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Mansudae Art Studio may be the world's biggest art factory. Its 4,000 workers churn out North Korean propaganda, but they're also available for hire

Turns out North
Korea does
have a growing
industry: Colossal
monuments.
By Caroline Winter



The Dear, Glorious North Korean Statue Factory

In November 2005, two Germans flew to North Korea on official business. Their goal was not to discuss nuclear disarmament or diplomatic relations. Rather, they went to check on the progress of a sculptural commission: the reconstruction of Frankfurt's so-called Fairy Tale Fountain, an art nouveau relic from 1910 that had been melted down for its metal during World War II.

Blueprints for the original Fairy Tale Fountain had gone missing, and the City of Frankfurt needed sculptors who could work from old photographs to re-create the naked beauty gazing down on an array of cherubic children and enormous waterspewing reptiles and fish. For this intricate job, the Germans had turned to Pyongyang's Mansudae Art Studio.

Perhaps the world's biggest art factory, Mansudae employs roughly 4,000 North Koreans, including some 1,000 artists, hand-picked from the country's best academies. These favored few are the only artists officially sanctioned to portray the Kim family dynasty, and their primary task is to churn out propaganda paintings, murals, posters, billboards, and Soviet-style monuments deifying the country's Great, Dear, and Supreme Leaders, also known as Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un. But Mansudae does more than just set the stage for North Korea's self-celebration. The studio also runs a thriving multimillion-dollar side business: building statues, monuments, museums, sports stadiums, and at least one palace, for a long list of countries across the world, many of them in Africa.

Klaus Klemp, deputy director of Frankfurt's Museum of Applied Art, discovered Mansudae back in 2004 and was impressed enough by the craftsmanship to convince Frankfurt officials to hire the atelier. "It was a purely technical decision," he says. "The top tier artists in Germany simply don't make realist work anymore. North Koreans on the other hand haven't experienced the long evolution of modern art; they are kind of stuck in the early 1900s, which is exactly when this fountain was made." North Korea's price tag for reconstructing the ornate bronze fountain was also attractive: €200,000, including shipping and handling.

In Pyongyang, Ministry of Culture officials escorted Klemp and his colleague, Philipp Sturm, to an expansive, well-lit factory space

hung with banners touting slogans like, "When the Party Gives Orders, We Execute!" and "Self-Sustenance Is the Only Path To Survival!" There, a full-size plaster model of the German fountain stood among other works-in-progress, including a 25-foot-tall white marble statue of North Korea's first leader, and a smaller statue of three revolutionary heroes, one of them brandishing an enormous flag.

The quality of the work was impeccable, but the Germans did have one complaint: Their art nouveau fountain had been rendered with a slightly hard, angular communist touch. "The woman had kind of a cement block hairdo," recalls Sturm. "It wasn't anything that couldn't be fixed. We explained to the head sculptor that the socialist realist style wasn't really in vogue in Frankfurt at the moment. He was very receptive and softened the look accordingly."

Mansudae Art Studio first expanded its repertoire to serve the interests of foreign countries in the 1970s, launching an international branch called Mansudae Overseas Project Group of Companies. Since then it has earned millions of dollars on projects built for countries including Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Benin, Cambodia, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Malaysia, Mozambique, Madagascar, Namibia, Senegal, Syria, Togo, and Zimbabwe, according to Curtis Melvin, a researcher at the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University. North Korean officials and Mansudae Art Studio did not respond to requests for comment sent via e-mail and faxed to North Korean embassies in several countries.

"They seem to have developed a small cottage industry," says Marcus Noland, an expert on North Korea and director of studies at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. "The North Koreans are desperate for money, and my guess is that at some point they figured out that essentially exporting their capacity to make glorious monuments to great leaders was something they could do to both win friends and possibly influence people, but also possibly make money."

Founded in 1959, six years after the Korean War, Mansudae has long defined—or at least produced—North Korea's aesthetic. The impoverished country, in which 28 percent of children under 5 suffer from malnutrition, according to the United Nations, spends much



Fairy Tale Fountain, Germany
Frankfurt in 2005 hired Mansudae Art Studio to recreate an ornate fountain destroyed during World War II. Total cost: €200,000



The Great and Dear Leaders on Horseback
Mansudae has earned millions exporting its statue and monument building expertise around the world

N. Korea



Kim Il Sung Statue

The art factory has created several statues of African leaders that look suspiciously similar to this 66-foot-tall North Korean shrine



Monument to the Founding of the Korean Workers Party

This 164-foot-tall monolith depicts the hands of a worker, a farmer, and an intellectual clutching a hammer, a sickle, and a calligraphy brush





Only Mansudae Art Studio's artists are sanctioned to portray the Kim dynasty

of its budget on Kim family deification. According to a recent statement by North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly, "44.8 percent of the total state budgetary expenditure for the economic development and improvement of people's living standard was used for funding the building of edifices to be presented to the 100th birth anniversary of President Kim Il Sung." Much of this money likely funds Mansudae, which designs everything from the tiny "Kim pins" that North Koreans wear on their lapels to shrines like the 164-foot-tall Monument to the Founding of the Korean Workers Party—three truck-size fists raising high a hammer, a sickle, and a calligraphy brush.

Germany is the only Western democracy to have hired Mansudae's art army, and it did so before North Korea further sank into isolation by launching the country's first nuclear and missile tests in 2006. "There's no question that North Korea was a criminal country, even then," says Klemp, but Germany at the time hoped a policy of rapprochement might help the Hermit Kingdom embark on a better, more humanitarian path. "It would be very difficult to hire them today," Klemp says.

Even so, the Pyongyang art factory does not lack for customers. Senegal's African Renaissance Monument, unveiled

just outside Dakar in 2010, is among Mansudae's most notable works. At 164 feet, it stands taller than the Statue of Liberty and Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer. A plaque at its base puts the cost of the monument at \$25 million, although foreign government officials say the work of around 150 North Korean artists and laborers cost closer to \$70 million, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. The bronze statue depicts an African family idealized à la socialist realism, with the barrel-chested father, mid-stride, holding a young child who points out across the Atlantic Ocean. (Socialist realism, not to be confused with social realism, is a style developed in the Soviet Union to portray a luminous communist future.) The monument is intended to represent "Africa emerging from darkness, from five centuries of slavery and two centuries of colonialism," Abdoulaye Wade, Senegal's former president, told the *Journal* after the unveiling. "Only the North Koreans could build my statue," he said, adding, "I had no money."

Senegal's unions protested Wade's decision to import foreign labor at a time when the country's unemployment was estimated at nearly 50 percent, and many were offended by the statue's mother figure. Chosen to represent Senegal's majority Muslim population, she's clad in a barely-there wisp of fabric. Senegal's Wade, meanwhile, was horrified when the faces of his African Renaissance family came out looking Korean—a recurring problem with Mansudae's international installations. He insisted they be redone. "It had to have African heads, not Asian!" said Wade at the time.

Mansudae's work was also criticized in Botswana. In 2004 the art factory won a \$1.1 million contract to design and build statues of three storied tribal chiefs, according to *ArtAsiaPacific* magazine. Local artists protested that they were priced out of the bidding and complained that North Korea's socialist realist style has no connection with indigenous African culture. Then, in 2010, outrage spread in Zimbabwe when the country contracted Mansudae to build two statues of its former vice president, Joshua Mqabuko Nyongolo Nkomo. Not surprisingly, the move was seen as an affront to those who say thousands of Zimbabweans were raped and massacred in the 1980s



King Béhanzin, Benin

North Korea has built glorifying statues of leaders in countries such as Benin, Botswana, Congo, and Zimbabwe, as well as museums, sports stadiums, and at least one presidential palace



Peace Monument, Angola

This monument, commissioned in 2009 and made from copper and iron, is just under 100-feet-tall

Heroes Acre, Namibia

This Mansudae-built memorial covers roughly 1,800 acres and houses 174 graves. It spotlights a white obelisk and this statue of an unknown soldier

African Renaissance Monument, Senegal

Unveiled in 2010, this monument is taller than the Statue of Liberty. The faces had to be redone because Mansudae's sculptors originally made them look too Korean. Total cost: Upward of \$25 million

Africa



by government troops who had received training from North Korea. One of the statues was decommissioned after its completion when former vice president Nkomo's family objected that they "did not find the statue to be in [the] likeness of the man known as Father Zimbabwe," writes *ArtAsiaPacific*. (The statue was later re-erected.) People in several other African countries have complained about their leaders wasting state funds on self-promotional statues.

Namibia, among Mansudae's best repeat customers, has hired Pyongyang to design and build four large-scale projects since 2000: a military museum; an independence museum; the Heroes Acre memorial in Windhoek, which features a white marble obelisk and an unknown soldier clutching a grenade and an AK-47; and the new Namibian State House, a boxy, corporate-looking complex that features life-size statues of native animals. Later this year, North Korea will also unveil the Grand Panorama Museum in Siem Reap near Cambodia's ancient Angkor Wat temple complex. According to Kyodo News International, Mansudae is not only building the museum but also producing images of Cambodian war scenes from the 12th and 13th centuries and creating 3D computer-generated simulations of ancient Cambodian monuments.

The art factory's Italian liaison, Pier Luigi Cecioni, a former orchestra president, met Mansudae officials on a trip to North Korea in 2005 and now facilitates the studio's international sales of paintings, prints, and smaller works. "Essentially the Mansudae Art Studio has the competence and experience to realize such huge projects and it can send large teams of artists and workers to foreign countries for a long time, something very few institutions, if any, are able to do," he wrote via e-mail. "For compensation, typically of several million dollars, probably there are agreements between governments.... The studio has the status of a ministry: It is not subject to the Ministry of Culture."

Mansudae Art Studio occupies 30 acres in Pyongyang, roughly the equivalent of 22 football fields. Stern portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il adorn the massive atelier's entrance gates. Inside, hundreds of studios are housed within Soviet-style concrete-slab buildings. Random statues litter the grounds, including a soccer player, mid scissor-kick, and a cartoonish piglet carrying a tray of food and drink. "I grew up in East Germany, and the Mansudae Art Studio reminded me a lot of the shabby industrial buildings we had back then," says Sturm, who toured the grounds during his Fairy Tale Fountain visit and shared his personal photos with *Bloomberg Businessweek*. "There were a lot of workers sitting around outside on tree stumps, and they didn't really seem to have much to do."

The massive atelier is organized into 13 creative groups, seven factories, and more than 50 supply departments where paints are mixed and materials tested, according to the German business publication *Brand Eins*. The art factory also operates its own paper mill,

soccer stadium, kindergarten, sauna, medical clinic, and gift shop. International business is conducted in a plush room decorated with gold-framed paintings, a flat-screen television, and black synthetic-leather couches. Sturm describes it as "nouveau riche; impressive, but also a bit strange."

Most Mansudae paintings, drawings, prints, and statues are of a uniform style and depict a pastel world filled with paternalistic leaders, rosy-cheeked children, loving mothers, vibrant nature scenes, and patriotic heroes. But the classically trained artists are good enough to create all manner of realist art. Klemp was surprised to find that Mansudae's artists produce kitschy knock-offs of several foreign genres, including Dutch landscapes and Parisian city scenes, which according to several experts, likely get sold abroad. "If you're standing on the Seine and you buy a painting from one of those stands, there's a good chance it was made in North Korea," says Klemp. "I can't imagine that those artworks are sold locally."

Preliminary work for Mansudae's international-statue and monument-building business is also done on-site, often by sculptors who have spent little time abroad. Before building Senegal's African Renaissance Monument, for example, Mansudae's artists constructed a 33-foot mock-up and tested the design to make sure it could survive natural disasters like earthquakes, storms, and bolts of lightning, according to *Brand Eins*. "Apparently we have no competition worldwide," one sculptor told the German publication.

As with so much regarding North Korea, it's impossible to know how exactly Mansudae is run and who profits from its international sales. Michael Madden, who edits the North Korea Leadership Watch blog and has written profiles of more than 200 North Korean organizations and individuals, says the firm is likely helmed, at least in part, by the late dictator Kim Jong Il's enterprising younger sister Kim Kyong Hui, who also owns a string of snack bars and restaurants in Pyongyang and has a hand in running various North Korean eateries abroad in countries such as Bangladesh and Cambodia. "I'm 95 percent sure, unless something has changed in the past five months," he says, citing sources in North Korea, as well as documents showing Kim Kyong Hui's presence at various company functions and an essay she wrote for a government publication about the "Merited Sculpture Production Company."

According to African and Cambodian press accounts, Mansudae workers sent abroad live regimented lives under surveillance. Noland of the Peterson Institute suspects they are treated no differently than North Koreans who labor overseas in logging camps and garment factories. "They're living in a dormitory where there is a party secretary and there's security, there are thugs there to keep them in line," he says.

Despite such controls, foreign posts are considered plum positions, and many North Koreans pay bribes for the chance to leave their country and earn better wages. "These people are reliably fed, they have a food supply, and the money that they make, while it's something we would sniff at—it's good," says Madden. To land such a position, workers must be politically reliable and typically have immediate family members under the thumb of authorities back home, making them low flight risks.

Frankfurt's Fairy Tale Fountain was completed entirely in North Korea, and went off without a hitch. The Germans took precautions early on to supply Mansudae's sculptors with photos of European children, so the sculptures "wouldn't end up looking too Korean," says Klemp. "We knew that could be a problem, but so did they." Once complete, the fountain got shipped from China to Hamburg, and then trucked to Frankfurt where it was installed. "We were all really pleased with the work," says Klemp. "Everything was done on time, and everyone we worked with was exceptionally professional and personable... for me, the most interesting part was how normal it all was." **E**



A work in progress in one of the studios at Mansudae's massive Pyongyang complex