Sin Yosong was introduced into Korea via Japan and the West, and it is clear that the New Woman in Korea was much influenced by the image of her counterparts overseas. But the question of who is a New Woman is a topic of discussion today as much as it was in the early modern period. Kim Won-ju, editor of *Sin Yoja*, stated "The New Woman is she who breaks down the moral code that has repressed her for so long and who leads an enlightened life of equality, free of sexual discrimination in her freedoms, rights, and duties."³

Among recent research, a report in 1994 by the title of *A Study of Female Types* separates the New Woman in Korea into four

³ Kim Won-ju, "Uri Sin Yoja ui chujang (The Demand of We New Women)," *Sin Yoja*, v.2, April, 1920.

different groups.⁴ The first is a leader who has gone overseas to study and has returned; the second has graduated from a women's high school and is working; the third has graduated from a women's high school and is a homemaker; and the fourth is a working woman who can read. Besides this, other studies show that the term New Women can be defined across a broad spectrum, from social activist farm workers or city workers who participated in the women's movement, to the bourgeois educated class of women who challenged the traditional patriarchal system. This implies that the term New Woman itself was used rather fluidly according to social change, such that the meaning, scope, and role of the New Woman provide a site of continuous definition and redefinition according to the era. In 1938 Na Il-bu admitted that, "It is difficult to define the New Woman explicitly, but no one can deny the divide between the Old Woman and the New Woman."⁵

A work related to this that has caught my interest is the 1995 research done by Cho Un and Yun Taek-rim, "The New Woman and Patriarchy under Japanese Occupation."⁶ The researchers interviewed a target group of women who received their education during the Japanese Occupation. According to their results, the term New Woman was in frequent use until about the mid-1920s to indicate women who in principle challenged the feudalistic patriarchal system. More broadly speaking, the term was recognized as indicating a woman who had received a modern education. The interesting thing, however, is that the women interviewed remembered the image of the New Woman

⁴ Han'guk Yosong Yon'guso, "Han'guk yosongsa chong'rip ul wihan inmul yuhyon yon'gu (The study of female types for establishment of Korean women's history)," v.3, Ewha Women's University, 1994.

⁵ Na Il-bu, "Sin Yosong kwa ku yosong (The New Woman and the Old Woman)," *Bipan*, November, 1938, 11.

⁶ Cho Un and Yun Taek-rim, "Iljeha sin yosong kwa kabujangje(The New Woman and patriarchy under Japanese Occupation)," *Kwangbok 50 ju'nyon ki'nyom yon'gu jip* (Journals commemorating fiftieth anniversary for Korean independence), Korean Research Foundation, 1995, 186-189.

more as an outward appearance than as a person standing for principles. For example, a woman who was a homemaker was termed a New Woman if she did not wear her hair in the traditional style of chignon. In other words, in its broader meaning, the term New Woman included not only those who supported the women's liberation movement or those who received a modern education and worked outside the home, but also women whose hair or clothing style distinguished them from traditional women. Rather than an academic definition, the image typical people with some level of education remember of the New Woman is similar to that represented by the artists, newspaper illustrators, or cartoonists of the day. In this paper, I will also follow this quite inclusive definition of the New Woman.

The first to be designated as New Women in Korea were those few elites who, between the late Choson period and 1910s, were able to receive a modern education in Japan or the West, or at home in an institute run by foreign missionaries. Included in this group are Park Esther (1876-1910), who studied medicine in the United States and became the first female doctor in Korea, and Haransa (Kim Chong Dong), who was the first to graduate with a Bachelor's degree from the United States, and who returned to be a dorm mother at Ewha Women's School. By the 1920s, the number of New Women had increased to the point where the term New Woman was widely known at least among educated city dwellers. Women at this time mostly pursued work as doctors, nurses, or educators, and there were also opinion columnists and artists. These New Women not only pursued professional jobs, but they also participated actively in the women's reform movement to freely associate with men, marry and divorce, be sexually liberated, and other aspects related to rapid social change. Recent scholarship on the New Woman has taken this era as its focus. Representative figures from the 1920s include women such as writer Kim Myong-sun (penname Tansil, 1896-1951), magazine editor Kim Won-ju (penname Il-yop), Na He-sok (penname Chong wol, 1896-1946), soprano Yun Shim-dok(1897-1926), and others. Among outstanding female educators there are Kim Hwal-ran (1899-1970), Kim Mirisa, and Park In-dok; and as

key social activists, Huh Chong-suk, Chu Se-chuk, and Park Won-hui are particularly worthy of mention.



fig. 2



fig. 3

With her modern education and scientific knowledge, the New Woman carried on a new lifestyle in terms of clothing, food and home. More than anything, though, what identified a New Woman from a traditional one was her style of clothing. What she wore became a key determinant in fixing her identity. A photo of Park Esther wearing a Gibson Girl-style jacket and glasses reveals that she is modern, Western and different (fig.2). However, the typical 1920s attire for a New Woman was not Western attire, but a short or pleated skirt and a longer version of the short Korean jacket, or chogori, which was influenced by the look of foreign female missionaries (fig.3)⁷. By the 1930s, however, Western clothes became the norm, not simply because they signified modernity, but because they were practical and comfortable.

The New Woman also used umbrellas or parasols and wore high-heeled shoes. As the *chima*, or traditional wrap skirt, got shorter, calves that were once discreetly guarded from view came into sight. But as showing bare leg was still considered taboo, many women took to wearing long socks. At first hairstyles mimicked the American Gibson Girl style, in which hair was parted on the side and twisted flat in the back (*tremori*), but later the bob with bangs became popular. The *ssugechima*, a traditional

⁷ This move to not fully Westernize clothing at this juncture can be interpreted as nationalistic resistance against Japan's promotion of Western clothes.

headdress used to cover the head and body when going out, was replaced with a decorative shawl. This New Woman departure from the long skirt and headdress with short jacket worn by the traditional woman presented a clear demarcation of a new kind of woman. Kim Ki-jin commented that the New Woman "has an appearance of balanced beauty and intellect."⁸ A writer by the penname Joseph described the New Woman in his poem "In Praise of the New Woman" as follows: "Her head held high, her confident stride, her ruddy cheeks, her sturdy arms, ..." ⁹

The appearance and behavior of the New Woman became a topic of public interest and the object of much envy, longing, and imitation. She also became the object of jealousy and criticism. Especially after the mid-1920s, as the number of educated women increased, the concept began to lose its freshness. The public perception of the new woman was that she was extravagant in her greed for things Western, and her selfish desires outstripped her attention to family. The *Dong-a Ilbo* carried an article on 8 August 1925 that read, "Seoul's extravagant women are first, the New Woman, second, the bourgeois mistress, and third, the kisaeng (female entertainer)." A response to this kind of stereotype of the New Woman appeared in an opinion article in the *Choson Ilbo*: "If she says free love, she's a New Woman, if she wears a bob, she's a New Woman, if she says divorce, she's a New Woman. The woman of divorce, free love, or a bob does not of herself demand that she be called a New Woman, so why do the members of our society carelessly call them all New Woman? This flippant usage of the term carries serious overtones of ridicule and hatred. You who welcome the new and despise the old, how can you abuse this new thing called a New Woman in this manner?"¹⁰

By the early 1930s, criticism of the New Woman became prevalent in newspapers and magazines. As the general social

⁸ Kim Ki-jin, *Sin Yosong*, June-July, 1925, 38.

⁹ Johan, "Sin Yoja song (Song for New Women)," *Sin Yosong*, August, 1924, 116.

¹⁰ Choson Il-bo, 1925, August 25.

atmosphere of the colonial period continued to call for women who had received a modern education to be ‘wise mother, good wife’ by helping the husband and raising the children well, the term New Woman was gradually replaced by more neutral term of Modern Woman. As a result, the discourse on New Women succeeded in bringing up the new concept of women for social discussion, but failed to lead to the discussion of women’s suffrage or social reform. Perhaps it was too high expectation for colonial society. Social interests focused mainly on the private lifestyle of New Woman or social intercourse between men and women.

3. The New Woman in High Art

Before we examine representations of the New Woman in early modern art, we first need to look at the image of women in traditional art. The reason women appear so infrequently in Korean classical art is that the main genre of Eastern painting, unlike Western art, has traditionally been landscapes. The earliest images of women can be found on tomb murals of the Koguryo Dynasty, but it is not until the late Choson dynasty that one finds more images in documentary paintings and paintings depicting royal ceremonies. Women of noble birth or upper class women begin to be seen in documentary paintings depicting domestic interiority. These include a baby’s hundred-day birthday, as in “Highlights of an Illustrious Life,” and other celebrations, as in “Ceremonial Scene of the 60th Wedding Anniversary.” In these scenes women are represented not as independent subjects, but only in relation to their men, as wives and mothers. As Confucian moral custom dictated that men and women not occupy the same space in public from when they became seven years old, and upper class women were not to be seen by strangers. It is virtually impossible, therefore, to find scenes of men and women together in public spaces other than in the ceremonial paintings mentioned above.

A greater variety of subjects regarding women’s daily lives is found in genre paintings and Standing Beauty paintings of the 18th



fig. 4

century onwards. Genre paintings for the lower classes increasingly began to portray men and women together, and the women in these cases were mostly courtesans (fig.4). We begin to get a taste of male-female relationships during the Choson Dynasty from these paintings that show women dancing for men at banquets, or flirting with them in a garden or by the side of a road. We should remember that these relationships consist of the noble male/ruling class and the female courtesan/lower class.



fig. 5

The focal point of interest in genre paintings of this time is that women move from the private space of the inner quarters into the public sphere. The image of women concealing their shape with long veils or headdresses as they venture into the streets frankly illustrates the fact that in the Choson Dynasty the body of a woman essentially did not exist (fig.5). However, we start to see depictions of lower class women washing their clothes or hair in a river, or coming from a market, which indicates that the strict line drawn between the private and public spheres is beginning to break down.

Portrait paintings and Standing Beauty paintings are where we see women as independent subjects for the first time. In the infrequent portrait painting, women are usually depicted as one half of the man and wife pair. In the case of Standing Beauty paintings, names of the subjects are not known, but the possibility that they are courtesans is high. These alluring women with their elegant coiffures represent the male artists' ideal image of beauty rather than the portrait of a specific person (fig.6).

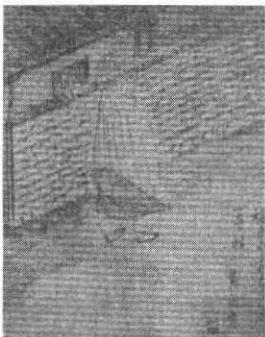


fig. 6

Rather than be painted for exhibit, since public exhibitions did not exist then the way they do today, Standing Beauty paintings were displayed only for private consumption. Taking this into account, the women in these paintings were not only for the appreciation of the male artist or male viewer, but may have had the objective of inspiring male fantasies. In this manner, these paintings seem to have carried similar meaning to that of today's pin-up girl.

As the enlightenment period dawned, the number of female artists who received formal art training, beginning with Na He-sok, began to increase. That is not to say that in the Choson Dynasty there were no female artists, Madame Sin (Sin sa-im-dang) being a notable example, but for them painting was not a job. Like the scholars, painting was merely one part of their cultural refinement. Before 1945 and Korea's independence from Japan, there were about twenty female artists who submitted their work at an annual official salon exhibition, the Choson Art Exhibition.

The woman who received the most attention, however, was the New Woman Na He-sok. She was the first female artist to paint in Western style, but her assertion of a new sexual morality and her belief in gender equality make her a forerunner of the radical feminist. After graduating from a Tokyo women's art school, she married and went around the world for two years, during which time she had an affair with a married man, Choi Lin, then got divorced, and ended up living out her life alone in a Buddhist temple, all of which subverted traditional values and gave rise to a new way of thinking that gave a severe jolt to society.

In the April 1920 issue of *Sin Yojja*, Na, perhaps out of her personal experience, contrasts two kinds of gaze regarding the New Woman in her illustration *What is that?* (fig.7).

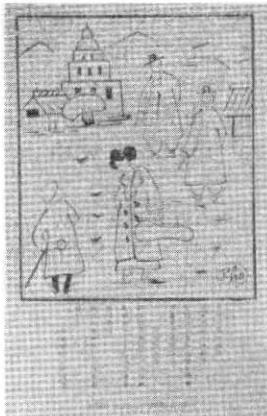


fig. 7

Some elderly people look at the woman holding a violin in the center of the drawing and remark, "Who would ever want that pretentious woman?" On the other side is a young man wearing a suit who says, "She sure looks pretty. She is very stylish—I should go up and say hello." As a talented writer, Na's numerous poems, novels, and essays can be seen as bold manifestos of womanhood. As an artist, however, she does not reveal herself as a passionate feminist since she mainly produced typical landscapes. One notable

exception would be her self-portrait, where she depicts herself in Western attire. Although she does not identify herself as a painter in this work, she breaks from the traditional way of luring the male gaze, which is to position the figure slightly aslant, and instead shows herself directly and fully facing the viewer for the first time.

With New Woman appearing in the modern era, artists faced the challenge of making a new image for women, and found a solution in conflating the new and traditional images of a woman. In his 1923 painting *The Gaze* (fig. 8), Kim Un-ho tries an interesting experiment by adhering to the traditional form of 'a beauty under a tree' while transforming the subject into a modern New Woman. In this painting spring has arrived. It is a season for lovers: the branches of a weeping willow sway in the breeze, and a woman stands in a field of wildflowers, a bouquet in her hands. She is the image of an ideal New Woman, with her shortened skirt, long jacket, high heels, and shawl around her shoulders. Rather than connecting the image of the New Woman with urban modernity, she is depicted here in a romantic setting, holding flowers, wearing a diaphanous skirt, eliciting in the viewer a sense of



fig. 8

having discovered her in her private moment of reverie, maybe for love, and she becomes the object of a voyeuristic gaze. This can be understood as the expression of sexual desire for a woman hidden within the image of the passive female of past representations, angled now to reflect a sensual liberation with the rediscovery of her body as a modern being.

Many other visual artists and writers also discovered a new era of beauty in the clothes of the New Woman. Artist No Su-hyon admires the New Woman's altered traditional dress in an illustration (fig. 9) under which he writes, "If fairies existed, this



fig. 9

is what their clothes would look like: a light jacket, abundant skirt pleats..."¹¹ Novelist Kim Ki-rim finds that the New Woman aroused eroticism as he writes in his novel *Spring's Messenger*: "Her high heels give her an added lightness—her skin colored stockings—her dramatically short skirt—with all these the New Woman paints the insensitive streets and mechanized society with eroticism and excitement."¹² In one of his novels, Yom Sang-sop also describes the allure of the New Woman's bared calves and high heels. "There is nothing wrong with buying your wife a pair of slightly high heels and letting her wear her in the

tremori hair style. A man will then have no desire to divorce her....When female students pass by, isn't the reason we look twice under a silk umbrella because of her Western hairstyle, long jacket, short skirt and high heels, which give us vertigo, and then her powdered face makes us lose all of our senses?"¹³

Despite the admiration and allure of the New Woman's appearance, in the case of high art at least, male artists continued

¹¹ Yi He-chang, *Han'guk sisa manhwa jip* (Korean Cartoons for current affairs)," 1982, 136-137.

¹² Kim Ki-rim, *Bom ui Jong'ryong* (Messenger for Spring), v.5, 305.

¹³ Yom Sang-sop, *Nohinun muot ul odonnunga* (What have you achieved), Nim'um-sa, 1974, 214.

to reproduce her image within defined, private spheres only, such as in domestic interiors or in enclosed gardens, that which feminist art historian Griselda Pollock calls a space of femininity.¹⁴ This indicates the difficulty artists had with portraying the new image of a woman that departed radically from that of the traditional woman. In the modern era, self-portraits and figures were genres newly added to the traditional landscape and still life. Most figure paintings of men tended to be self-portraits or portraits of artists' friends. Figure paintings of women, however, consisted of anonymous generic types and carried titles such as "Woman Reading," "Woman Knitting," or even simply "Woman." Despite this objectification of women, the number of women figure paintings far outnumbered those of men, and became a popular subject. There are a few different reason for this. First, when Western painting was introduced in Korea in the 1910s, it mainly consisted of works by Impressionist artists who loved to paint women in their daily lives, which then influenced the Korean art scene. Second, Japanese *Nihonga*, especially *Bijinga* ('Painting of Beauty') began to infiltrate from the time of colonization. Thirdly, using a live model was a new method of painting, and modern artists were the ones privileged to take advantage of this method.

Among images of women in interiors, by far the most prevalent is of women reading. If the New Woman established an identity distinct from the traditional woman in what she wore, then knowledge and education became additional tools in establishing that identity. At the 3rd Choson Art Exhibition in 1925, we find examples of the New Woman in a traditional setting. Chong Kyu-ik's *Woman in the Study* and Kim Chang-sop's *Woman Holding a Book* (fig. 10) show a woman sporting the



fig. 10

¹⁴ Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Space of Femininity," *Vision and Difference*, Routledge, Lond and New York, 1988, 50-90.

tremori hairstyle and holding a book indicative of the new learning, but in the interior space of a study. The women look impressive in strength and seriousness. In Chong's work, the books on the bookshelf appear to be written in English, but in most works it is difficult to confirm what book they are reading.

Women's literacy was already vigorously encouraged as early as the late Choson Period, on the level of patriotism and enlightenment. The November 1923 issue of *Sin Yosong*, in which women are told they must without fail read books, study music, and attend concerts indicates that music appreciation and reading were regarded as necessary to a New Woman's cultivation. But if we take October 1930 as a measuring stick, the number of men who could read the Korean alphabet was about 36.5%, and the number of women topped out at a mere 10.5%.¹⁵ Therefore, women who can read indicated not only New Women but also a privileged class.

Music appreciation in paintings was also charged with a modern meaning. In Kim In-sung's *Spring Melody* (fig.11), a

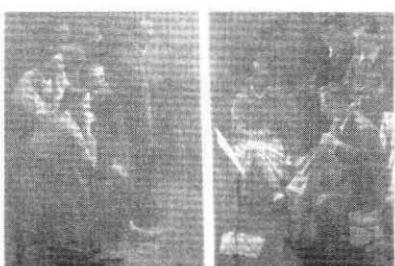


fig. 11

New Woman wearing a modern hanbok and a man in a Western suit attend a cello performance. The artist indicates that this work praises youth, and with this work we see the women and men occupying the same space for the first time. Interestingly, the figures Kim In-sung portrays

here have Western facial features and body proportions, as do the figures in most of his other works. For example, in his work *Studio*, we see a woman posing as a model and a male artist looking at his sketch of her, and the features and body proportions

¹⁵ Chong Yo-sop, "Ilje chiha-e itsoso han'guk yosong-e daehan kyo'yuk chongchek kwa ku johang-e kwan'han yon'gu (The study of educational policy and its resistant movement in Japanese Colonial period)," *Asia Yosong Yon'gu*, v.9, December, 1970, 9.

of the figures are very Western. In addition, the man and the woman show an equal relationship.

More than anything else, the New Woman's trademark was her bobbed hair, which was termed 'short-cut hair' for a time. Yi Kwae-dae and Kil Jin-sop's *Young Woman* (fig.12) shows two



fig. 12

young ladies with their hair in a bob and with Western features. From its inception, the bob faced serious opposition in society. In 1895 Choi Ik-hyon and other Confucianists stood in front of the royal gates and sent up a petition to King Kojong declaring, "Though you cut our throats, we will never cut off our topknots!" This demonstrates the degree to which tradition and modernity were divided by the symbol of long or short hair.

It also suggests a breakdown of gender boundaries. The woman who cut her hair made ambiguous the distinction between her and her male counterparts, as well as between the young woman with her long braid and the married woman with her bun.

Some say the first so-called "bobbed beauty" was the female entertainer (*kisaeng*) Kang Myong-hwa, while others say it was Kang Hang-ran, also a *kisaeng*, who later became a social activist. Soon thereafter, educator Kim Hwal-lan, writer Kim Myong-sun, dancer Choi Sung-hi and others also cut their hair in bobs, thus making it a symbol of the New Woman. The pros and cons of this new hairstyle appeared in a variety of newspapers and magazines and became the talk of the town. Kim Hwal-lan described it as hygienic, pretty, economical, liberating, and in line with worldly trends.¹⁶

In the 1930s as the number of artists increased, many portraits of women in interiors wearing Western clothes were produced. The leading artist of the time, Yi In-song, mostly depicted women in the countryside in traditional dress for the works he submitted

¹⁶ "Yoja danbal yi kahan'ga buhan'ga (Pros and cons on women's bob)." *Byolkonkon*, January, 1929, 128-129.



fig. 13

to the Choson Art Exhibition, probably because it was local color which appealed to Japanese juries. But on a personal level, he took great interest in the Western attire of women and children. In his 1936 work *Woman in Yellow* (fig. 13), he portrayed his wife, who studied fashion design in Tokyo, wearing a capeline hat and ultramodern dress. The following year, Yi Kap-hyang depicted a bright, urban sensibility in his work *Woman in Checkered Clothes*.

The city produced a new consumer class of women seeking individuality and style, and the sense of beauty they sought after was all things Western.

By the end of the 1930s, debate on the New Woman discourse had disappeared, but paintings with the New Woman as their theme continued to appear at the Choson Art Exhibition. In the midst of World War II, in 1944, the most commanding image of the New Woman was produced by Yi Yu-tae. In his portrait



fig. 14

Research (fig. 14) stands a case full of laboratory tools in the background, and on the desk is a microscope, among other tools. A young, female scientist wearing a modern hanbok covered by a white lab coat is taking a short break from her work in a place that once was the domain of men only. In its companion piece, "Responding in Verse to a Poem," a young woman wearing a hanbok sits in a Western-style room with a table covered with flowers and books and a piano. It is unclear whether

this woman is a pianist, but when comparing this work with "Research", it seems likely that she is indeed a pianist by profession. The artist has said that for his work "Research" he used as a model the younger sister of a friend who works in the lab of a university hospital. When looking at the two works together, it becomes clear that the faces of the two women

are the same, which indicates that rather than focus on any one person in particular, these works seem to have been painted to contrast science vs. art and reason vs. sensibility.

4. The New Woman in the Mass Media

The new genre of newspaper and magazine illustrations, advertisements, cartoons and the like, played important roles in propagating the image of the New Woman. This is largely due to the fact that by its nature, the mass media reflects even subtle changes in society. The media would foster public opinion as they debated on whether to welcome or reject the rapidly changing values of society. Similarly, as the public grew accustomed to the identity of the New Woman as presented by these media, her image took on a universal form.

Reproductions of the New Woman in the media, as opposed to high art, characteristically focused on the image of women on the streets. Men now had plenty of opportunities to freely observe many different kinds of women, as those concealing, cumbersome headdresses and veils began to disappear in the streets. The photographers, illustrators, or the modern flaneur quickly took note of changes in the streets and were able to take snapshots or

made sketches. For instance, the June 11, 1924 edition of the *Dong-a Ilbo* printed a cartoon reflecting the face of a changing era entitled "Headdress and Glasses." (fig. 15). In it we see a New Woman in a long jacket, shortened skirt, high heels, glasses, and short hair, carrying books and an umbrella. Behind her is a traditional woman wearing a headdress, and the caption reads: "In the past, women showed only their eyes; now that's the only thing they cover." Women themselves, as they strolled



fig. 15

about, went shopping, and looked at themselves in the reflection of show windows, began to branch out in the public sphere, thus realizing a new social status for women.

Opinion media that often treated the debate surrounding the New Woman included the *Sin Yosong*, *Byol konkon*, *Dong-a Ilbo*, and *Choson Ilbo*. These media dedicated a great number of pages to culture and lifestyle, as well as space for social critics and illustrators to publicly air their opinions. In this period, virtually all of the editorial staff was male. These editors, illustrators, contributors and ad designers acted as spokespersons for modern cultural intellectuals. The most suggestive themes treated by editorialists and illustrators did not so much concern a woman's individual rights as a human, but focused instead on her tendency towards luxury and extravagance, the newly educated woman's interactions with men, the changes in male-female relationships, the single versus double income life, and marriage and divorce, thus indicating that the New Woman still struggled to find her identity in relation to her husband and her parents.

In truth, the reason many men had an unfavorable response to the New Woman is that as Western thought infiltrated the country, free love and divorce were more easily achieved, there was trouble with the in-laws after marriage, and the new etiquette of 'ladies first' was introduced; all of which led to the breakdown of the male's status in society.

Kim Kyu-tae, a well-known illustrator of the time, in the December 1928 issue of *Byol Kongon*, drew a satirical picture of a

wiry, arrogant, bobbed New Woman wearing glasses with a man in a Western suit. The title was "An influential gentleman and gentlewoman returned from studying abroad after swaying their elderly parents' purse."(fig.16). The man holds a sign that reads, "Bought my Doctorate, in the middle of a terrible divorce, one hundred



fig. 16

thousand *won* inheritance, immigrant love;" the woman's reads, "Would-be artistic intellectual, lots of experience with love affairs, seek a beautiful young man." In reality, there were many men who married as young teenagers, but after studying abroad, their old-fashioned wives no longer suited them so they either deserted them or took on a New Woman as a second wife. New Women, because of their position, could not find a man worth marrying, so they often had affairs with married men. These issues gave rise to many social problems. However, in this case the men's actions were tolerated, but the women often became the object of social reproach.

Another negative image of the New Woman was the notion that as women became educated and joined the workforce they became masculinized, and men became feminized, leading to ambiguity in distinction between the sexes. In the January 1928 issue of *Byol Kongon*, an illustration depicts a man wearing a soft, feminine jacket and pants with high-heeled shoes who calls out, "Miss Yong-ja, now that I'm dressed like this, will you love me?"

Whereupon the intellectual New Woman, complete with glasses and a pipe, retorts, "Your voice has to sound like a woman's to be a true man of the new era." (fig.17)

Meanwhile, the field that recognized the New Woman as connected with a consumer lifestyle and as the leader of new fashion trends was the field of advertising. The New Woman's lifestyle became a new model for society, and she began to be a symbol of modernity to be imitated. Consumers and the masses followed ads carefully for signs of change in make-up, fashion, and foodstuffs. In the 1920s many of the consumer goods sold were Japanese, and advertisements from Japan were often printed as received. Sketches were changed to reflect a



fig. 17



fig. 18

Korean woman's image in ads for white cosmetic powder, for example, or the New Woman's progressive image in ads for *Ajinomodo* spices (fig.18). Thus did Japan strategically devise to give native color to Japanese products.¹⁷

From the end of the 1920s, the media's interest turned to the New Woman's new manifestation, 'Modern Girl'. The term 'modern' had become a household word by this time. 'Modern' was a catchword used not only for Modern Girl and Modern Boy, but also for 'modern bread', 'modern real estate', 'modern science', and so on, in anything that represent new culture. The definition of a Modern Girl as found in a modern language dictionary of 1930 is as follows: "The definition of modern is new, or contemporary, so Modern Girl means new woman, or contemporary woman, and Modern Boy refers to the same except it concerns the male....usually Modern Girl or Modern Boy has a negative, derisive connotation. Thus, the terms often refer to a delinquent young girl or boy. Recently, the term modern has been replaced by the word 'chic'. It is super modern. Ultra modern."¹⁸

This fresh kind of New Woman included female students, office workers, café girls, tea room waitresses, shop clerks, hair stylists, factory workers, bus ticket sellers, telephone operators, and others who for the most part had to support their families (fig.19). As working women, however, they gained economic power and enjoyed the life of modern consumers who could freely think for themselves. Modern Girl, unlike the original New Woman, was not endowed with any association with enlightenment or social consciousness. But she was potentially more threatening to traditional ethics. The new urban working class that was the



fig. 19

¹⁷ Yi kiri, "Ilje sidae kwang'go wa jegukju'ui (The advertisement in colonial period and imperialism," *Misulsan nonsan*, v.12, 2001, 127-146.

¹⁸ "modern-o sajon (a dictionary for modern)," *Sin'min*, September, 1930.

basis of Modern Girl usually broke away from their controlling families and as working women often had much social contact with men. Soon, the image of modern girls constructed in the media not only replaced the New Woman's reformed traditional



fig. 20

dress with Western clothes, but also gave them a new identity with the bob cut, pointy shoes, heavy make-up, and as avid followers of fashion with disorderly sex lives. A good example of this is the cover of the September 1929 issue of *Byol Konkon*, where a healthy, attractive, and bobbed Modern Girl and a Modern Boy are pictured walking sprightly together in front of a big city backdrop (fig.20). The woman's bulging breasts, cinched waist, and healthy thighs showing through her

flare skirt exemplify the difference between Standing Beauty paintings of the past and modern renditions of the physical form female in arousing male desire. This attractive young woman became a new paradigm for the Korean woman.

However, most people felt that their lifestyle was consumer oriented and hypersensitive to trends and fads, so the often frivolous-seeming Modern Girl was viewed quite negatively. The term Modern Girl was popular in Japan in the 1920s, and it seems that perhaps the image was synonymous with that of the flapper in the West.¹⁹ The flapper in the 1920s United States was the kind of woman who wore thin, short dresses and bobbed hair, who was savvy and independent, and who practiced unrepressed expression of her sexuality. From a 1927 *Choson Ilbo* article (June 26), we see that at the time, Modern Girl and flapper had essentially the same meaning to the people. It reads, "Four or five years ago in the United States, it was popular to call a young, beautiful woman

¹⁹ However, Miriam Silberberg warns about the superficial similarity between modern girl and flapper. "The Modern girl as Militant," *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, edited by Gail Lee Bernstein, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1991, 239.

with a bob a flapper. That basically meant that this youthful woman focused mainly on her clothes, make-up, and imported goods, not paying the least bit of attention to life's responsibilities. But the popular bob was not limited to this kind of youthful woman. Universally, almost everyone started chopping off the long blond hair they had once considered more precious than life. We can say that these days the term Modern Girl that we hear so often has the same meaning as flapper." In Korea the term flapper was used well into the 1960s to indicate a delinquent girl.

One of the characteristics of the Modern Girl was her consciousness of her body. There were now attempts to freely express the physical strength or beauty of woman's body. Nude paintings, which once were banned from being shown in public, now could be displayed at an exhibition with no restrictions, but they were still depicted in the setting of the artist's studio. However,



fig. 21

Nude paintings, which once were banned from being shown in public, now could be displayed at an exhibition with no restrictions, but they were still depicted in the setting of the artist's studio. However, there is a photograph of famous dancer Choi Sung-hi (fig. 21) in 1931 which reveals that she exposed her body half naked in a public performance, as if to declare the freedom of the body. Kang Dae-sok's

photograph of a female nude should be also noted in this context, in her stretched posture facing toward the sky as if to embrace the whole world, breaking away from the passive reclining or standing nude form.

Yet, in the 14 January 1930 edition of the *Choson Ilbo*, artist

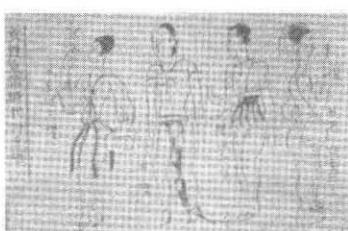


fig. 22

and illustrator An Sok-young drew a satirical Modern Girl (fig.22). In it, he depicts a decadent woman whose body is almost entirely exposed, wearing lacy socks, high heels, a very short skirt, and adorned with jewels. In this way, 'third period' indicates Modern Girl's ruin. The exposure of her

body and her ultramodern style make her the object of male physical desire, as well as a representation of the crisis mentality of rapidly changing value systems and confused sexual morals.

Modern Girl resided in the cities. Modern Girl and Modern Boy strutted the streets among strangers and the new buildings and cars that swept the city, and frequented the newly rising tea rooms and cafes. Cafes and tea rooms sprung up in the big cities like Kyongsong (present Seoul), Pyongyang, and Pusan. In Seoul, in the Chongro district alone there were the Magnolia (Mokdan), Paradise (Rakwon), Peace (Pyonghwa), and other numerous cafes, and in each café there worked several tens of café waitresses.²⁰ Cafes and tea rooms were places in which men and women intersected and interacted. Of all Modern Girls, it is the café waitress who often inspired the minds of writers and became the subject of various novels.

In novels like Yi Sang's "Wings" and Pak Tae-won's "In an Alley" and "Piryang," for example, the café girl lives together with the intellectual. Yet cafés or tea rooms are not symbols of modernity only. Amidst the despair of colonization and severe unemployment rates, male intellectuals would gather in tea rooms or cafés to write, have affairs, or spend their time doing nothing. Because café girls and tea room waitresses did not merely serve alcohol or tea, but sat with the patrons and spent time with them, receiving tips that way, they had to be popular and sell eroticism. Most waitresses seemed to have received an education at least through elementary school, but Kim Jin-song points out that most of them were former kisaeng or movie actresses.²¹ Literary Critic Kim Byong-ik says that café girls are more modern than kisaeng, less burdensome than the typical New Woman, speak forthrightly about love, and yearn for free love.²²

²⁰ Kim Jin-song, *Seoul e dance hall ul hohara* (Permit the Dance Halls in Seoul), Hyon'sil Munhwa Yon'gu, 1999, 260.

²¹ Ibid., 210.

²² Kim Byong-ik, "Chajol ui munhak kwa café girl (The Literature in frustration and Café Girl)," *Han'guk Mundansa* (The History of Korean Literary Circle), Ilji-sa, 1973, 154.

5. Conclusion

As Sin Yosong advanced and was active in society, male-female relationships and the meaning of family of necessity had to become redefined, and the resulting confusion between the traditional and the modern became one of the biggest social changes of the early twentieth century. The New Woman became fresh material for the modern visual arts in the 1920s and 30s. By the late 1930s, however, interest in the New Woman as an object of curiosity was waning, and during wartime, images of *hyeonmo yangcho*, (wise mother, good wife) or of strong women supporting their husbands were promoted.

Reproductions of the New Woman in the visual arts during this era of transformation into a modern society suggested a certain dichotomy. Artists rejected feudalistic ethics and depicted the New Woman as presented to them with mystery and allure, but placed her in traditional interior spaces. A woman reading, appreciating music, or engaging in other new activities for women were new popular themes, but for the most part male artists expressed the identity of the New Woman through her body and what she wore. The New Woman, who was at the center of society's cultural change in the 1920s, was not able to find a voice in the face of reality. One reason for this may be that from 1922, in the Choson Art Exhibition hosted by the provisional Japanese government, Japanese juries preferred works of local color depicting exotic quaint customs or pastoral countryside scenes over those containing modern themes. This led the trend towards localization to dominate the art world at that time.

Compared to high art, the image of the New Woman in the mass media was much more incisive and straightforward. She provided continually rich debate in the media. At first there were many articles and illustrations in support of the New Woman, but later we see them taking on a critical tone. Because the issue of the New Woman, as treated in writings and illustrations in these media, showed a mix of favor, curiosity, and suspicion all at once, it can be said that this was where the debate over tradition versus modernity came to a head. In those times when Eastern ethics

dominated the social structure, it was difficult for the New Woman and the Modern Girl to find acceptance since they brought to mind issues of sexual ethics, free love, exposure of the body, and devotion to Western trends.

Finally, then, what role modern visual arts played in the production and dissemination of the New Woman's image? Although the modern system of art exhibition had been established, it was still known only to a limited number of people, thus it was rather the mass media which led public discourse on the New Woman and universalized her image. Whether her exposure was positive or negative, the image of the New Woman and the Modern Girl in newspaper illustrations, on magazine covers, in advertisements and so on became well-known to the public. In the gaze of those viewing the New Woman arose doubt about traditions, hope in things new, confusion over value systems, and a crisis mentality over change. This crossroads concerning the gaze on the New Woman reflects the broader gaze on modernity.

<국문초록>

'모던'하기: 한국 근대 시각미술에 재현된 신여성

김영나 (서울대)

시각미술에서 신여성의 재현은 대략 두 가지 분야로 나누어 볼 수 있다. 하나는 전통 서화를 이어간 동양화와 1910년대에 시작된 서양화와 같은 고급미술을 통해서이고, 다른 하나는 신문의 삽화나 만화, 대중잡지의 표지화, 광고, 사진을 중심으로 하는 대중매체를 통한 경우이다. 고급미술의 경우, 전통미술에서의 여성 이미지를 어떻게 계승하면서 근대적 여성 이미지로 탈바꿈시켰는가라는 점에서 문제제기가 된다면, 신문화의 하나로 전통의 틀이 자체적으로 존재하지 않았던 출판물과 연론과 같은 대중매체의 경우에는 그 속성상 사회의 반응과 현상을 더 직접적으로 반영할 수 있다는 점에서 고급미술과는 다른 측면을 제시한다.

우리나라에서 신여성이란 용어가 처음 등장한 것은 1910년대인데, 포괄적인 의미에서 신여성이란 여성해방운동을 주장한 신여성과, 신식 교육을 받고 가정에 들어앉더라도 구여성과 구별되는 머리 모습이나 옷차림을 한 신여성 등을 모두 포함한다. 초창기 신여성은 주로 구한말에서 1910년대 까지 일본이나 서양에서 근대적 교육을 받거나 국내의 외국선교사들이 세운 교육기관에서 교육을 받은 소수의 엘리트 여성들이다. 반면, 20년대 후반부터 회자되던 용어는 '모던 걸'이다. 모던 걸은 초창기의 엘리트적인 신여성과는 다른 종류의 신여성으로 여학생, 여사무원, 카페 걸이나 미용사 등 대개 나름의 경제력을 가지고 근대 소비생활을 향유하고 자유주의적 사고를 갖는 직업여성을 의미했다. 1930년대를 전후해서 신여성에 대한 비판이 고조되었는데, 이 시기는 1920년대의 문화정치가 끝나고 전반적인 사회분위기가 근대 교육을 받아 남편을 내조하고 아이들을 잘 돌보는 것이 이상적인 여성상이라는 현모양처의 이데올로기가 진행된 시기로 신여성이라는 용어보다는 보다 중립적인 용어인 현대여성이라는 용어가 더 많이 사용되었다.

근대의 시각미술에 나타난 신여성의 재현은 이중적 잣대를 보여주고 있다. 미술가들은 봉건적 윤리관을 거부하고 새로운 여성상을 제시하는 이들에게 호기심과 매력을 느끼면서도 전통적인 실내의 여성상이나 미인도 등의 틀 안에서 당대의 신여성을 그리고 있다. 독서하는 여성, 음악 감상하는 여성 등 새로운 도상들이 유행하였으나, 기본적으로 남성 화가들은 신여성의 신체와 외모를 통해 이들의 정체성을 표현했을 뿐, 1920년대 사회와 문화 변화의 중심에 있었던 신여성이 치했던 현실에는 주목하지 않았다.

고급미술에 비해 대중매체에서 다루어진 신여성의 이미지는 훨씬 더 신랄하고 적설적이다. 변화하는 세대는 화가들보다도 만화가나 삽화가들에 더 빨리 포착되었고 이를 언론매체에 등장한 신여성의 이미지는 가장 직접적으로 일반인들에게 신여성의 이미지를 유포할 수 있었던 통로였다. 이미지와 글이 공존하는 이를 매체에서 신여성이라는 이슈는 호감과 호기심, 혐오감을 동시에 드러내고 전통과 근대의 논쟁이 가장 첨예하게 드러났던 영역이었다. 그런데 이를 매체에서 가장 많이 다루었던 주제는 신여성에 대한 이념적인 논의보다는 이들의 생활방식과 행동의 부도덕성이었다. 이로써 남편, 부모와의 관계에서 여성의 정체성이 아직도 파악되고 비판되고 있음을 확인할 수 있다. 비록 도시는 근대화되고 서양의 근대 자유주의 사상이 유입되었지만, 아직도 한국사회에는 동양적인 윤리관이 지배적이었다. 당시의 사회구조에서 신여성과 모던 걸이 연상시키는 성 도덕관, 자유 연애, 신체의 노출 등 서구 유행을 추종한 것은 쉽게 받아들여지기 어려웠던 것 같다.

근대의 시각미술이 신여성의 이미지 생산에 어떤 역할을 했는가라는 측면에서 볼 때, 전람회라는 근대적 제도가 생겨나긴 했지만 아직도 제한된 관람객만을 확보했던 고급 미술보다는 오히려 대중 매체가 신여성에 대한 공공의 담론을 형성하고 주도하면서 보편화된 이미지를 만들어냈다고 할 수 있다. 비록 글을 읽을 수 있는 독자층에 한정되기는 했지만, 궁정적이건 부정적이건 신문 만화, 거리의 간판, 광고 등 새로운 시각매체를 통해 신여성 혹은 모던 걸의 이미지가 일반인들에게 점진적으로 파고 든 것은 사실이다. 신여성을 바라보는 이들의 시선에는 전통에 대한 회의와 새로움에 대한 기대, 가치관의 혼란과 변화에 대한 위기의식 등이 혼재되어 있다. 신여성의 근대성에 대한 이러한 엇갈리는 시선은 한편 당대를 살았던 사람들이 근대를 바라보는 시각이기도 했다. (초록 작성: 정미경)