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AiA Art News-service



THE KOREA TIMES

Family of deceased artist files suit over museum's claims

By Kwon Mee-yoo



The late Chun Kyung-ja

The family of Korean artist Chun Kyung-ja (1924-2015) has filed a suit against the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), furthering a controversy about the authenticity of one of her works.

Chun's family said that the museum has abused the painter's human rights through its long-held claims that the "Beautiful Woman" in the museum's collection is one of Chun's artworks, an assertion which was rebutted by the painter.

The "Beautiful Woman" was in a confiscated collection of artworks owned by Kim Jae-gyu, the head of the then Korean Central Intelligence Agency who assassinated President Park Chung-hee in 1979.

When the painting appeared in a museum catalog, Chun claimed that it was a fake, but the museum declared the piece to be authentic after a appraisal by an art expert.

"Parents can recognize one's child. That is not my painting," Chun protested regarding the piece.

The nearly forgotten art scandal surfaced again last October with the belated report of Chun's death.

Her second daughter Kim Jeong-hee, a Montgomery College art professor, and her husband Muhn Bum-gang represented the family and asked MMCA to admit that the "Beautiful Woman" in its collection is a fake.

The group of lawyers hired by the family is led by Bae Keum-ja; Wi Cheol-hwan, former president of Korea Bar Association; Oh Wook-hwan, former president of the Seoul Bar Association; and Park Young-soo, an attorney at Gangnam Law Firm.

Bae said that the group of lawyers came together to protect the late artist's human rights.

"It is an infringement of copyright if a person who did not create a work is declared to be the artist. What the MMCA is doing is violating the human rights of an individual and defaming a deceased person," the lawyers said in a statement.

About nine months has passed since Chun, known for her bold use of color in portraying women and flowers, passed away in New York, but the scandal continues to haunt her artistic legacy.

The controversy over Chun's "Beautiful Woman" is one of the largest art

scandals in Korea, which forced the artist to retire from the local art scene in 1991. Though she continued to paint overseas, she did not sell many works.

The nation's flagship art museum said the painting was determined genuine after scientific investigation and its former employees heard the artist admitting that her claim of forgery was a mistake.

However, a major Korean media outlet reported Tuesday that the MMCA's report to the congress regarding "Beautiful Woman" was not true. The former museum officials said that they did not visit the artist regarding the forgery case and that the pigment used in Chun's painting was not enough to verify the authenticity.

Kim and Muhn sent an open letter to Bartomeu Mari Ribas, the current director of MMCA, Monday, asking him to settle the dispute even though it happened before he occupied the post.

"Director Mari Ribas made his position clear on the Lee U-fan forgery case, clarifying that the artist's opinion should be respected. However, he said there is not enough evidence to determine whether Chun's 'Beautiful Woman' is genuine or not (even though Chun said it was not her creation), revealing a serious double standard," the family said in a statement. "Though it was before his time, he should be responsible and show willingness to take care of the museum's murky past."