

‘Gwangju is my grandfather’s hometown and my final resting place’

‘Viktor Moon Art Museum’ to open next month; expected to serve as cultural bridge connecting identity

Currently preparing portraits of key figures from May 18th Democratization Movement and Gwangju-born independence activists

“We have no homeland of our own. Though we ride trains across the land, we are actually flying towards the sky from beneath the earth. We Koryoin, forced to wander without knowing when, where or how far we must go, were like people flying like birds.”

In the eyes of artist Viktor Moon (74), who we met on Jan. 12 at the Koryoin Village in Wolgok-dong, Gwangsan Ward, Gwangju, both the harsh winds of Kazakhstan and the bitter history of the Koryoin lingered simultaneously. A third-generation Koryoin from Kazakhstan and a leading Korean art master, he has now ended his life of wandering and settled in Korea, his grandfather’s homeland, specifically in Gwangju, where his roots lie.

Sorrow of Koryoin people imprinted on canvas

In the studio and living space provided for him by the Koryoin Village, countless dots gathered on the canvas to form a world of their own: from the train symbolizing the tragedy of forced migration to the faces of the Koryoin striving to hold onto their identity. In conversation with Moon, the world of art he dedicated his life to painting and the trajectory of his life as a Koryoin came through.

The most significant symbol in Moon’s work is the installation piece “The Migrant Train Flying Through the Sky,” displayed on the outer wall of the second floor of the Koryoin Comprehensive Support Center. It embodies the Koryoin community’s hope to soar freely through the sky, escaping the suffering of being loaded onto freight trains in 1937 and forcibly driven into the desolate wastelands of Central Asia without understanding why.

“I painted windows on the train in the work because this wasn’t merely a means of transportation. Though we were settled in Russia from the time of our great-grandfathers, we were always forced to leave. Even those born and raised in Kazakhstan became strangers again after independence due to intensified nationalist policies. In a reality where even outstanding doctors and scientists were excluded for being of a different ethnicity, I projected the fate of the Koryoin onto the train.”



Artist Moon Viktor is interviewed by Yonhap News Agency in his studio within the Goryeo Village in Gwangju on Jan. 12.

Portrait of Hong Beom-do with 14 medals emblazoned on chest

His artistic awakening began while watching the 1988 Seoul Olympics on TV. His first visit to Seoul in 1989 was a shock in itself. “Staying for a month opened my eyes wide. To us, who had only encountered negative information about North Korea, South Korea’s development seemed miraculous.” This experience became the catalyst for him to seriously tackle the heavy theme of forced migration on canvas.

Ironically, the unique pointillism technique that symbolizes Moon’s style was perfected during a life-or-death crisis. After heart surgery, confined to bed for a long time, he endured his painful recovery by dotting tiny pieces of paper with a small brush, unable to move his body.

“When lying down, there was nothing I could do. As I applied



Artist Moon Viktor poses in front of a portrait of Gen. Hong Beom-do in his studio on the second floor of the Koryoin Comprehensive Support Center within the Koryoin Village in Gwangju on Jan. 12. This work is listed for auction on the Koryoin Village website with a starting bid of 20 billion won.

each dot with a small brush, time passed. Though a technique originating in France, to me, each dot represents the life of an individual Koryoin and embodies tenacious vitality.”

His brush also turned toward portraying historical figures. His portrait of Gen. Hong Beom-do, who died in solitude in Kazakhstan, carries Moon’s profound regret.

“I depicted the general’s anger -- he fought for independence during the Japanese occupation, yet after forced relocation, he received no compensation due to the Russian government’s administrative failures. It was a tribute to our hero who never received the respect he deserved.”

Museum will showcase refined artistry of Koryo people

In this work, listed for auction at 20 billion won on the Koryoin Village website, he depicted 14 medals on the chest to honor Gen. Hong’s achievements.

His settling in Gwangju felt like destiny. In 1994, he arrived in Korea with about 20 paintings, and by chance, he held an exhibition at the Gwangju Kumho Cultural Foundation. It was a huge success, with all works sold out. During this process, he discovered something even more astonishing.

“I found ‘Moonbawi’ in Gwangju. Seeing the ancestral burial site of my family name, Moon, and the characters engraved on the stele, I became certain my roots were here in Gwangju. This was the hometown my grandfather, who emigrated to Ussuriysk, Russia, in 1886, must have longed for so deeply.”

Three years ago, suffering from complications after a botched knee surgery in Kazakhstan, he underwent corrective surgery and regained his health thanks to Korean medical professionals and the

support of compatriots, including Lee Cheon-young, chairman of the Gwangju Koryoin Village. Now, he is preparing for a new tomorrow to repay the Koryoin Village in Gwangju that embraced him.

This February, the official Moon Viktor Art Museum will open in the Koryoin Village, featuring a permanent exhibition of Moon’s works. The first floor will be a gallery, while the upper floor will serve as a studio, creating a space where visitors can experience Koryoin history through art.

‘Deeper the work, the older I get’

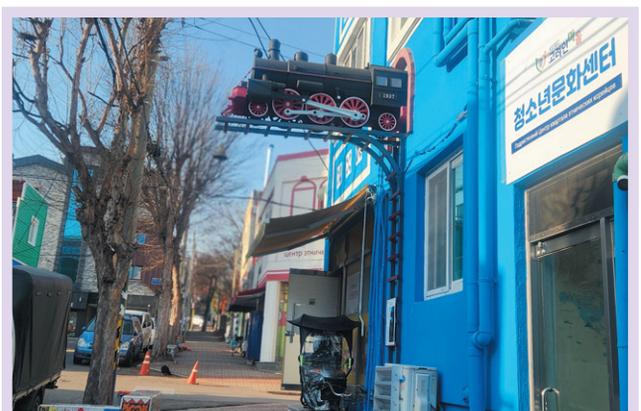
“If my paintings remain in Kazakhstan, no one will value them. But in my homeland, they become the history of the Koryo people. I am preparing portraits of key figures related to the

May 18 Democratization Movement and independence activists from Gwangju. I want to transform the image of the Koryoin, often seen merely as laborers, into dignified art.”

He didn’t forget to offer harsh words for young descendants of Koryoin. He expressed regret over their attitude of coming to Korea only to earn money, without trying to learn Korean or its history.

“If you study just a word or two every day, you can speak well in a year. You must know the language to preserve your roots.”

As the interview concluded, Moon began dotting the canvas again. True to his words that “deeper works emerge with age,” the countless dots he applied were now stitching together the scattered history of the Koryoin onto the canvas of Gwangju. 🇰🇷



Artist Moon Viktor’s representative work “Migrant Train Flying Through the Sky” is seen on the exterior wall of the second floor of the Koryoin Comprehensive Support Center within Gwangju’s Koryoin Village on Jan. 12. This piece embodies the aspirations of the Koryo-in people soaring freely through the sky after passing through the deep historical tunnel of forced relocation in 1937.