

Winning the hearts and minds of Korean artists: The US, the Cold War, and Korean Art

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to offer an overview of how U.S. cultural policy played a significant role in the formation of the South Korean art scene during the tumultuous decade, from the US military government rule (1945–1958) through the Korean War (1950–1953) to the late 1950s. Conceived as a bulwark against Communist expansion in the Pacific region, post-liberation Korea was caught up in the rivalries between two superpowers not only in their first ‘hot’ confrontation but also in the ideological tensions which lay at the heart of the Cold War. For the southern part of the peninsula, a great deal of grant money and foreign aid poured in under U.S. patronage and a vast range of resources were allocated to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of Korean people. It is no surprise that an unprecedented increase in American presence occurred in every corner of Korean society, and the art field was no exception. And yet the modality of U.S. influence was far from uniform. This essay explores the ways in which the Korean art field in the post-liberation and immediate post-war period was shaped in relation to the marked changes in U.S. cultural policy.¹ Furthermore, I hope that this essay will illuminate what U.S. and its visual art meant to Korean artists in the period of a heightened cultural Cold War.

2. “Officially neglected”: visual arts under U.S. Military Government

Thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule in Korea came to an end on August 15, 1945. The much-celebrated return of Korean independence, however, marked the beginning of national division. The United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) was established in the southern half of the peninsula. Formal US rule (1945–1948) assigned cultural matters to the Bureau of Culture within the Department of Education (originally given section status, then raised to bureau status in April 1946, and finally changed to the Bureau of Social Education in September 1947).

The Bureau’s activities regarding Korean art can be understood as both promotion of traditional artifacts and neglect of contemporary art production. Much attention was paid to the preservation and protection of historical, cultural and religious objects. Historical sites and monuments were inspected and excavated, and colonial museums were taken over by Korean staffs. The former Japanese Government General Museum reopened under the auspices of the American Military Government with Korean director Kim Chaewon in 1945 [fig 1], and branch museums in Kyeongju, Puyo, Kaesung, and Kongju followed the same path in 1946.²

In contrast to the cultural authorities’ investment in ancient and traditional Korean arts, the neglect of contemporary art practices was remarkable. Korean art circles’ demand for financial and institutional support was rejected or ignored. Seokjojeon in the Deoksugung palace, where Japanese modern painting and sculpture had been on permanent display from 1933 to 1944 in the colonial period, was transformed into offices for the U.S.-Soviet Union Joint Commission in 1946–47. [fig 2] The Japanese General Government Art Museum in the Gyeongbokgung palace shared a similar fate. The regular display site for the Joseon Art Exhibition in the 1940s came to be first a billet and then the M.G. officers’ club in the immediate occupation period.³ [fig 3] Artist Lee Quede lamented the U.S. occupants’ rejection of Korean artists’ request for the use of the public museum of contemporary art for its original purpose, with the result that they were pushed to a few galleries at department stores.⁴

The cultural authorities gave little support to the establishment of the Chosun Arts Academy, a proposed higher educational institution including schools of Fine Arts, Music, Motion Picture, Drama, and Dance.⁵ Having been submitted by Korean artists in 1946 with the hope of building a national identity around art and culture, the proposal gave the appearance of a post-colonial endeavor that was overtly suggested in its proposed location, formerly the Japanese Shinto shrine in Namsan, a major spiritual institution for colonial assimilation. The cancellation of the ambitious plan suggested the loss of Korean initiative in art education and its direction, leading to the U.S.-led establishment of fine arts department within Seoul National University following the American model in 1948.⁶

A memorandum prepared by the Bureau of Culture in 1946 divulged that “no government subsidies or other concrete assistance is made available.”⁷ Moreover, in 1947 Warren A. Gilbertson, an advisor for the cultural authorities, remarked that “since the liberation the (Korean) artists have been officially neglected,” implying an unfriendly relationship between the U.S. Military Government and Korean artists in his detailed report on the immediate postliberation art field.⁸ The M.G.’s reluctance to support Korean artists was neither surprising nor unreasonable. For the US, South Korea was not so much a liberated country as an occupied enemy one. The great distrust of the Korean people resulted in the neglect, which was “the most prominent aspect of the U.S. attitude toward Korea in the initial year or two of occupation”. This attitude was mirrored in the cultural field. Gilbertson’s report described Korean artists as still being still bound up with their colonial experience: they were “passive, non-

cooperative” and caught in a “negative unhealthiness fostered by grievances and frustration” so as to make no “proper contribution to society.” The advisor thus recommended that Korean artists should receive “outside guidance and encouragement—enlightened, forward-looking, and tolerant”—that “insist on civil liberties” and “creat[ed] a constructive, hopeful, more democratic attitude.”⁹

His negative view represented U.S. cultural authorities’ approach to Korean artists and their practices. Marked by left-right conflicts and accusations of collaboration with the Japanese, the tumultuous years of postliberation Korea could be seen as a barren age with little productivity. The dominance of this approach in the art-historical literature, however, was subject to revision in the late 1980s, when the ban on the works and texts of the “artists who went north” was lifted. Freedom given to cultural productions censored for forty years triggered a widespread reconsideration of the period less as a ‘dormant’ one than as a ‘liberation space,’ where various visions of art competed for attention in a concerted attempt to build a new national culture and identity.¹⁰ What made the American observer regard this potential vitality as barren instability was a certain ideological stance. The stance was well indicated in his insistence on “civil liberties” and a “democratic attitude,” under which slogans oppressive measures were implemented against the leftist forces on the cultural scene, with the result that a number of Korean artists went underground or defected to the north in mid-1946 to 1947. Some malfunction in the Korean art scene was thus of the M.G.’s own making, a result of both neglect and intervention.

In this vein, it would be more accurate to state that not all Korean artists were neglected. Anti-leftist forces gained ground in alignment with the M.G.. Its sole interlocutor, the Joseon Artists Association (later renamed in 1948 as the Daehan Art Association after the establishment of the Republic of Korea) took the lead in the organization of the Comprehensive Joseon Art Exhibition in November 1947, the first government-sponsored art exhibition in post-liberation Korea. This ‘right-wing’ association was also the recipient of Namsan Hall, the now-vacant, former Japanese artists club, which had been requested by the moderate left-wing Joseon Plastic Arts League.¹¹ Such selective governmental support, however, provided only a modicum of material support to the Korean contemporary art scene.

3. The OCI (USIS) and the Propaganda War

Fine art was “officially neglected,” whereas a certain type of visual material was officially manufactured. As the Cold

War emerged around the world in 1946, culture and information became a new weapon. Posters, illustrations, cartoons and pamphlets served to disseminate pro-U.S. propaganda and anti-Communist messages to mitigate the political unrest and the growing threat of Communism in domestic South Korea. Originally assigned to the M.G.’s Office of Public Information (raised in March 1946 to department status), visual propaganda gained new urgency, resulting in the establishment of the Office of Cultural Information (OCI) under the direct control of United States Army Forces in Korea (USAFIK) in mid 1947. Establishing an office in Seoul and branch centers in major cities in the provinces, including Cheongju, Jeonju, Daejeon, Kaeseong, Gwangju, Daegu, and on Jeju Island, the OCI came to dominate the U.S. propaganda offensive from 1947 onward. [fig 4] This marked the beginning of the ‘period of activism’ from mid-1947 to 1950 in U.S. cultural policy toward Korea, departing from the previous one of ‘apathy,’ ‘alienation,’ or ‘neglect.’¹²

Posters, illustrations, cartoons and pamphlets might have been regarded as less effective than other ‘fast’ media such as moving pictures and radio. And yet the ‘low-tech’ media was by no means ignored in the arena of psychological warfare. Engaged in carrying out the propaganda operation were the Art and Poster section and the Publication section in the DPI (Department of Public Information) within USAMGIK and the Visual section and Publication section in the OCI within USAFIK. [fig 5] Some of visual materials were related to public hygiene and energy saving campaigns. And yet rather than ‘enlightening’ the Korean people, a higher priority was placed on intervention into domestic Korean politics. This intervention reached a peak of activity in the campaign to encourage voting in the May 1948 elections for the National Assembly, separate elections that would lead to the creation of a separate South Korean state and to the political division of the country.¹³ [fig 6] The inauguration of the new Republic of Korea in August 1948 put an end to the dual processes (by the DPI and the OCI) of information operation. The processes came to be unified into the OCI within USAFIK, and the army’s engagement in the cultural Cold War shifted emphasis from information to cultural relations. In January 1949 the OCI was renamed as the United States Information Service (USIS), of which offices in major cities in South Korea served as cultural institutions for Koreans as well as disseminators of U.S. propaganda. [fig 7]

Despite the plethora of visual materials produced in the active propaganda phase, their impact on the Korean art field remains unexamined. It is known that a few employees of the OCI and USIS had fine art backgrounds. Kim Foon

(1924–2013), for instance, had attended the Japan Art School in Tokyo in the mid-1940s before working for the Visual Section of the OCI Seoul office from 1948 to 1951. In his 2006 oral history interview, Kim recalled that the “spacious” OCI office turned after work into his atelier where he prepared for solo exhibitions, stressing his uninterrupted artistic career.¹⁴ And yet no comment was made on his involvement in the propaganda program and its influences on his art. Given that Kim became a popular illustrator for magazines and newspapers in the 1950–60s, along with other ex-employees like U Kyung-hee (1924–2000), a Tokyo School of Fine Arts alumnus who worked for the OCI Kaesong branch, the artistic legacy of the OCI (USIS) program could be best detected in the history of Korean illustration. A more convincing narrative, however, should be made by paying attention to the various roles of the agency as a cultural institution. Indeed, the agency gave Kim the rare opportunity to mount two solo exhibitions (in 1949 and 1950) at the USIS gallery and get access to information on currents in Western art in its library.

The OCI (USIS) as a workshop for visual propaganda seems to have been less influential on the Korean art field than it was in its roles as a cultural institution. [fig 8] Mostly composed of a library and auditorium, each center served as a gallery, concert hall, and lecture hall, film theater as well as a library in its local community. The libraries were particularly important because they contained thousands of books and magazines on the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and arts, in addition to American government publications.¹⁵ The information agency satisfied a fast growing but unfulfilled demand for culture and education in the post-liberation era, providing a subtle but powerful way to spread cultural propaganda in conjunction with a newly changed U.S. policy toward South Korea. The increasing exposure of Koreans to the USIS and its cultural assets, however, came to fruition in the 1950s after the Korean War.

4. Postwar Korean art and its ambivalence toward American art

If the U.S. had suffered any anxiety over losing the cultural cold war during the period from 1945 to 1950, the Korean War (1950–1953) firmed up anti-Communism in South Korea, bringing an end to that anxiety. After securing the ‘hearts and minds’ of the free world, U.S. cultural policy took an active step toward mobilizing soft-power, one that “enticed, rather than coercing, through intangibles like culture, values, and belief systems,” which many scholars have identified as a major core nature of Eisenhower’s cultural policy (1953–1961).¹⁶

The sudden increase of USIS-sponsored art exhibitions in the second half of the 1950s should be understood against this context. Among these exhibitions were “Dong Kingman’s Watercolors” (USIS gallery, Seoul, April 1955); “Masterpieces of American Art” (USIS gallery, Seoul, July 1956); “Student Work from College and University Art Departments” (Seoul National University, November 1956); “Eight American Artists” (the National Museum, Seoul, April 1957); “The Family of Man” (Gyeongbok Palace Museum, May 1957); “Recent American Prints in Color” (USIS galleries in Chinju, Pusan, Seoul, Gwangju, and Taegu, November 1959–February 1960). The USIS served as the key channel through which ever-increasing American influence permeated the Korean art field. [fig 9]

It is widely accepted that the U.S.’s aggressive cultural program resulted in the emergence of the Korean *Informel* movement in the late 1950s. [fig 10] Indeed, the USIS-sponsored exhibitions served as the only opportunity for Korean artists to gain firsthand experience of post-war art from overseas. “Masterpieces of American Art” introduced the Korean audience to American abstract expressionism, although in the form of photographic reproduction. “Eight American Artists,” which had toured Europe and Japan for two years, included abstract paintings and sculptures by artists such as Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, and Morris Graves, artists who had been active on the American west coast. Although mostly not in a top-level class and sometimes taken in the form of reproduction, the works of art aroused widespread public and professional interest in post-war American art. In addition to organizing or sponsoring exhibitions, the USIS made much effort to create and circulate information on those exhibitions and ultimately on American art by publishing books, catalogues, and press releases.¹⁷ Both experiential and informational access to ‘American-type’ painting was thus made available to young Korean artists. Interviews with and memoirs of these artists provide ample evidence of how influential the USIS activities were to the burgeoning interest in gestural abstraction as well as to the restoration of the Korean art scene in the wake of war devastation.¹⁸

Korean art historians have pointed to the connection between American influence and the rise of the Korean *Informel*, refuting a groundless claim of originality (or of creation without reference) often made by *Informel* practitioners themselves. What they have stressed, however, is something more than that connection; they draw our attention to multiple connections and inner motivations. As the term *Informel* indicates, the rise of the specific art form

had other sources: the French *Informel* and its Japanese mediation. The “*Informel* whirlwind” swept through the Japanese art world in the 1950s,¹⁹ and Japanese art magazines served as the main source of understanding of postwar gestural abstraction for Korean artists, who felt less comfortable with English than with Japanese. As for inner motivations, the elevation and endurance of the Korean *Informel* should be approached less as merely the result of Western influence than as that of the complex interplay of local discourses and conjunctures. Motivations include a widespread dissatisfaction with the hegemonic power of Academic Realism, a search for a means of expression reflecting the existential anxiety related to war devastation, a ‘creative’ understanding of gestural abstraction as being inherently Oriental, and a sense of liberation from an ‘objective’ quality.

Korean artists were highly ambivalent toward the U.S. On the one hand, not unlike most Koreans, they appreciated ‘our greatest ally the U.S.’ When the Committee for Free Asia (CFA), a front organization of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, supplied Korean artists with brushes, canvas, and oil paints in 1953, leading painter Lee Ma-dong expressed his deepest gratitude, noting that this offering was “admirable and splendid.”²⁰ And yet such gratitude did not guarantee admiration for contemporary American art. Critic Lee Kyung-sung spoke of the low visibility of American art in his review of the USIS-sponsored exhibition “Eight American Artists.” He remarked that “it can be said that our artists have been indifferent to American art.”²¹ Despite growing awareness, Korean artists remained unfamiliar with this emerging art power. For their fascination with Europe did not end in the 1950s. In his 1953 letter to Korean architect Kim Jung-up, Kim Hwan-ki expressed his envy toward the former, who was then working at Le Corbusier’s office in Paris, by noting that “the art of today is centered on Europe; and the same is true of art education.”²² A more interesting example is provided by Kim Foon, the aforementioned ex-employee of the USIS in his reply to a question posed by a Korean magazine, “What would you do if you have a million dollars”: “My hope is to go to France.”²³ While the U.S. played an enormous role as a desirable model in various fields, that status was denied in the Korean art field at the very moment of America’s unrivaled presence.

Or we might say that the U.S. served as a model for Korean artists only in a limited sense; that is, only when the U.S. was the model of a successful follower rather than an ideal forerunner. In the above-mentioned review, Lee Kyung-sung wrote that “studying American art allows us to learn how it

reached the present status by taking quick steps along the course of art history.”²⁴ Having quickly gone through a chronological, stagist development, American art, for Lee, offered a viable model for catching up with the forerunners, which was the most crucial issue for a critic who saw Korean art as a (late-) late-latecomer.

A retrospective view of postwar Korean art seems to show that the presence of American art in the Korean art scene of the late 1950s was an exception. In the early 1960s practitioners of Korean *Informel* painting including Park Seo-bo would go to Paris, taking what can be called a European turn in terms of shifting their focus from the energetic gesture of vigorous brushstrokes to a semi-figurative, thickly-impastoed surface. A short-lived interest in American Neo-dada and Pop in the late 1960s soon gave way to the 70s’ monochrome wave, which was in no small part linked to Japanese art. The 1980s witnessed a widespread anti-American/Western disposition among Korean artists, who explored the potentials of traditional Korean visual practices. This narrative of a surprisingly low profile of American art in the post-war Korean art scene is a naive, limited one: American influences on the field of art education and theories of art have been enormous and profound. And yet it seems that the question of whether the U.S. won the ‘hearts and minds’ of Korean artists is yet to be answered.

- 1 On American influences on the Korean art scene in postcolonial Korea, see Youngna Kim, “Asian Culture in the 1950s: The American Cultural Influences in Japan and Korea”, *Asian Art in the 20th Century* (Seoul: National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, 2005), 129–13;; Youngna Kim, *20th Century Korean Art* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2005), 198–229; Moojeong Chung, *Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, and Modern Korean Art, 1945–1965* (PhD. Dissertation, The City University of New York, 2000). On U.S. cultural policy toward Korea, Charles K. Armstrong, “The Cultural Cold War in Korea, 1945–1950”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (February 2003), 71–99.
- 2 See Kim Chaewon, *Gyeongbokgung Story* (Seoul: Tamgudang, 1990)
- 3 On these art museums during the colonial period, see Mok Soohyun, “The Exhibition Space in Gyeongseong during the 1930s,” *Journal of Korean Modern & Contemporary Art History* 20 (2009), 97–116 (in Korean).
- 4 Lee Quede, “The Art Scene Running out of Steam”, *Minseong* (August 1949) (in Korean).
- 5 See “Declaration for the Establishment of the Chosun

- Arts Academy”, RG 332, Box 64 (NARA), 62–63.
- 6 On the establishment of fine arts department at Seoul National University, see Kim Hyungsook, “The Proposal for Seoul National University and the College of Fine Arts,” *Form_Archives 2* (2010) (in Korean)
- 7 “Preliminary Notes on Status of Arts and Monuments, Korea,” RG 332, Box 64 (NARA), 49–50.
- 8 Warren A. Gilbertson, “Brief Discussion with Recommendations Regarding Arts and Handcrafts.” Report to Dr. Horace H. Underwood, Advisor, Department of Education, July 1, 1947, RG 332, Box 64 (NARA), 79.
- 9 Warren A. Gilbertson, *Ibid.*, 79.
- 10 See Choi Yeol, *The History of Korean Modern Art* (Seoul: Yeolhwadang, 2006) (in Korean). On the field of Korean literature in the ‘liberation space’, see Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom’s Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
- 11 Lee Gu-yeol, “The eruption of passion and ideas for the creation of new national art,” *Culture and Art* (September and October, 1988), 22–31 (in Korean).
- 12 Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 74.
- 13 See An Jini, “The Cultural Policies and Visual Culture under USAMGIK, 1945–1948,” MA theses, Seoul National University, 2006 (in Korean).
- 14 Kim Foon and Kwon Haengga, *Oral History Project of Samsung Foundation of Culture: Kim Foon, 1924-* (Samsung Museum of Art, 2006), 46–48 (in Korean).
- 15 On the OCI or USIS as a cultural institution, see Youngna Kim, “Asian Culture in the 1950s: The American Cultural Influences in Japan and Korea”, 136; Moojeong Chung, *Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, and Modern Korean Art, 1945–1965*, 145–148.
- 16 On art and design as a ‘Soft Power’ in the cold war regime, see Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the home front: the soft power of midcentury design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 17 See chapter IV of Moojeong Chung’s dissertation, 111–184.
- 18 Pang Guntaek, “The beginning of Korean Contemporary Art: a critical recollection of the art world,” *Art World* (February 1991), 116–123 (in Korean).
- 19 See Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1–11.
- 20 Lee Madong, “Constant Efforts” *Sincheonji* (January 1954), 113 (in Korean).
- 21 Lee Kyungsung, “The Meaning of Contemporary American Art,” *Donga Inbo*, April 17, 1957 (in Korean)
- 22 Kim Hwanki, “Letter to Paris: To Jungup,” *Sincheonji* (June 1953), 260 (in Korean).
- 23 Kim Foon, “If you have a million dollars,” *Hope* (July 1955) (In Korean)
- 24 Lee Kyungsung, *op. cit.*



Fig 1. The Japanese Government General Museum in Gyeongbokgung palace



Fig 2. Seokjojeon in the Deoksugung palace where the U.S.-Soviet Union Joint Commission took place in 1946-7



Fig 3. The Japanese General Government Art Museum in Gyeongbokgung palace, ca. 1945

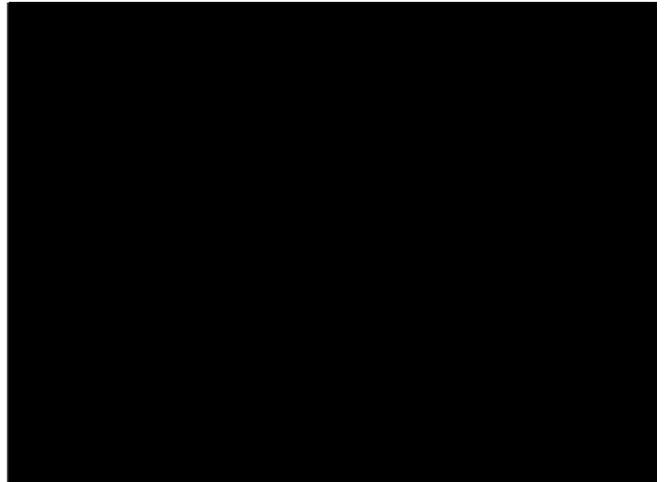


Fig 4. A view of the OCI U.S. information center in Seoul, taken in 1948

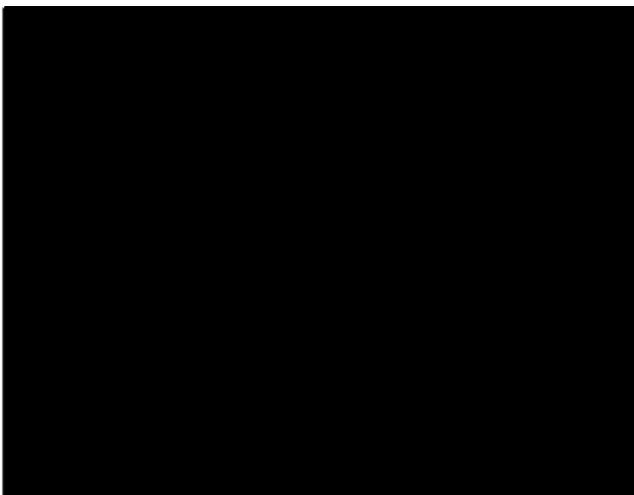


Fig 5. Art section of the USIS making visuals, 1949

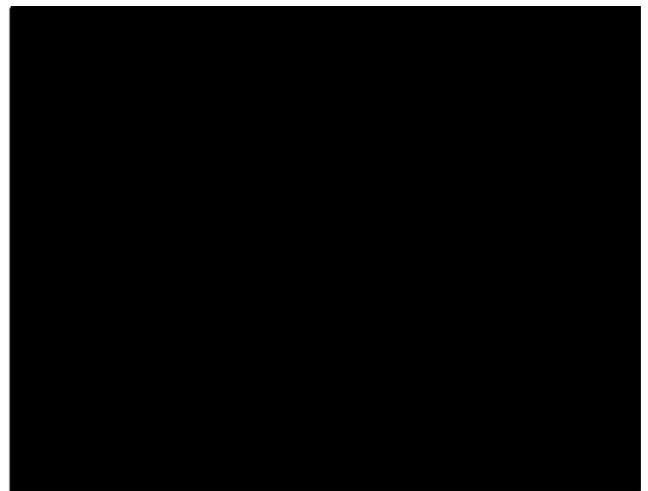


Fig 6. A group of Korean reading the poster about elections, May 1946



Fig 7. Information media distributed by the USIS

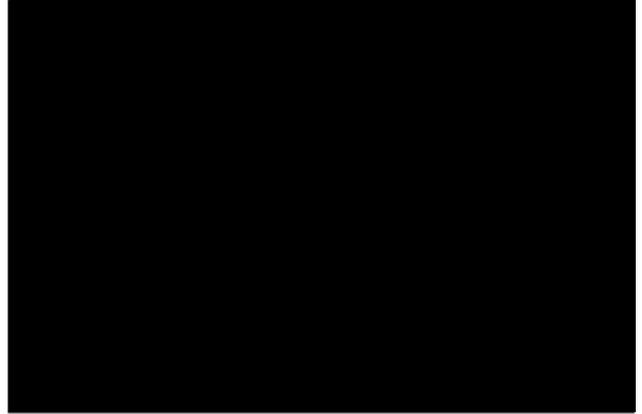


Fig 8. USIS library in Seoul, ca. 1953

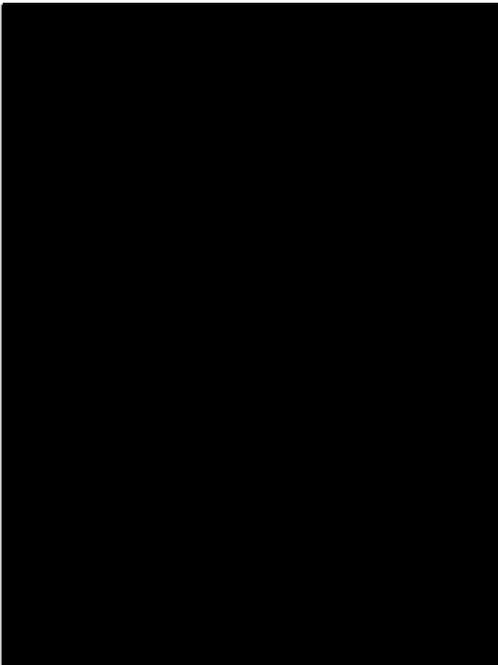


Fig 9. Poster of the Family of Man exhibition in Seoul, 1957

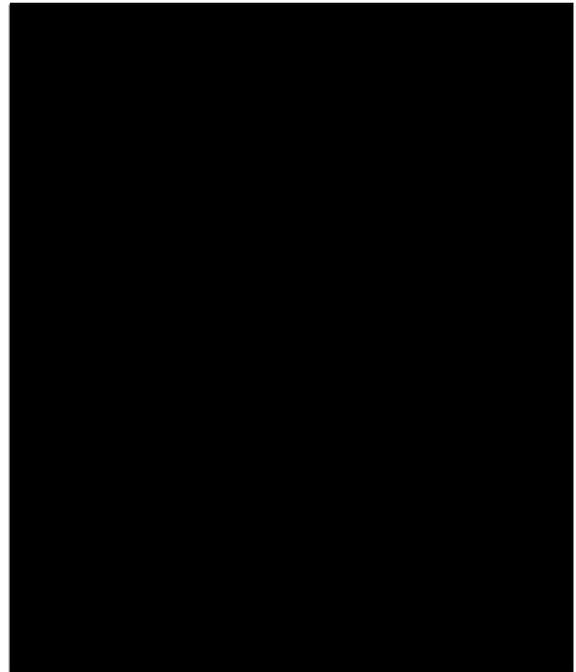


Fig 10. Park Seo-bo, No. 1, 95x82cm, Oil on canvas, ca. 1957