

## Extending the Boundaries of Tradition: The Art of Shi Mo

The first thing that strikes a Western eye when viewing the paintings of Shi Mo is that he is indisputably and unmistakably a Chinese artist, working in the grand tradition of his nation, a tradition that stretches far back into dim antiquity. No-one but a Chinese painter could take such pains to bring out the inward essence of objects in nature, or show human figures in such serene stillness, or deploy empty, unmarked surfaces to such effect.

Yet while Shi Mo works in the great tradition of Chinese art, he strives to extend the boundaries of that tradition by means of new insights and techniques. His attitude to the past masters of his art echoes the admonition of one of the greatest of those masters, the Qing Dynasty painter Shi Tao (1642-1718), whom Shi Mo reveres: “To learn from me is to live; to imitate me is to die.” It is the artist’s duty, taught Shi Tao, once he has mastered the fundamentals of technique, to venture out boldly in new directions, creating a style that expresses his own individual and unique perception of the world.

Shi Mo has followed those precepts, developing his own very distinctive modern style of ink painting. Most striking to a Western eye is his imaginative use of color, especially when painting nature. Here we see the inspiration of Chang Dai-chien (also written “Zhang Daqian,” 1899-1983), one of the greatest Chinese artists of the last century, and originator of the “splashed ink / splashed color” technique, inspired in part by the European Impressionists.

Shi Mo’s own technique represents a further advance in the freedom of coloration pioneered by Chang Dai-chien. He calls it the “accumulated ink” (*ji-mo*) method — a way of repeatedly applying ink, color, and water to the paper surface to form suggestive natural-looking shapes and contours which yet hover on the verge of the abstract.

The technique is shown to best advantage in his lotus paintings, which I believe will one day be as well known and as instantly recognized as Xu Beihong’s horses or Qi Baishi’s prawns. Particularly effective are those works in which massy “accumulated ink” regions of greens and blues predominate, yet lead the eye effortlessly to a peeping blossom, a watchful kingfisher, or darting minnows.

The lotus paintings hint at the spirituality that infuses Shi Mo’s work. The connection is not an obvious one to Western sensibilities; but the lotus, a beautiful flower that comes up from out of mud, has long been taken by Chinese poets, painters, and thinkers — most notably the 11th-century philosopher Zhou Dunyi, who wrote a famous essay on this topic — as symbolic of the emergence of an enlightened being from the dirt, chaos and illusion of the human world. The very formlessness of the “accumulated ink” regions helps the analogy along, heightening the purity and perfection of the blossoms.

The more directly human aspect of Shi Mo’s spiritual interests can be seen in his paintings of the 6th-century Buddhist monk Da Mo, and in his interest in Tibetan scenes and figures. The technique here is more sparing of ink and color, reverting sometimes to a few lines sketched in black. See, for example, the 1994 “Portrait of Da Mo” — I think it is my favorite of all those

paintings of Shi Mo's I have seen — in which a scattering of light brush strokes suffices to give us the monk's face, beard, and robes, while yet, by their very minimalism, suggesting the dissolution to which he aspires. This is work of great power and insight.

In Summer of 2004, Shi Mo traveled in Tibet, and was inspired by the strange and beautiful scenery of that place. This trip resulted in a series of pictures titled "Heavenly Lakes in the Land of Snows," in which a restrained use of color and a skillful control of empty space (giving us, for example, an entire lake without a single brushstroke!) convey the artist's awe at the scale and serenity of his surroundings. Here again we are engaged with key elements of the great Chinese artistic tradition: man's place in nature, and the search for an inner harmony to match that presented to our eyes by nature's great spectacles.

Shi Mo is a boldly innovative artist with his feet planted firmly in the grand traditions of Chinese art, thought, and spirituality. For those of us in the West who are just beginning to understand those traditions, and to find aesthetic delight in their productions, Shi Mo offers welcome reassurance that Chinese art is vigorous and thriving in this new century, ready and willing to explore new subjects and techniques, eager to thrill, astonish, and move us, while yet never losing sight of the soil from which it first grew. I welcome Shi Mo to America; I look forward with great interest to following his future artistic development.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Derbyshire". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.

John Derbyshire  
Huntington, NY  
September 2004

John Derbyshire is a novelist, critic and commentator, and columnist for the National Review magazine. He has a longstanding interest in Chinese culture and history, has lived, worked, and traveled extensively in China, and often writes on China for U.S. and British publications.