Letter Paintings

In July 1952, amidst the devastation of the Korean War, Lee's wife and two sons left for Japan, leaving him alone. From that time on, he meandered between many different places, but no matter where he went, he regularly sent letters to his family overseas. The early letters are joyful and affectionate, imbued with the hope that the family would soon be reunited. Many of these letters include charming illustrations for his two sons, reflecting his paternal love and concern. From the middle of 1955, however, Lee sank into despair and almost entirely stopped writing to his family. It is also said that he stopped reading the letters that his wife sent to him.

Approximately sixty of these letters have survived, consisting of about 150 pages, and some of them are presented here. These letters have important documentary value, illuminating the relationship between Lee Jung-Seob's life and his art. Furthermore, they must be viewed as independent artworks, characterized by the wonderful harmony between the free-flowing handwriting and the delightful impromptu illustrations.



Artist Drawing His Family
a. 1953–54, Color and pen on paper, 26.4×20cm

Seoul (1954–1955)

With his family still in Japan, Lee moved to Seoul, where he stayed with friends and acquaintances in places like Nusang-dong and Sangsu-dong. Around this time, Lee's wife earned some money by selling Japanese books at a mark-up in Korea, but a middleman swindled Lee on the deal, plunging him into debt. Hoping to pay this debt and be reunited with his family in Japan, Lee made a last-ditch effort to sell his works through a solo exhibition in January 1955 at the Gallery of Midopa Department Store (present-day Lotte Department Store). Although he sold around twenty works at the exhibition, he never received the money for the sales, and thus remained heavily in debt.



Family with Chickens
1954–55, Oil on paper, 36.5×26.5cm



Family on the Road
1954, Oil on paper, 29.5×64.5cm

Daegu (1955)

Following the January 1955 exhibition in Seoul, Lee held another solo exhibition in April at the Gallery of the US Information Service in Daegu. This exhibition was organized with the help of Ku Sang (1919–2004), a poet and close friend of Lee. However, this exhibition had even worse results than the one in Seoul, sending Lee into a state of depression. Now convinced that he was deceiving the world about being an important artist, he castigated himself for failing in his role as a breadwinner and for having to scrounge free meals. Suffering from mental illness and anorexia, he convalesced at Ku Sang's house on the outskirts of Daegu, all the while continuing his art production.



Family of Poet Ku Sang
1955, Oil on paper, 32×49.5cm

Jeongneung, Seoul (1956)

Starting in December 1955, Lee spent time in various hospitals, before moving to Jeongneung, Seoul, where he stayed in the homes of Han Mook (painter, b.1914), Park Yeonhee (novelist, 1918–2008), and Jo Yeongam (poet, b.1920). During this period, he did some illustrations for literary magazines and created his final works, including the *River of No Return* series. However, due to hepatitis and malnutrition (from his anorexia), he was again hospitalized. Still separated from his family, he died on September 6, 1956, at Seoul Red Cross Hospital. His friends commissioned a tomb and tombstone for him at Manguri Public Cemetery in Seoul.



River of No Return
1956, Oil on paper, 18.8×14.6cm

Information

Date
3 June 2016 – 3 October 2016
(Closed on Mondays)

Venue
National Museum of
Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA),
Deoksugung
(Located in the ground of Deoksugung Palace)

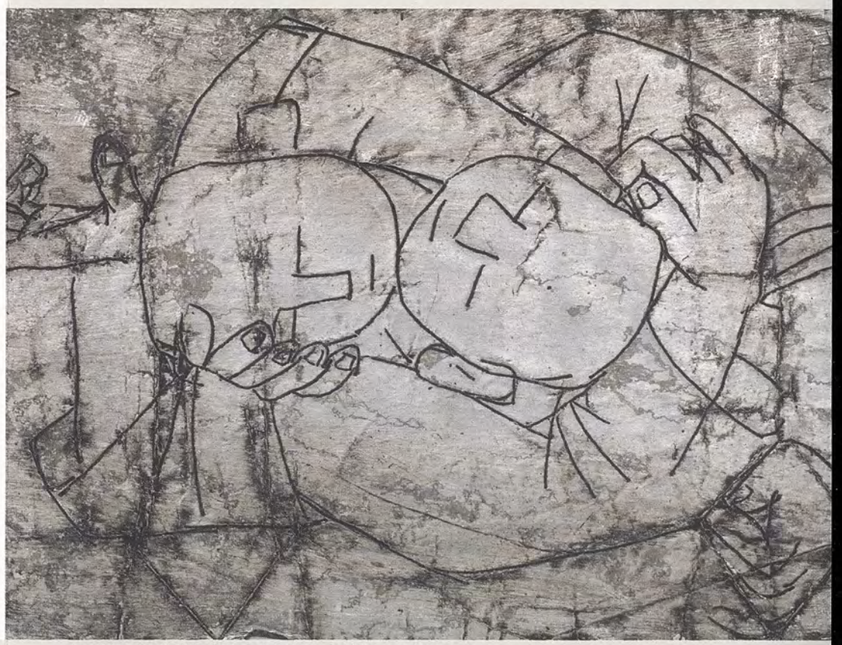
Opening Hours
Tue, Thur, Fri, Sunday 10:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m.
Wed, Saturday 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.
(Admission: Until 1 hour prior to the closing time)

Ticket
7,000 KRW for adult
4,000 KRW for student under age 19

Contact
02-522-3342

Website
www.jungseob.com

MMCA Gwacheon, 30 years
1986 – 2016
국립현대미술관
과천 30년



Two Children (detail), 1950s, Incising and oil paint on metal foil on paper, 8.5×15.5cm

LEE JUNG SEOB
1916 – 1956

National Museum of
Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA),
Deoksugung

June 3 to October 3, 2016

100th Anniversary of Korean Modern Master

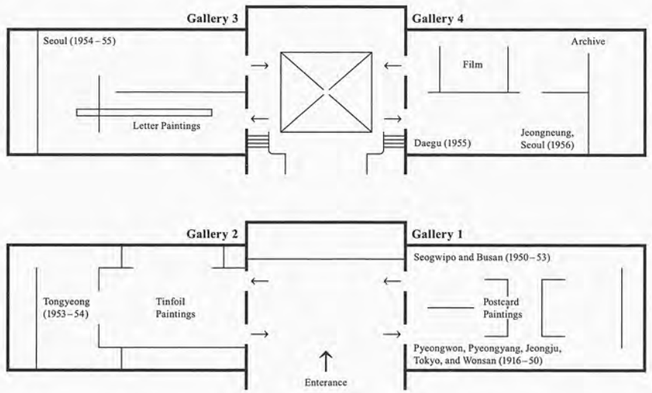
주최 국립현대미술관 조선일보 아르코미술관 후원 KOREAN AIR 협력 CHRISTIE'



Lee Jung-Seob (1916–1956) was born to a wealthy family in Pyeongwon, South Pyeongan Province in present-day North Korea. After studying in Pyeongyang, Jeongju (in North Pyeongan Province, North Korea), and Tokyo, he began his career as an artist in Japan during the Japanese colonial period. He then returned to Wonsan, South Hamgyeong Province (North Korea), where he was when Korea regained its independence in 1945. Seeking refuge from the destruction of the Korean War (1950–1953), he fled to various places, including Jeju Island and Busan. After the war, he continued his migratory lifestyle, moving around between Tongyeong, Seoul, and Daegu, before he died in 1956 at the age of 40. But no matter his whereabouts or the dire circumstances of his living situation, Lee adamantly maintained his passion for artistic creation.

Although his life coincided with the most turbulent period of Korean contemporary history, marked by colonial rule, war, and division, Lee persisted in living his life and expressing himself as an artist. During the colonial period, when signs of Korean heritage were actively repressed by the Japanese, he boldly made paintings of bulls, a traditional symbol of the Korean people. Even during his years of poverty, transience, and warfare, he produced paintings that laughed at the harshness of reality, expressing the blithe, childlike beauty of happy days spent with his family. After the war, he turned his focus to bull paintings, imbued with a dynamism that reflected his strong will and confidence. Above all, he aspired to be an honest painter who faithfully expressed his emotions. He also wished to be the artist of the Korean people by realizing the traditional aesthetics of his country. But Lee's life was undoubtedly filled with tragedy; after being separated from his family, he spent his final years in bleak solitude, suffering from mental illness and anorexia, and falling into debt after being defrauded of his money. Like so many other artists, he died alone, leaving behind a collection of lonesome, plaintive works.

As this year marks the 100th anniversary of Lee Jung-Seob's birth, as well as the 60th anniversary of his death, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art is presenting its first solo exhibition of this extraordinary artist. Covering the full trajectory of Lee's background and career, the exhibition examines how he doggedly pursued his artistic vision despite the oppressive violence and poverty of the era. By shedding new light on this unsung artistic genius, this exhibition aims to inspire deeper contemplation on the meaning of life and art.



Pyeongwon, Pyeongyang, Jeongju, Tokyo, and Wonsan (1916–1950)

Born in September 1916 in Pyeongwon, South Pyeongan Province, Lee Jung-Seob attended Jongno Primary School in Pyeongyang, where his mother's family resided. He began his art studies in 1930 at Osan High School in Jeongju (which was independently financed by Korean people), under the tutelage of Im Yongryeon (b. 1901), a graduate of Yale University.

In 1936, Lee went to Tokyo to continue his art education, studying first at the Imperial Art Institute and then at Bunka Gakuin from 1937 to 1941. At a time when Japan was predominantly conservative, Bunka Gakuin, a private school, was known for its very liberal atmosphere. While studying there, Lee joined some of his elder classmates who showed their works at an exhibition organized by the Association of Free Artists (*Jiyu bijutsuka kyokai*). After his exhibited works drew praise from several important critics, Lee was invited to join the Association of Free Artists.

In 1941, Lee formed the Association of New Artists (*Shin bijutsuka kyokai*) with other Korean artists in Japan, including Lee Qoedee, Jin Hwan, Choi Jaedeok, and Kim Jongchan. The group held an exhibition in Tokyo, which was well received by the art field.

With the Pacific War reaching its apex in 1943, Lee returned to his family in Wonsan, Korea. In May 1945, just before Korea regained its independence, Lee married Yamamoto Masako, a Japanese woman whom he had met at Bunka Gakuin.

Three People
a. 1945, Pencil on paper, 18.2 × 28 cm



Seogwipo and Busan (1950–53)

With the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Wonsan began to be bombed, forcing Lee to flee to Busan in December 1950. He brought his wife and two sons with him, but was forced to leave behind his mother and all of his artworks. This is why almost none of the works that Lee Jung-Seob produced before 1950 have survived. Finding Busan to be very crowded with refugees, Lee moved his family to Jeju Island in 1951. The family spent most of the year on the island, eking out a meager but happy life.

They returned to Busan in December 1951, but could only wander between refugee camps. Fed up with living in destitution, Lee's wife took their two sons to Japan in July 1952, leaving him alone. Throughout this ordeal, Lee continued working, producing paintings, magazine illustrations, and book covers, and participating in exhibitions. Unfortunately, however, most of the works that he produced in Busan are not extant, having reportedly been destroyed in a fire.



Children on the Seashore
1952–53, Oil and pencil on paper, 32.5 × 49.8 cm

Children in Spring
1952–53, Oil and pencil on paper, 32.6 × 49.6 cm

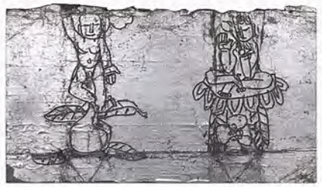


Tinfoil Paintings

Lee Jung-Seob also created an innovative new technique for making paintings on pieces of tinfoil from cigarette packs. He scratched lines into the tinfoil, applied paint, and then wiped away the paint so that only the etched lines were painted. Although they are flat, the resulting images seem to have multiple layers thanks to the deeply indented lines. The aesthetic effect is further enhanced by the sparkling surface of the tinfoil. Notably, this technique recalls the tradition of inlaid Goryeo celadon or metalware inlaid with silver. Indeed, Lee Jung-Seob had a deep reverence for Korean tradition, and intentionally borrowed the technique for these tinfoil paintings.

Lee Jung-Seob supposedly produced about 300 tinfoil paintings (some of which are shown here) over a long period of time. Etched with a sharp tool, the images range from scenes of his happy family life in Seogwipo, Jeju Island to scenes of poverty and social adversity. According to Lee, the tinfoil paintings were intended to serve as rough sketches for murals that he wanted to paint. Indeed, he often dreamt of painting huge murals in public spaces, where they could be appreciated by many people.

The Birth of Buddha
1950, Incising and oil paint on metal foil on paper, 8.7 × 15.2 cm



Tongyeong (1953–1954)

From around the end of the Korean War (July 1953) until June 1954, Lee Jung-Seob worked as a lecturer at the School of Lacquerware Inlaid with Mother-of-pearl in Tongyeong. He received this job through the intercession of Yoo Kangyul (1920–76), a master craftsman who had moved down from North Korea. Taking advantage of this relative stability, Lee spent his year in Tongyeong feverishly producing an abundance of new works, including his famous *Bull* series and numerous oil paintings of the beautiful Tongyeong landscapes. Furthermore, he greatly advanced his career by holding his first solo exhibition and participating in the *Four Young Artists Exhibition*.

Landscape of Yokjido
1953, Oil on paper, 39.6 × 27.6 cm



Bull
1953–54, Oil on paper, 32.3 × 49.5 cm

