



## ***A Korean Female Artist, the Pioneer Hae-Seok Rah***

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### ABSTRACT

A personal story is a powerful tool. It validates women's ability to draw upon their tacit knowledge and intuition to explain experiences as well as answer questions that have personal meaning to them. This is a story of Hae-Seok Rah, the first Korean female artist of Western painting in the 1920s. She introduced Western painting to Korea during a time of upheaval and transition in modern Korean history. Through the fifty years of Hae-Seok's life, she wrote numerous articles promoting a modern education and an equal opportunity for Korean women. Sadly, Hae-Seok's story is one of resistance to societal oppression and prejudice against a talented, strong, and independent woman. It is also the story of her empowerment through her struggles as an artist, writer, and feminist ahead of her time.

Feminist scholars have argued that the intuitive and tacit knowledge from lived experiences is as important as propositional and empirical construction of knowledge. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discovered in their study, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, that there are patterns that characterize female epistemological development. These patterns include subjective knowing, connected knowing, and constructive knowing. Women's subjective knowing relies on their intuitive processes of listening to their "still small voice" and therefore is considered personalized epistemology (p. 54). The connected knowing pivots on subjective knowing and builds on women's personal experiences that are considered most trustworthy sources of knowledge. Connected knowers can gain access to other people's knowledge through empathy (Belenky et al, 1986). With empathic understanding, we can approximate other people's experiences and thus gain access to the contexts of

their knowledge. Constructive knowing connotes integration of various perspectives to gain private authority for knowledge. In accordance with the constructionist's frame of mind, women frequently "jump outside" the external authority and construct their internal authority by weaving strands of emotive, intuitive, rational, direct, and vicarious knowledge in an authentic and creative manner (p. 134).

This story of a Korean female artist, Hae-Seok Rah, the first artist of Western painting in 1920s Korea (Figure 1), is formed from subjective, connected, and constructed knowing. Her journey as an artist took her first to Japan in 1913 and later Paris in 1927 to study Western painting. As a public figure in Korea, Hae-Seok suffered the fate of many pioneers, in that she was ahead of her time and misunderstood by her contemporaries.



Figure 1: Hae-Seok Rah, 1920

Until the last couple of decades, most discussions of women artists center on individuals in Western European cultures. While Asian women artists faced many of the same obstacles as their Western sisters, they also had many unique challenges related directly to their cultures. Throughout Hae-Seok's life she fought societal oppression and prejudice against her as a talented, strong, and independent woman. Yet her struggles as an artist and a pioneer in translating Western styles of painting into a Korean context is a story of empowerment.

Hae-Seok Rah is my great grandaunt on my mother's side. Through her life story, I share a reflective personal space to relate to three characteristics of feminist perspective, subjective knowing, connected knowing, and constructed knowing. I came into contact with Hae-Seok Rah's story in the late 1970s when I found a biography of her life entitled *Your Mother was a Pioneer*, in my grandmother's attic. The biography was a compilation of Hae-Seok's travel journals, letters, and numerous essays about art and modern education for women in the 1920s. Initially, both my grandmother and my mother were reluctant to talk to me about Hae-Seok. They felt that she was still considered a token of family shame. I was, at that time, pursuing an art degree in college and I became very interested in learning more about Hae-Seok's life. It was during the time of this discussion that my mother began to tell me about her own wish to study art while she was in her 20s. My grandfather was vehemently opposed to her interest in art. When my mother persisted in her pursuit of art, my grandfather took the extreme measure of burning her art books and supplies, thus forcing her to give up studying art. This occurred in the mid-1950s, a few years after the end of the Korean War. During this period, many Korean families lived in poverty, so studying art was believed to be frivolous and unworthy of support from my grandfather's viewpoint. My mother was expected to bring in an income to help with her two younger siblings and family. In retrospect, it is somewhat ironic that both my uncle and aunt completed their college education thanks to my mother's sacrifice.

Just as my grandfather was opposed to my mother's interest in art, my father did not approve of my pursuing a career in art. Even though the Korean War had long been over and the social and economic status was growing in the 70s, many Korean people held the view that art was impractical and therefore it was reserved only for the select few who could afford it. From my father, I received an ultimatum. I had to choose between practical fields of study other than art, or else! It was then that my mother's aborted passion for art resurfaced. My mother fought to protect my love of art and supported me both morally and financially. She enrolled me in private art lessons at home, frequently drew with me during many art sessions, and took me to numerous art exhibits through my formative years. With her support, I was able to enter Hong-Ik University

that had one of the best art departments in Korea. I struggled, however, all through my college years, to pay for my education through working numerous jobs and applying for scholarships.

While I was in college, my mother and I opened up a small art gallery of traditional Eastern and Chinese paintings in an old section of Seoul. We named the gallery, Lee Hyang Dang that translates to *A Place of Unique Fragrance*. To this day, my mother continues to paint, primarily Chinese ink wash painting and calligraphy. Her subject matter includes plum blossom, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo that are traditionally considered as the four noble plants. She has developed her own personal style of calligraphy and she has won several awards from the Korean National Art Exhibit. This is the same annual national art event in which Hae-Seok's paintings were exhibited in the 1920s.

Hae-Seok was born in 1896 in a Yang-ban family. Yang-ban refers to an upper class family according to a Korean cast system created during the Lee Dynasty. The Lee Dynasty was founded by Seung-Gae Lee in 1392 and lasted until it abruptly ended in 1910 through a forced annexation by the Japanese government. Hae-Seok had one younger sister and two older brothers. Her parents were keenly interested in providing their children with a modern education. In 1913, Hae-Seok graduated from Jin-Myung Girls' high school and went to Japan to study Western painting at Tokyo Women's Institute of Fine Art. She was seventeen. This was an extraordinary opportunity for Hae-Seok since it was almost unthinkable for women to go abroad for studying at such a young age in 1920s Korea. It was Hae-Seok's older brother who recognized her artistic talent and enrolled her in an art school in Japan.

During her study in Japan, Hae-Seok wrote many outstanding essays and poems advocating equal opportunities and women's rights. She returned to Korea after graduation from Tokyo Women's Institute of Fine Art and taught art for two years at Young-Seong School and Jeong-Sin Girls' High School. It is unfortunate that there are no records about what and how she taught. In 1919, Hae-Seok participated in the Sam-il (March 1) Independence Movement against Japanese occupation. The following year, she married Woo-Young Kim who was a friend of Hae-Seok's older brother and an aspiring young lawyer. She met him while she attended Tokyo Women's Institute of Fine Art. Both Hae-Seok's older brother and

Woo-Young attended Tokyo University studying to be lawyers. During the annexation of Korea for 36 years from 1910 to 1945, it was the ultimate prestige to be able to attend Tokyo University as a Korean citizen. Woo-Young was a widower and ten years senior to Hae-Seok. Hae-Seok asked Woo-Young to support her interest in art and refused to be a part of his extended family. In other words, she placed her privacy and independence over the family responsibility of caring for her mother-in-law and a step-daughter. In 1920s Korean society, filial piety was regarded as the highest virtue under Confucian ethics. Hae-Seok's outspoken nature was beyond the imagination of most Korean women at that time.

In 1921, one year after her marriage, Hae-Seok saw her first dream realized. She made a mark in the history of Korean modern painting by opening a one-person art exhibit at the No-Chung Gak gallery in Seoul, the capital of Korea. Approximately seventy of her paintings were displayed in this exhibit. No one, man or woman, had ever had a one-person art exhibit in Korea. Hae-Seok was the first one. With the success of her exhibit, Hae-Seok was beginning to gain public recognition as an artist. In 1922, the Cho-Sun National Art Exhibit was founded and it was the first fine art competition at the national level in Korea. Cho-Sun is an ancient Korea name that translates into "The Land of Morning Calm." Hae-Seok's oil painting that represented a nostalgic scene of rural Korea was selected for the national exposure. In 1923, Hae-Seok co-founded the Korean Artist Association with seven male artists. In the same year, her husband received an official order from the Japanese government to work in Manchuria as an assistant to the Japanese consul. This gave Hae-Seok an opportunity to experience Chinese culture first hand. While in Manchuria, Hae-Seok continued her painting that included Chinese themes and objects. While in Manchuria from 1923 to 1926, Hae-Seok's paintings were selected for an exhibit four years in a row by Cho-Sun National Art Exhibit. Although Hae-Seok's husband held a prominent official position and was assigned to work in Manchuria by the Japanese government, Hae-Seok during her stay in Manchuria helped many Korean freedom fighters and political exiles whose mission was to gain independence from Japanese occupation.

In 1927, Hae-Seok's best year, her dream of a world tour was about to be realized (Figure 2). This world trip was a gift granted by the

Japanese government for her husband's outstanding accomplishment in Manchuria. In June 1927, Hae-Seok and her husband traveled from Manchuria by the Orient Express to Europe and returned to Korea in February 1929 by way of Yokohama, Japan. Their travel itinerary included Beijing, Moscow, Poland, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Brussels, Netherlands, Italy, France, England, Spain, United States, Hawaii, Japan, and finally Seoul. Of all the places Hae-Seok visited, Paris was her favorite. She stayed in Paris for about eight months while her husband was on official business in several other European countries (Figure 3). It was in Paris that Hae-Seok met Ryun Choi, a founder of the Chun-do religion. Chun-do is a Korean indigenous religion similar to Japanese Shinto. In the early twentieth century, very few Koreans were in Paris, and for this reason, Hae-Seok welcomed Ryun Choi's companionship.



Figure 2: Hae-Seok on her way to Europe, 1927



Figure 3: Hae-Seok in Paris, 1928

In the early twentieth century, Paris was the Mecca of new ideas, styles, and insights for modern art. It was a phenomenal awakening for Hae-Seok to experience the artistic freedom and international dynamics in Paris. Hae-Seok wrote travel essays of her experiences in Paris and painted at a private studio in preparation for her second one-person

exhibition. Hae-Seok was fascinated by Fauvism, which was one of the prevailing painting styles at that time. The exposure to artistic freedom Hae-Seok had enjoyed in Paris made it extremely difficult to return to and engage in Korean traditional society.

In 1929, shortly after her return from Europe, Hae-Seok had a second one-person exhibition and published her numerous essays about 20th century European art history, women's status in Western countries, and travel sketches that were highly praised. The prelude to her tragedy, however, began a few years after she returned from Europe. In 1931, her husband discovered Hae-Seok's alleged affair with Ryun Choi in Paris. It was said that a letter sent from Hae-Seok through a messenger was made public before it was delivered to Ryun Choi. Hae-Seok claimed her relations to Ryun Choi did not jeopardize her family or deny her commitment to her husband. Contrary to her daring response to the allegations, Ryun Choi denied any association with Hae-Seok in Paris. True or not, scandal for a married woman in those days was fatal to her acceptance by society. Hae-Seok responded with an eye-opening statement regarding her relationship with Ryun Choi. In her words:

I love him dearly. I do not, however, give away the responsibility for my husband and children. We have to be brave enough to accept that it is human nature to love. As long as it does not hurt the responsibility to which I am committed, it is not even a sin or mistake but a blessed gift from God we should all enjoy. (Quoted in Lee, 1974, p. 194)

This statement enraged her husband. This scandal, while perhaps distorted and overstated, ended Hae-Seok's marriage. She was forced to consent for a divorce without any financial support or custody of her four children. Hae-Seok insisted on dividing their property in half because a large portion of their property was accumulated by the sales of her paintings. However, the legal system in the 1920s favored men. She had absolutely no rights in the eyes of the Korean family law at that time without her husband's consent. As a result, Hae-Seok lost everything—her reputation, self-respect, pride, money, and marriage. Above all, the most painful loss was her four children. Hae-Seok was not allowed to visit or see her

four children under any circumstances after the divorce. Her youngest son was one year old, and Hae-Seok was thirty-four years old (Figure 4).

After the divorce, Hae-Seok's brother asked her to go to Japan, but instead, she chose Manchuria. While she was there, Hae-Seok dis-



Figure 4: Hae-Seok with her four children, 1930

covered that her husband married in violation of their mutual agreement that the two would not marry for two years after the divorce. Hae-Seok returned from Manchuria to contest the marriage only to find out that her husband had never meant to honor their agreement. No one was sympathetic towards Hae-Seok. Her parents and brothers turned their backs on her for the shame she brought to her family.

In the midst of her personal tragedy, however, Hae-Seok's professional career seemed to be gaining a national recognition. In 1931, a year after her divorce, Hae-Seok submitted a painting she had completed

in Paris for the Cho-Sun National Art Exhibit and won the grand prize (Figure 5). This prize gave her hope to continue painting. Hae-Seok published several of her travel essays including: *What I Saw and Felt in Paris*, *An Atelier and the Lives of Artists in Paris*, and *Oh How I Miss Paris* during this period in an attempt to regain her position as an artist. To earn a living, she continuously wrote for newspapers and various monthly magazines, and in 1933, Hae-Seok opened a women's art studio in Seoul for painting instruction. This studio was closed in one year due to financial difficulty.

In 1934, Hae-Seok published an article, *My Divorce Statement*, in a nationally circulated monthly magazine entitled *Sam-Cheon Lee* in



Figure 5: Hae-Seok with her painting for Cho-Sun National Art Exhibit, 1931

the form of a letter to her husband. According to Lee, *My Divorce Statement* was a plea for acceptance and compassion to help her rebuild the life after divorce. Hae-Seok condemned a Korean society that ostracized her. She argued that the society favored men's interests against women's rights, and she was victimized by this injustice. As a conclusion of her divorce statement, she expressed her deep concern for her four children and asked her husband to care for them. This statement shocked most Koreans. Many men and women submitted an article to refute Hae-Seok's argument about women's place in Korea in the following months. In my view, Korean society was not ready for Hae-Seok's frank and outspoken

attitude about what she believed. Hae-Seok became more and more alienated.

In 1935, Hae-Seok had a third one-person exhibit in Seoul where she exhibited about two hundred small size paintings for sale. This show could have resuscitated her artistic career if it had been successful, however, few paid attention to the show. Unfortunately, Hae-Seok's reputation as a divorcee and immoral woman overshadowed her artistic recognition. The third one-person show turned out to be an unrecoverable loss that left her in a serious financial strain and depression. Hae-Seok became embittered and resentful and her paintings were never seen in public after the third art exhibit.

During the years of pain and anguish, Hae-Seok tried to comfort herself by taking residence in Sudeok-Sa Temple and contemplating becoming a Buddhist nun. At this time, there were a few other female poets and writers who devoted their lives to the religious order. However, it was unbearable for Hae-Seok to leave the world behind. Her life was the epitome of an individual's struggle whose ideals and foresight were clearly ahead of her time. Hae-Seok expressed this metaphorically, writing that she believed in her heart that she could fly high and free. In her words:

I was a tiny bird that was shot down by the society. "The bird trembled with pain and fluttered its wings in the desperate hope to stay alive. Finally, the bird became soundless and motionless. However, Hae-Seok added, the bird may still be alive. It might just be saving the strength and courage in order to fly back again (Quoted in Lee, translated by author, 1974, p. 259).

Sadly, this poor bird never had another chance to fly. In 1939, Hae-Seok's anguish, loneliness, and grief became too painful to bear. Her emotional and psychological distress caused a mental and physical illness. Half of Hae-Seok's body was paralyzed and she lost her ability to speak. There are no known records of Hae-Seok's life between the years 1939 to 1944, nor knowledge of her whereabouts or what had become of her. In October, 1944, she was taken to an old people's home. In 1945, the director of the old people's home, a friend of her older brother,

moved Hae-Seok to a convalescent home that offered better medical care and living facilities. However, Hae-Seok did not stay there long. To this day, it is unknown where or how Hae-Seok passed away (Lee, 1974). According to the hospital record, which is believed to be the most reliable source, Hae-Seok was taken to the Seoul municipal hospital and rested her soul in peace with no mourners or no family members around. It seems Hae-Seok died in seclusion at the age of fifty-one. She was cremated in 1946, a year after Korea gained its independence from Japanese occupation. It is unknown whether or not, or where her ashes were buried. Hae-Seok left a heart-breaking message to her four children. The following is the last section of *My Divorce Statement* published in 1934:

My dearest four children, please do not blame your mother. Your mother was a pioneer in a transitional time of the Nation. I am a victim of the harsh disapproval of a Korean traditional society that refused to accept me as I am. So, do not weep over me, but weep over the society that shot me down in cold blood. I am leaving you with my wish unfulfilled. When you grow up, please visit me at my tomb, comfort my soul, and make up for my lost dream. (Lee, 1974, p. 12)

There is no doubt that Hae-Seok was a pioneer for female artists in Korea in the 1920s. The stigma imposed on her as a divorcee and the alleged personal scandal with Ryun Choi decisively terminated her professional career as an artist. Unfortunately, this single scandal was enough to erase her rightful place and diminish Hae-Seok's contributions to the women's art world in a modern Korean art history. While she was a celebrated visual artist, her talent and vision was not limited to paintings. Through the fifty years of Hae-Seok's life, she was an active writer and feminist. She wrote numerous articles promoting a modern education and an equal opportunity for Korean women. In addition, she introduced Western painting into the country during a time of upheaval and transition in Korean modern history. Until recently, her contributions to art, literature, and society in the early twentieth century Korea have not been recognized. In 1974, her biography, *Your Mother was a Pioneer*, was

published with a retrospective exhibition of some of her paintings (Lee, 1974). The biography included a collection of her creative literature, essays, travel journals, and articles written about her art and life by art critics and journalists. This was a significant event in terms of reevaluating the work of Hae-Seok Rah from a contemporary point of view. Prior to the publication of Hae-Seok's biography, her artistic passion, progressive values, and active involvement in making societal changes, particularly the social status of women, was not acknowledged.

The story of my great grandaunt, Hae-Seok Rah is long overdue. Her foresight and determination as a pioneer female artist, however, deserve professional distinction. Her contribution to modern history of art in Korea and the painful price she had to pay to pave the path for future generations of Korean women ought to be recognized with respect. Lipard (1990) states, "Without a vision, without a big dream, without the anger and humor that keeps our feet on the earth even when our heads are in the clouds, we won't see the multicultural society that these artists in their diverse ways are trying to show us" (p. 248). Although Hae-Seok never saw her dream realized in her lifetime, her devotion to art and resistance against the societal oppression signifies more than a personal plea for equal opportunities and acceptance. She passed her dreams on to future generations in the hope that they would value and carry on her struggle, and benefit from the paths she opened.

I brought *Your Mother was a Pioneer* (Lee, 1974) with me as my keepsake when I came to Indiana University in 1985 to pursue a graduate degree in art education. The tragic story of my great grandaunt continuously moves me deeply and I brace myself feeling the pain and sadness in my heart for her. I returned to Korea in 1988 to collect more information about Hae-Seok's life and art. I found several additional articles written by Hae-Seok and other art critics but I was not able to locate her paintings to see them for myself. However, the story of my great grandaunt instilled in me a strong desire to visit Paris. In the summer of 1993, I received a Lilly Teacher Creativity Fellowship and spent two months in Paris wondering how things might have been like for Hae-Seok in 1928. A string of events and opportunities that followed the Teacher Creativity Fellowship has changed my professional direction and focus. I know I owe it to my great grandaunt, Hae-Seok Rah, for inspiring me to believe

that I have a reason to continue her dreams and passion for art as an art educator.

**Author's Note:**

The journal articles and a biography, *Your Mother was a Pioneer* were written in Korean. My perspective may be subjective due to my special interests and personal family history involved in Korea. Although I attempted to stay true to Korean texts in my translation, it was necessary, at times, to interpret a story in the Korean cultural context that I know and understand.

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