



'A Walking Encyclopedia of Art' Kim Dal-jin

Kang Shin-jae
Freelance Writer
Shim Byung-woo
Photographer

A boy who had lost his mother when he was young threw himself into art clippings to overcome his loneliness. It eventually became his lifelong endeavor, which has yielded an impressive collection and compilation of materials on art. Thanks to his painstaking efforts, a vast amount of valuable sources for chronicling the history of the modern and contemporary Korean art world has been put together and systematically organized. And even today, he is still busy collecting materials and verifying facts.

One day, a 19-year-old boy went to visit Lee Kyung-sung, the then director of Hongik University's Museum of Art. Of course, the boy had never met Lee before, but he made a deep bow and then took 10 scrapbooks out of a wrapping cloth. They were filled with color photos of great artworks published in women's magazines and world art book series. They formed a compilation of Western art in their own right. Lee patted the nervous boy on the back and commended him for his efforts.

Collecting Art Clippings

Starting with cigarette packs, postage stamps, and gum wrappers, Kim Dal-jin's collecting gradually expanded to include copies of famous artworks from books and magazines. With the clippings he gathered he made scrapbooks that comprised a history of Western art. When he lost his mother at the age of 11, he was left with an emptiness that he tried to fill by collecting things. He was an introverted soul but when he had a mission he could turn bold enough to pay a visit to a famous art critic. He started collecting materials on art seriously after graduating from high school. He sent out letters to magazine publishers, art critics, and curators, pledging his dedication to art and asking them to contact him if they could provide him with any materials. He received only one reply, from Kim Hyung-yoon, the editor of "Deep Rooted Tree" (*Ppuri gipeun namu*), a high-toned magazine that dealt with Korean culture. His heart leapt when he received the letter of encouragement, but he felt dejected after reading the closing advice: "But I am sorry to say it will be difficult for you to turn your hobby into a job."

This incident, however, signaled not the end but a new beginning. Sometime thereafter, Lee Kyung-sung was appointed director of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA). With Lee's help, Kim landed a job at the museum, albeit as a temporary worker receiving only 4,500 won per day. What's notable is that he has continued his hobby for 45 years, and has even been introduced in middle-school textbooks as an "archivist who turned his hobby into his lifetime work."

Kim, now 60 years old, laughed at his own fate marked by a mixture of coincidences and connections. He is called "a walking encyclopedia of art" as he knows everything about Korean art and artists, including their contact numbers, circle of friends, and even their personal tastes. A living witness of Korea's modern and contemporary art and a leading collector of art materials, he has

recently moved from a small rental office into a new building of his own. He looked notably relaxed during the interview.

"When I was a high school senior, I was amazed by the exhibition '60 Years of Modern Korean Art.' At the time, it was easy to get materials on famous artists such as Park Soo-keun, Yi Chung-sop, and Kim Whanki, but those on less famous artists were hard to come by. It occurred to me that I should begin collecting materials on Korea's modern and contemporary art in addition to photos of foreign masterpieces," he said.

Kim began to show me the materials he had collected some 40 years ago, including admission tickets to exhibitions and Gyeongbok Palace, as well as various pamphlets. Those days proved to be a turning point that gave him a clear direction in life. He worked at the MMCA archives for some 14 years and as chief archivist at Gana Art Gallery for six years until 2001. Then, bringing all his materials together, he opened the Kimdaljin Art Archives and Museum.

Growing Piles of Materials

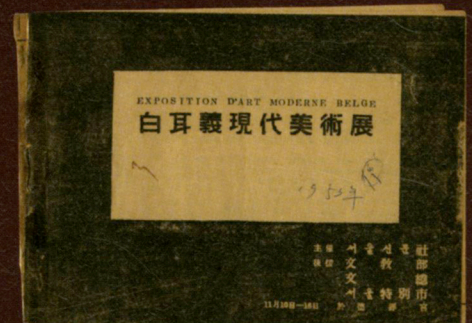
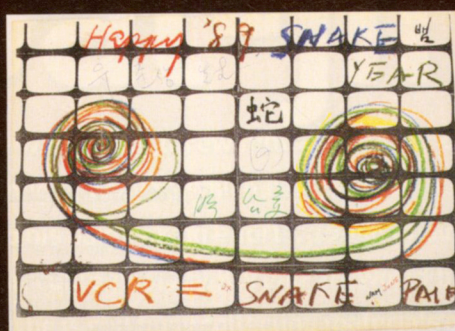
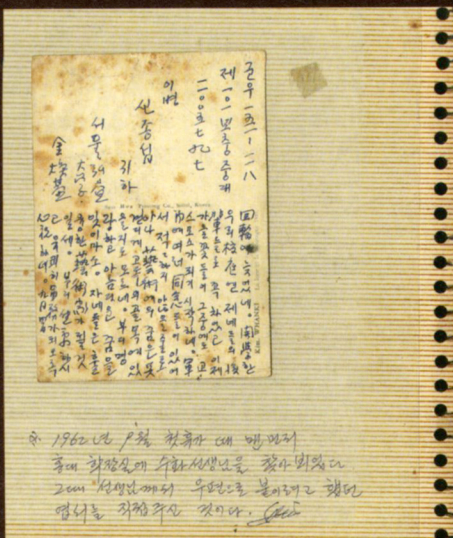
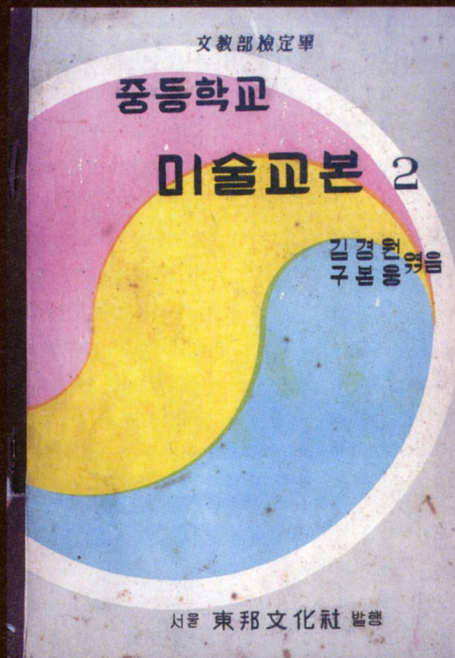
It took a lot of legwork and perseverance to collect all the materials. Gallery curators called Kim "Friday Man" because every Friday he made the rounds of galleries in Insa-dong and Sagan-dong, downtown Seoul, to collect pamphlets and catalogues. One of his shoulders is still stooped from carrying the heavy bundles of materials.

Kim set no limits and collected everything within his reach, including pamphlets, catalogues, admission tickets, posters, periodicals, and textbooks. At one time, his collection weighed nearly 20 tons. The floor of his home gave way, and he had to rent a basement space next door. Then, when additional boxes again filled up his home, he ended up sleeping on a mattress laid over the boxes.

Nonetheless, Kim is always thirsty for more art data and materials, particularly rare data. This is why he regularly participates in the monthly Kobay auction, which deals chiefly in hobby art items. Among his favorite purchases are two copies of the "Journal of the Calligraphy and Painting Association," Korea's first art magazine, published in 1921 and 1922. "My heart throbbed as soon as I saw them," he said. "I told my wife that I had to have them at all costs. I won the auction, but I still can't say how much I paid. They are so rare that they could be designated as important cultural properties, like the first edition of Kim Sowol's poetry collection 'Azaleas.'"

Whenever specific materials or articles were mentioned during

Cigarette packs, postage stamps, and gum wrappers, which a young boy started to collect to overcome his loneliness after losing his mother, along with other materials he has collected all his life, have yielded an impressive collection for a museum. Thanks to the collection of Kim Dal-jin, director of the Kimdaljin Art Archives and Museum, the modern and contemporary art history of Korea has become richer and more accurate.



the interview, he brought them out for me to see with my own eyes. It seemed as if he would never engage in any discourse unless it was based on actually existing materials or hard data. He was never vague about years or statistics. He dwelt on every question and gave answers that suggested what he wanted from me as the interviewer. It was not by chance that our topic shifted from "collector" to "archivist."

Collector, Archivist and Researcher

Kim's first job was as a magazine reporter. From 1978 to 1980, he wrote articles for the art magazine "Monthly Exhibitions" (*Wolgan jeonsi gye*). He kept writing even when he worked at the magazine's archive room. He recalls: "In 1985, I wrote an article titled 'Visitors to galleries are cheated: A suggestion for keeping accurate records and archives.' I called people's attention to the seriousness of errors, discrepancies, and omissions in biographies, almanacs, and yearbooks, by citing specific examples. For instance, there is a discrepancy among books that cite the number of exhibitions held in 1983: 1,272 in 'Journal of Korean Art'; 1,695 in 'Culture and Art Yearbook'; 1,775 in 'Korea Art Annual'; and 2,005 in 'Yeolhwadang Art Almanac.' I found it lamentable that historical inaccuracies were repeatedly quoted without verifying facts. My article was cited in many newspapers and later other suggestions of mine also hit the headlines. I was a so-called newsmaker."

But the more articles he wrote, the thirstier he became. As a high school graduate, he struggled in a society where academic background counts for so much without regard for one's knowledge. In the end, he entered college at the age of 34 after two failed attempts. While he was at it, he also went on to obtain his master's degree.

After opening Kimdaljin Art Research and Consulting and Kimdaljin Art Archives and Museum, he gave serious thought to how to make the most of his collection. As a result, he launched "Seoul Art Guide," a free magazine that carries art news and articles, and the website Daljin.com. He also helps to spread art news more quickly through social media.

But not yet satisfied, he said, "When you collect things, you need to sort them out. And when you sort them out, you tend to think of how to give value to them. Without this process, you can't call yourself a real collector. Look at this. It's a pamphlet for the 'Exposition

D'Art Moderne Belge' held at the National Museum of Art in Deoksu Palace. Isn't it surprising that it was held in 1952? An exhibition of foreign art held during the Korean War? It doesn't make sense, but it happened. If this pamphlet had not come into my hands, I'd never have thought of verifying the fact. Based on this experience, I organized the 'Exhibitions of Foreign Art in Korea 1950-2011' and published an accompanying pamphlet."

Kim's collecting and sorting activities invariably led to his own exhibitions or books. He has thus far published "Exhibition of Regular Publications about Korean Art 1921-2008," "Overseas Exhibitions of Contemporary Art of Korea 1950-2010," "Korean Art Groups 20th Century's Topology," "An Overview of Korean Modern Art Textbooks," and "A History of Art Competitions." In recognition of his contributions, in 2014 he was awarded an art publication award by the Kim Se-joong Memorial Society. He also published "Who's Who in Korean Art I" and "Korean Art Groups 1945-1999" to build a base archive for the art circles. In the same context, he founded the Korea Art Archives Association in 2013.

All this work would not have been possible without his meticulous and detailed analysis. I looked into his eyes, which have gone through hard training over 45 years, combing through countless letters, pictures, and numbers. "One day, a reporter asked if I was paranoid when I kept on pointing out errors and discrepancies. I told him that it was hard for me to ignore them once they caught my eye. I believe that accurate records today will end up as accurate history tomorrow. I still believe that a small exhibition leaflet or a note in my briefcase today will spark big things in the art world in the future," he said.

With a determined look, Kim began to show me the files of 270 modern Korean artists in a scrapbook that he has compiled, category by category. The "small exhibition leaflets or notes" in his briefcase indeed amount to detailed written accounts of artists' lives.

Suddenly, I wondered who would put together all the details of this man's life. Totally engrossed in cutting out and pasting things, rummaging and sorting out materials, Kim has had little time in his life for anything else. But even during the art market boom, he never attempted to put a price on the precious artworks in his possession. The artists in his files, though they may not know how they got there, need to know about this man who missed out on much in life to chronicle their works and lives. **WF**

Suddenly, I wondered who would put together all the details of this man's life. Totally engrossed in cutting out and pasting things, rummaging and sorting out materials, Kim has had little time in his life for anything else ... The artists in his files, though they may not know how they got there, need to know about this man who missed out on much in life to chronicle their works and lives.