



AiA Art News-service

# KOREA EXPOSÉ

## One of South Korea's Most Famous Paintings, but by Whom?

*Published on June 2, 2017 by [Haeryun Kang](#)*

**A single painting dominates a dimly lit corner in one of South Korea's most famous museums. It's about the size of a magazine. It doesn't deserve any superlatives — it's not the grandest, most beautiful, nor the most radical among all the paintings on display. It would've been a forgettable work of art under any other circumstance. It's just a simple portrait of a woman.**

**"A lot of people come to the museum just to see this painting," a guide told a crowd of twenty or so visitors huddling around the painting at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Gwacheon, 30 km south of Seoul. "It hasn't been shown to the public for the past 26 years."**

**That's because "Portrait of a Beauty," on display at the MMCA until April 2018, is at the center of South Korea's highest-profile and most enduring forgery scandal. It involves a celebrated female artist, the MMCA, numerous high-ranking government officials and art experts, a team of French authenticators and even the assassin of former president Park Chung-hee, father of recently-ousted president Park Geun-hye.**

**It's hard to say where exactly this story begins. It could've been in 1977, when the painting was allegedly created (at least according to the signature). It could've been in 1980, when the MMCA says it acquired the painting from the state, after military dictator Chun Doo-hwan confiscated all the possessions of Kim Jae-gyu. Kim was the spymaster who shot and killed Park, Chun's predecessor, in 1979. By a bizarre, unknown, turn of events, the painting had ended up in Kim's hands after its creation.**

**Maybe the best place to start is in 1991, when the artist — who was supposed to have created the painting — discovered that a poster of it was hanging in a public bathhouse in Seoul. She called the museum.**

**"This is not mine," Chun Kyung-ja apparently said after examining the original painting, which was brought over to her apartment by the museum. She claimed the piece was forged, and uttered the now-legendary line: "Would a mother not recognize her own child?"**

**This was the beginning of a long, much-publicized feud between Chun and the museum. The MMCA has insisted to this day that the painting it acquired in 1980 (without the artist's knowledge) is really hers. Chun and her family have accused the museum of lying to save face, because the painting in question was part of a huge MMCA exhibition spearheaded by the minister of culture at the time.**

**The scandal shattered the 67-year-old artist, who was attacked by close acquaintances and even accused of suffering from dementia for denying the painting's authenticity. "I'm so tired by the world," she said in a 1991 interview with public broadcaster KBS. "Why are they tormenting me like this?" She even briefly declared that she would never paint again — a statement she took back quickly, saying that she realized what never painting again would do to her.**

**"This past year is something I never want to relive," Chun said in an interview with daily Kyunghyang Shinmun in December 1991. "But it's better than me hurting my arm and not being able to work."**

**In an article titled, "The 'Portrait of Beauty' in an Age of Distrust," Shin Jeong-hee, an official from the Ministry of Culture, wrote in 1991, "No matter what [the**

**museum] says, as long as the artist is alive and repeating the claim, 'Over my dead body is this painting mine,' the truth of the painting will remain a mystery."**

**The mystery has carried on beyond the artist's death and to this day. Over the years, the cast of characters in the scandal continued to grow — a forger publicly announced in 1999 that he was the artist (although the man in question, Kwon Chun-sik, has undermined his own credibility by retracting this statement, then retracting his retraction, and most recently saying again that the painting is real).**

**The newest addition to this colorful cast is a team of French authenticators, who add an interesting layer to the story — not to mention the larger art world beyond South Korea.**

**\*\*\***

**On September 19, 2016, a team from French firm Lumiere Technology arrived at Incheon International Airport in South Korea, carrying their precious camera and other equipment weighing a total of 629 kg. They had been commissioned by one of Chun Kyung-ja's daughters, reportedly for a fee of 70 million won (over 60,000 U.S dollars), to authenticate the famous painting and assist South Korean prosecutors in getting to the bottom of the case.**

**It may seem peculiar that the artwork was investigated again last year. After all, the MMCA had already had the painting authenticated by the Galleries Association of Korea (GAK) in 1991. The GAK's findings, as well as the government's scientific analyses, were rejected by Chun Kyung-ja, who argued that the authentication process had been haphazard, illogical on many points and even corrupt, citing the GAK's close ties with the MMCA and the Ministry of Culture.**



**THE 1991 CERTIFICATE OF AUTHENTICATION FROM THE GALLERIES ASSOCIATION OF KOREA, WHICH WAS REJECTED BY THE ARTIST. (HAERYUN KANG/KOREA EXPOSÉ) Chun, who eventually left South Korea in 1998 for the United States, died in New York City two years ago. Her death thrust the “Portrait” once again into media spotlight. Her daughter, Kim Jeong-hee, vowed to protect her mother’s legacy and sued the MMCA for defaming the artist’s reputation by claiming the painting was real.**

**Hence, the ensuing investigations on a prosecutorial level (in South Korea, prosecutors have both the authority to investigate and indict).**

**The Lumiere team, summoned by Kim, was simply referred to by many in the local media as the “French experts” (indicating that many South Koreans seemed to believe being French alone lent Lumiere more credibility). But much of the South Korean public was (and is) unaware of Lumiere’s complicated position in the larger art world.**

**If the company sounds familiar to some, it’s because this team of optical engineers also analyzed another portrait of a beautiful woman, a 16th-century painting that is immeasurably more famous around the world than the “Portrait of a Beauty” can ever be — the “Mona Lisa.”**

**Leonardo da Vinci’s iconic work, which the Louvre Museum allowed the firm to analyze in 2004, was Lumiere’s most high-profile case.**

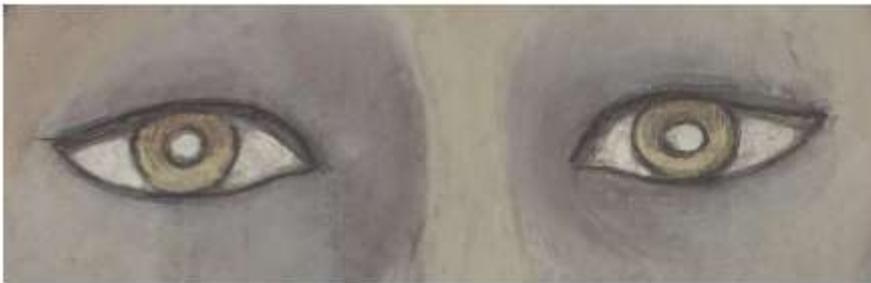
**Lumiere scientists studied the “Mona Lisa” through a process called multispectral digitization. A series of intense lights are projected onto the artwork, while the Lumiere camera, called the JumboScan, scans the painting and measures the reflections to digitally reconstruct the layers hidden beneath the surface.**

**“The camera can peel back the layers of paint like an onion,” Lumiere founder and CTO Pascal Cotte told the BBC. To put it into perspective, the front camera of Samsung’s newest S8 smartphone has 8 million pixels; the Lumiere camera has 240 million.**

**Before being commissioned to study the “Portrait,” Jean Penicaut, CEO of Lumiere, had never even seen a Chun Kyung-ja painting. He didn’t need to. His approach was about radically decontextualizing the artwork, examining it only for its tangible components, or, as Penicaut puts it, like running a patient under a health scanner.**

**Lumiere Technology compared the “Portrait” to nine other portraits of women by Chun (real ones) produced during a similar time period of between 1977 and 1985. Each painting was scanned by the camera for 20 hours under 13 different units in the light spectrum.**

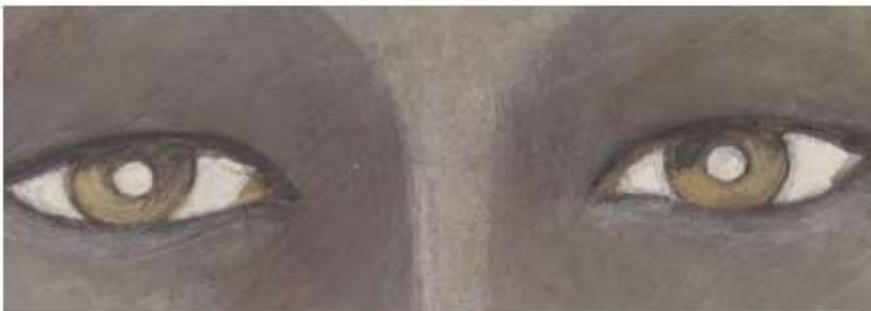
**The ten artworks were then digitally reconstructed into 1,600 layers per painting; each layer was compared with the corresponding layer from the other paintings. The final outcome indicated the statistical probability of whether a painting was real or fake.**



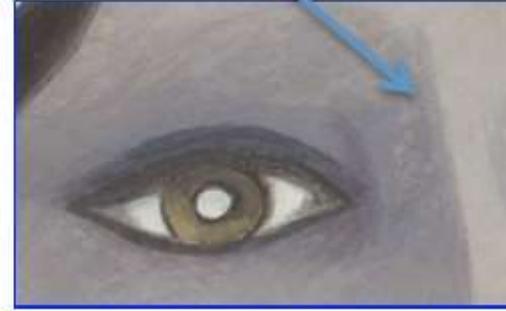
K1 *Portrait of a Lady* 1977



K2 *Roses & Lady* 1981



K4 *None Theresa* 1977



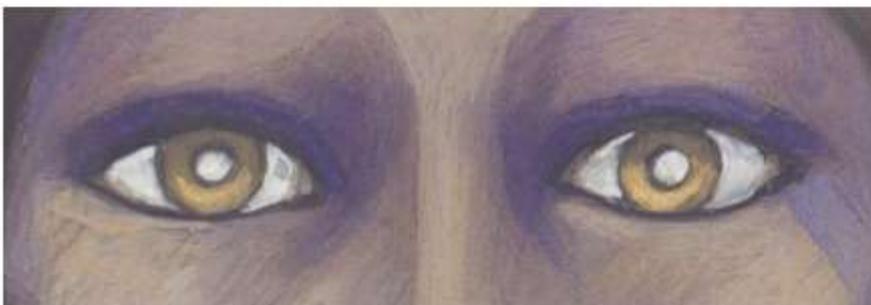
K5 *Wonderful woman* 1977



K6 *The 22nd Page of My sorrowful ...* 1977



K7 *Portrait of a Lady* 1982



K8 *Naked Woman with flowers* 1985



K9 *Naked Woman* 1984

**THE FRENCH FIRM COMPARED THE CONCENTRATION OF LIGHT IN DIFFERENT NASAL BRIDGES. "K5 WONDERFUL WOMAN," THE PAINTING IN QUESTION, "HAS A UNIQUE BRIGHTNESS... THE CONTRAST IS NOTICEABLY STRONGER AND CLEARER." (SOURCE: LUMIERE TECHNOLOGY)**

**"Scientifically speaking, [the "Portrait"] cannot be construed as an artwork by Ms. Chun Kyung-ja," the team concluded in a 63-page report. "It is fundamentally different from the others."**

**To Lumiere's outrage, the prosecutors rejected this conclusion. "Their mathematical calculations are meaningful in figuring out the differences between each painting, but not sufficient to judge whether a painting is fake," they said in a written press release last December.**

**According to them, some of Lumiere's formulas — namely, ones used to calculate the brightness distribution and the thickness of the eyelids (in the paintings) — were flawed. These formulas, they said, would find even some of Chun's real artworks to be fake.**

**What Penicaut felt then was betrayal — he had thought the prosecutorial investigations were supposed to be collaborative; he had thought the Lumiere team had a rapport with the South Korean prosecutors; he thought the Lumiere approach was respected. Now, his team was forced into a position where they had to defend their analysis against this massive South Korean institution. Lumiere's reputation was now on the line.**

**The team pointed out that the formulas criticized by the prosecutors were just some of the many that went into calculating the whole picture.**

**Lumiere also criticized the prosecutors' relatively primitive technologies. Sure, experts were summoned from South Korea's most prestigious institutions, like the National Forensic Service and KAIST university. But the scientific methods they used — such as X-ray, infrared, 3D imaging, DNA — were mostly a repetition of what the MMCA had already done in 1991. Their capacities were incomparable to that of the Lumiere camera.**



**THREE OF THE TEN PAINTINGS ANALYZED BY LUMIERE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: “MOTHER THERESA” (1977; OWNED BY THE SEOUL MUSEUM OF ART, OR SEMA), “PORTRAIT OF A BEAUTY” (?; MMCA), AND “THE 22ND PAGE OF MY SAD LEGEND” (1977; SEMA). Granted, Lumiere Technology represents something of a Wild West in the still-conservative art world: scientific authentication.**

**Verifying works of art still relies largely on the traditional methods of background research, including tracking down a work’s whereabouts since its creation and, most importantly, the human expert who can give the piece a stamp of approval.**

**In most cases, scientific analysis — from basic X-ray scans to incredibly detailed optical scans like those of the Lumiere camera — is still seen as supplementary evidence. Sometimes, especially in Lumiere’s case, stripping down the artwork is viewed as downright demeaning.**

**“Picasso’s son refused our approach,” Penicaut said. “Ours is a new protocol, which the market refuses.” He admitted that even after all the years since the company was founded in 1989, its market was “a very little one.”**

**Even Lumiere’s findings regarding the Mona Lisa were received with skepticism from the art community. When the company announced that it had found a second portrait hidden under the painting, art history professor Martin Kemp [told](#) the Wall Street Journal, “I do not know of any major Leonardo scholar who has definitely accepted [the finding].”**

**In this context, to Lumiere, using its technology in the Chun Kyung-ja case is not just about getting paid. It's about making a pioneering statement about the validity of its methods.**

**“You know, I don't care about Chun Kyung-ja's story. I don't care about the story of the guy who killed the president,” said Penicaut. “I just wanted to know, is it possible to measure the light and objectively assess the painting?”**

\*\*\*

**The prosecutors involved refused to comment on Lumiere's criticisms (or anything related to the painting, for that matter).**

**Like the prosecutors, the MMCA rejected Lumiere's analysis. In a [press release](#) last November, the museum pointed to the French team's lack of traditional expertise, including the absence of knowledge of Chun Kyung-ja's other artworks and general art history. “[The Lumiere team] only focused on the superficial patterns on the screen,” the museum stated.**

**To the French team, whose “superficial patterns” comprised of over 1,000 layers in a single painting, this artistic background just wasn't necessary to their work.**

**“Our work is a purely objective assessment. It's pure statistics,” said Penicaut, who calls himself an amateur lover of paintings. He has no background in art; he used to be a marketing director for brand names like Samsung and Konica prior to joining Lumiere.**

**His company doesn't claim to have absolute authority, anyway. Lumiere Technology is well aware that scientific analysis can only be one of many ways to help validate an artwork. “I never want to say whether [the painting] is good or not without the art specialists,” said Penicaut.**

**And therein lies the bigger problem with the South Korean prosecutors' authentication process: the art specialists they retained, who are mostly anonymous.**

**Even with groundbreaking technology, in art authentication the human eye is still more valued than the eye of the camera. “95 percent of the process depends on the discerning eye of the expert,” said Choi Byung-sik, an art professor and prominent South Korean scholar in the field of art authentication.**

**According to Choi, the expert cannot be just anyone.**

**“For example, what does one need to do in order to become an Andy Warhol authenticator? Knowing his work, reading his books and all relevant materials are just the basics. Anyone can do that. The authenticator, on the other hand, must know which illness Warhol suffered from at what age, what food he liked, who he was friends with, which pencils he used.... It’s an incredibly complicated process, because you are responsible for signing off how valuable a work of art is.”**

**“The path to becoming an authenticator is full of thorns,” said Choi.**

**The question is how many of the prosecutors’ team of nine specialists — whose names the prosecutors will not release — fit Choi’s qualifications.**

**“I can’t trust the prosecutors,” said Kim Jeong-hee — Chun’s daughter — who sued the MMCA and hired Lumiere Technology. “We don’t have the list of the human authenticators. We don’t know if they’re curators, qualified, or what.”**

**Authenticators specializing in a single artist are difficult to come by in South Korea, where the art market is still relatively new and job stability nearly nonexistent for aspiring authenticators. This was true in 1991, and is not significantly different in 2017.**

**But authenticators specializing in Chun Kyung-ja are even rarer.**

**“Chun was a difficult artist to study,” said Choi Kwang-jin, an art critic and former authenticator who is often dubbed by media as South Korea’s only Chun Kyung-ja specialist. “She didn’t provide an easy environment for specialists. She didn’t sell many paintings. She didn’t put on shows very often. People didn’t have much opportunity to even see her stuff.”**

**The artist’s last exhibition, in 1995 — which Choi curated, three years before Chun left South Korea permanently — was her first showing in 15 years.**

# “그림인생 50년 恨과 情 담았어요”



어느새 71살 「마지막 생각으로 작품 모아  
가품 오를 손 아프지만 「붓질이 계속할터

Chun Kyung-ja, 71, said she had put all her love and 'han' into her 50-year painting career. She mentioned that her hands were getting painful from holding the brush, but she intended to continue painting.

Chun Kyung-ja, 71, said she had put all her love and 'han' into her 50-year painting career. She mentioned that her hands were getting painful from holding the brush, but she intended to continue painting.

Chun Kyung-ja (Chun Kyung-ja)

“미스터리영화 좋아해 때때로 비디오 빌러봐요”

Chun Kyung-ja, 71, said she had put all her love and 'han' into her 50-year painting career. She mentioned that her hands were getting painful from holding the brush, but she intended to continue painting.

**OLD NEWSPAPER CLIPPING ABOUT CHUN'S LAST-EVER EXHIBITION IN 1995: “I PUT ALL THE LOVE AND ‘HAN’ FROM MY FIFTY YEARS OF PAINTING.” (SOURCE: DONGA ILBO, NOV. 5, 1995)**

**Choi is one of the nine experts in the prosecutorial investigations, and the only one whose name we know, because he’s the only one to speak out publicly.**

**After over a decade of studying Chun Kyung-ja and collecting over 600 of her artworks in his digital database, Choi Kwang-jin finally saw the original “Portrait of a Beauty” for the first time in September 2016. He was commissioned by the prosecutors to study the painting for a total of four hours.**

**“It was like being momentarily confused by a person who reminded me of someone I knew,” he recalled the first moment of seeing the painting. “But the more we talked, I realized this was a different person.”**

**“You can tell a powerful, good actor by his or her eyes,” he told Korea Exposé. “This painting was not a good actor. It had only imitated the shell.”**

**In his home office, Choi Kwang-jin opened up a computer folder titled “Chun Kyung-ja.” In it, hundreds of artworks, sketches and documents were arranged in folders neatly categorized by year. One of the folders was titled “Portrait of a Beauty.”**

**For Choi, the “Portrait” was a relatively difficult painting to gauge, because it was pretty well-painted for a forgery, compared to the others he’d seen. “With some forgeries, I can tell just by looking at the piece alone. With others, I have to compare with other originals. Forgeries are always based, in some way, on an original.”**

**He flicked through the images, demonstrating his thought process in authenticating the artworks.**

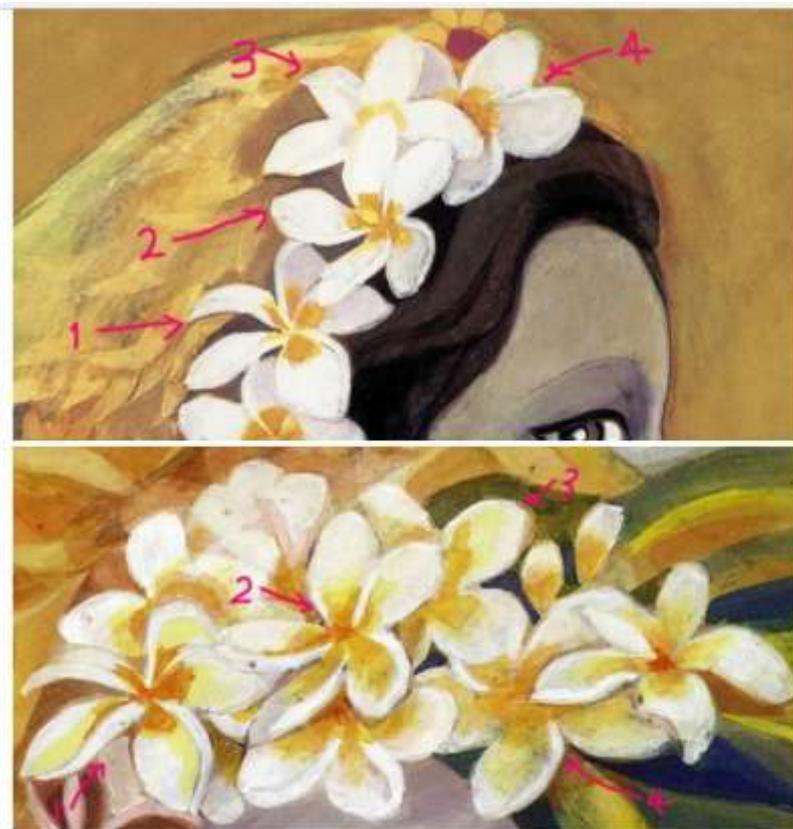
**“Chun was truly a perfectionist,” he said. She would work on one painting for months, putting layer upon layer. “There’s a subtle contrast to her work. Forgeries, which are painted usually within a week, cannot reach the same level of contrast.”**



**“THE 22ND PAGE OF MY SAD LEGEND” (1977) VS. “PORTRAIT OF A BEAUTY” (?) BEFORE AND AFTER CONTRAST WAS DIGITALLY HEIGHTENED. (SOURCE: [CHOI'S BLOG](#))**

**He showed an edited version of the “Portrait” in heightened contrast, alongside an original. “The painting becomes really strange once you photoshop it like this. The woman looks like a witch. Other originals don’t show this stark a contrast.”**

**“Look at the flowers here,” Choi said, pointing to the flower tiara on the woman in the “Portrait.” “They are so sloppily done. Chun would never have painted like this.” He also pointed out that, like some other elements in the painting, the flowers seemed to have been taken from other original pieces.**



**THE FLOWERS ABOVE ARE FROM AN AUTHENTIC CHUN KYUNG-JA PAINTING, “THE VIRGIN IN BALI” (1975). BELOW ARE FLOWERS FROM THE “PORTRAIT.” THE NUMBERS INDICATE FLOWERS THAT SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN COPIED DIRECTLY FROM THE ORIGINAL.**

**(SOURCE: [CHOI'S BLOG](#))**

**Choi’s analysis contradicted that of the prosecutors, who cited “thick layers” and brushstrokes as some of the reasons the painting was real. Their report did not mention any of Choi’s criticisms of the artwork.**

**“There’s something fishy about the prosecutors,” he argued. “They should have made the process transparent, made the information public and provided a platform for debate. But everything is a secret. They hid the process and just announced the final answer.”**

**This distrust toward well-established institutions is prevalent in South Korean society, where politicians, prosecutors and big businessmen are routinely embroiled in various corruption cases. But in the Chun Kyung-ja case, this sentiment is especially pronounced. By numerous observers, this case has been called a “fight between the individual and national institutions.”**

**“What if Chun had said the “Portrait” wasn’t hers when it wasn’t on display at the MMCA and its copies weren’t distributed? Would the museum have responded in this way?” Choi said. “The [exhibition] was ordered by the Ministry of Culture. The painting was already too famous. This was a situation where the painting just could not be fake, from the museum’s perspective.”**

**Kim Seong-hwan, a prominent comic and artist, told broadcaster SBS in a documentary, that he heard rumors in 1991 about unnamed authorities threatening the seven authenticators from GAK: “If you don’t prove that it’s real, we’ll destroy the seven of you. Don’t question whether it’s fake. *Make* it real at all cost.”**

**The MMCA, whose director is appointed by the Ministry of Culture, responded curtly to these rumors of conflict of interest. “Nothing has been confirmed,” a representative stated in an e-mail.**

**“Something is not right,” Choi Kwang-jin said. “The entire South Korean art world is involved in this “Portrait” scandal. The Galleries Association of Korea, the MMCA; everyone is connected.” Choi claims that’s a huge reason why many people are hesitant to speak about the painting. “I know all those people and have worked with them at one point. If I talk to press like this, like I’m doing now, I’m basically building a wall against those people.”**

**How is Choi able to speak up? How is he able to speculate about the connection between the GAK, the MMCA and even the prosecutors? How is it possible for him to publicize his role in the prosecutorial investigations?**

**“I’m a man of the wild,” he laughed. “I’m not tied to an organization. If you are, you just can’t speak, because everything is connected.”**

\*\*\*

**In April, a few months after the prosecutors declared it real, the “Portrait of a Beauty” was displayed to the public for the first time in 26 years. The theme of the exhibition is the scandal itself; viewers can see newspaper clippings, museum documents and other materials relevant to the story.**

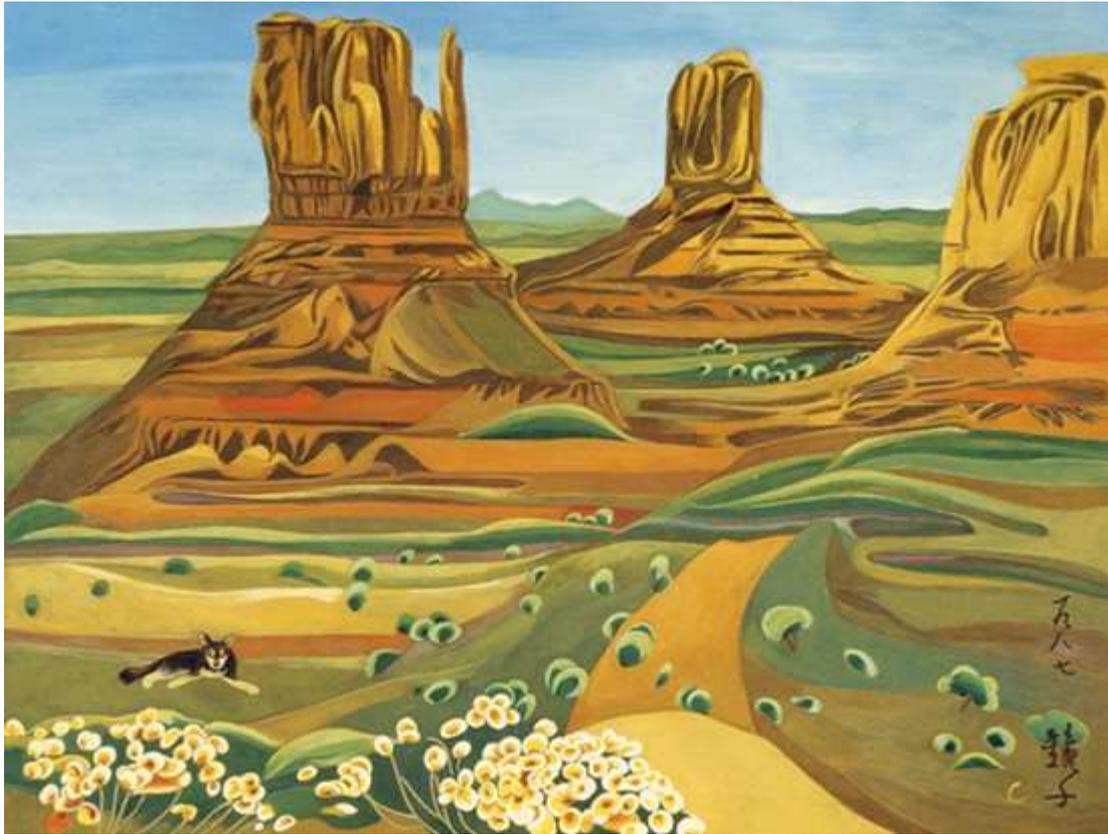


**A DISPLAY EXPLAINS THE SCANDAL. (HAERYUN KANG/KOREA EXPOSÉ)**

**“The museum saw the need for open debate, by making information as public and transparent as possible, from a neutral point of view,” the exhibition explained. Of course, none of the displayed materials mentions the allegations about corruption, conflict of interest, or criticisms against the prosecutors’ conclusions.**

**“The prosecutors’ conclusions aren’t a court verdict. Yet the museum is holding this exhibition based on their sloppy investigations,” said Kim Jeong-hee, Chun’s daughter, who, despite planning to sue the museum again, still went to see the painting. “Would the artist have wanted this exhibition? It’s killing my mother twice over.”**

**It’s ironic that Chun Kyung-ja’s most famous artwork is one that she doesn’t claim as hers. Before the forgery scandal damaged her reputation (and correspondingly, diminished her desire to stay in the country), Chun was a prolific artist and writer. She created haunting portraits and ventured to unfamiliar countries to paint, at a time when travelling abroad was still a rarity.**



**“MONUMENT VALLEY” (1987) IN UTAH, U.S.A. (SOURCE: SEMA)**



**“GRANADA MARKETPLACE” (1993) IN SPAIN. (SOURCE: SEMA)**

**Just a few years before the scandal broke, she wrote in one of her many essays, “Reality means, no matter how sad, to swallow it all and laugh and live.”**

**Choi Kwang-jin grieves for his beloved artist’s legacy, which is so often reduced to the scandal.**

**“In the late 70s [when the “Portrait” was allegedly created], Chun Kyung-ja had a tendency to think of herself as a little girl in the universe,” Choi said. “She had a desire to transcend, and often rented VCR tapes of science fiction movies. She saw herself as a lonely and suffering girl, but one who was strong enough to transcend reality. The eyes [in her other portraits] show this powerful strength, which overcomes strong anxiety within.”**

**“I don’t feel the soul in her eyes,” Choi said of the woman in the painting.**

***Editor’s Note: An earlier version of this article erroneously stated that Chun Kyung-ja first claimed the painting was fake after seeing a poster of it. Chun did not make this judgment until the museum brought over the original to her apartment in early April 1991. We apologize for the error.***

***Cover image: “The Portrait of a Beauty,” on display at the MMCA in Gwacheon. (Haeryun Kang/Korea Exposé)***

\*