

**1995**

## **Art Furniture, Redefinition of Tradition**

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### **Byung-hoon Choi, Pioneer of a New Genre**

Byung-hoon Choi, an art furniture maker, has given a fresh impact of art craft and furniture industry in Korea since the 80's. He reconciles the two typical Korean senses of "pure art" and "art craft". In other words, his creative activity does not merely expand the functions of the traditional wood craft. He creates a new genre.

It may be a bit hasty to credit Byung-hoon Choi as a genre developer instead of giving him a credit for having expanded the area of art craft. However, considering the post-modern tendency in the European and American scenes during the period of the latter part of the 70's thru the 80's, there is a good possibility that the same post-modern vision may be established in Korea. The European art festivals during the early part of the 80's focused on introducing "single production artworks" rather than those art works styled for mass production. All these were revolutionary reaction against the modernistic ideals of Bauhaus and the design consistently demanded anonymity on the part of the modernistic designers - that anonymity in the industrial society which brings about dehumanization. It spurred creation of a new genre a new design.

Byung-hoon Choi as an art furniture maker is not an exception in the fact that he himself is a by-product of the industrialized Korea. His solo exhibition of 1993 proved his potentiality as a cornerstone in the field of art furniture. And also, the art works of his students (both undergraduates and graduates) introduced in the '94 Seoul international furniture fair confirmed this new genre.

One of the characteristics of Byung-hoon Choi's art furniture is its function of counter effecting the weaknesses in the Western post-modern art works, which gives a credit to him as a pioneer of new genre. The temporality, fun, and fantasy those post-modern artists pursue may cause (or already have caused) the loss of the function of communication in art furniture Michael Thonet's "chair No.14", Voldker Albus's "A Group of Chairs", and Matteo Thun's "Tea Pors" are good examples of this problem of the loss of communication. In contrast, Byung-hoon Choi's art furniture reconciles the elements of fun and fantasy with the function of communication.

### **Art Furniture Out of Nothingness**

Any art work is supposed to be made into being out of nothingness. However, Byung-hoon Choi's art works give an impression that they create nothingness itself. His works; "The Collected Insects" series during the 80's and "Wind from Beginning of the World" series of the '93 exhibition were culminations of the artist's technique of finishedness and refinement. His '95 exhibition excludes this polish from his art works. He introduces furnitures which look almost crude and unfinished.

Prof. Choi's art work series during the 80's were based on his experiences in his childhood, insect collection, lobster catching, etc. And so the physical forms of the insects were sublimated into fine, artistic lines and forms. This time, his works look almost coarse and even crude.

A girder, a pastry board, a flat stone to smooth linens and gardening tools that were used in the traditional Korean style households are randomly arranged. And the stones which support these things look as if they need more polishing. This gives an impression that the artist might have given up his art. However, he seems to intend to convey to his customer the natural beauty as it is. We can trace the typical traditional Korean art and aesthetics from this exhibition. The artist must have wished to show not the man-made beauty but the awe-stirring natural beauty, the crude, unpolished nature that the ancient Buddhist monks used to enjoy. For Korean people, it was a very important art to recognize beauty in crude, natural things.

As is well known, natural beauty is the supreme goodness in Taoism and Zen ideals. Nature as it

is what is true to us. The Zen monk in the 10th A.E., Shou-Shan Hsing-Nien showed his stick to his disciples and said, "if you say that this is a stick, you are subjected to it's name, and if you say this is not a stick, you deny the fact itself." The monk wanted his disciples to have a total experience of the thing, the stick, by means of the man-made form. And thus Paul Klee, who was charmed with the Zen ideals, said that art creates not what is being seen. Art instead makes things to be seen. Andre Masson also liked to say that we should let nature tell herself.

Perhaps Byung-hoon Choi the artist might have this oriental and typical Korean aesthetic in mind when he avoids the artificial refinement in his works. And we can conjecture the panic he might have gone thru, giving up his technique as an artist. And also, the artist avoids the contrast of the strong colors prevalent among the Western artists. He instead highlights the natural wood color of the wood materials or the natural stones themselves which we could call a non-technique art.

The same feeling that a very fine artistic work is yet to be finished is what we experience in the oriental painting. It's root lies in the philosophical idea that faithful portraiture of the outward part of things makes impossible the experience of their inner nature.

Nam-chuan also insists that "truth does not exist in the outward part of things, and what exists in the outward part is not truth." A fine artistic technique interrupts the experience of inner nature of the art work. Artist Byung-hoon Choi's non-technique art works must be based on these ideals, that is, art furniture formed with properly controlled technique. In other words, his experiment of creating not visual being, but visual nothingness proves his maturity as traditional Korean artist in his own way.

#### Redefinition of Tradition

Other than the above-mentioned characteristics traced in Byung-hoon Choi's '95 exhibition, he demonstrates his creativity in portraying traditional elements, which have been already confirmed in his exhibitions of '89 and '93.

For instance, take the forms and functions of the traditional gate locks or the hair pin on the knotted hair on the back of the head of Korean woman. These objects keep traditional value but in a very different meaning.

In other words, these objects are not in the familiar forms of gate locks or the traditional chignon hair-do of Korean woman. But they not only create a perfect harmony in the artist's new arrangement but also they let us identify them with the originals. Forms of the pole signifying prayer for a good harvest in ancient Korea, gardening tools, and flat stone to smooth linens seem to redefine their own usage. And also, stones used in this exhibition properly reflect the aesthetic sense of Korean people. They remind us of piles of stones in the corner of a typical traditional town temple. These stones arranged in a neat order figuratively speak prayers and wishes of Korean people, which probably expresses Byung-hoon Choi's symbolic world. His ability to represent people, their wishes, stones for their wishes, and a pile of these stones by means of a very simple arrangement comes from a refined sense as an artist. And in some cases, large stones do not seem to sufficiently take part in conveying the total meaning of a work. However, since they are in charge of supporting the whole work, they complete the totality of that work. It surely demonstrates his elaborate sense of balance. We remember the avant-garde art to be very unfamiliar and outrageous as a revolution against tradition. However, the avant-garde artists were those who spurred creation of a new tradition, which surely was a historical and cultural contribution. Likewise, Byung-hoon Choi's experiment in art furniture will create another tradition in the history of furniture industry in Korea.

Another tradition - it should be a positive phenomenon formed not in secession from the past but in redefinition of the past in the present reality. Byung-hoon Choi's avant-garde characteristics in his art works are rather familiar to us contrary to those in the past who used to bring about a negative reaction of terror. It is because his avant-garde art figuratively redefines the tradition in harmony with the reality.