

Rare panoramic view of North Korean art scene – Asia Times book review

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Enigmatic North Korea gives up its cultural secrets in a new book, *Exploring North Korean Arts*.

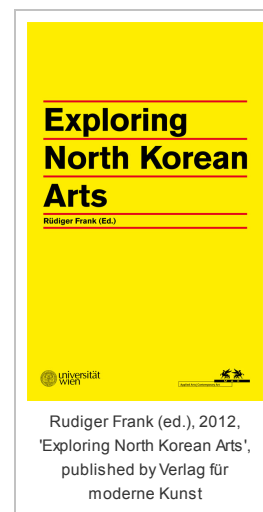
Asia Times Online journalist Michael Rank reviewed a book by renowned scholars of North Korean arts and culture. According to Rank, it offers original research and rare perspectives on visual arts of a nation with culture as closely-guarded as a state secret.

Click here to [read the full article by Michael Rank on Asia Times Online](#), published 16 June 2012.

First published September 2011, *Exploring North Korean Arts* is richly illustrated and delivers a comprehensive study of a broad range of visual arts in the region. The book provides both historical and contemporary context of art coming out of a nation suffering, as Rank puts it, "...a suffocating, trinitarian personality cult and enveloping secrecy."

Exploring examines a wide array of artistic output in context of North Korean life, and looks at contemporary art, music, literature as well as more every-day items such as stamps. The book's editor, Rudiger Frank, provides an overview of the contents and introduces the key debate of the text: How is it possible to discuss art in a country where "state-kitsch" prevails, an art bent on imitating art history, art movements or other cultures?

Thirteen essays in all, each is composed by an expert in some facet of North Korean culture ranging from art to politics and includes in-depth analysis of creative expression in a military state. Each author has direct experience of the region. For example, Dr. Koen de Ceuster, area expert from Leiden University and frequent visitor to North Korea, gives the reader a view of what it is like to be an artist there. Meanwhile, art historian Frank Hoffmann offers a rare account of objects destroyed or censored from art history altogether by the military regime.





Ri Sok Nam, 'Blauer Himmel: The Blue Sky Over My Country', 2005, in 'Flowers for Kim Il Sung', at Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria

Both this book and international symposium of the same name (held at the **University of Vienna, Austria, September 3-4 2010**) followed on from the exhibition entitled "**Flowers for Kim Il Sung**", hosted by Austrian Museum of Applied Arts [MAK] in Vienna, 19 May through 5 September 2010. 130 works never seen before outside of North Korea demonstrated the first opportunity of its kind to "...examine the idealising art of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which is hardly known at all," Dr. de Ceuster said of the exhibit.

Though ***Exploring North Korean Arts*** covers a lot of ground, Rank's single criticism is that there is no mention of North Korean film; this for him is an unusual gap considering the high impact of film on culture. Nonetheless, he concludes that the book is "outstandingly well informed and original ... essential reading for anyone interested in the arts in North Korea and their political and historical context."

The complete list of book contributors is as follows: Koen de Ceuster, Aidan Foster-Carter, Keith Howard, Sonja Haeussler, Marsha Hauffler, Kate Hext, James E Hoare, Frank Hoffmann, Keith Howard, Ross King, Brian Myers, Jane Portal, Dafna Zur; and Rudiger Frank (editor).

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