

Shan Fan's World of Bamboo

I.

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That Gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, wayworn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home,
To the glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome.
(Edgar Allan Poe, *To Helen*)

This popular poem suggests a Western literati's desire to return to his spiritual home which, naturally, is either ancient Greece or ancient Rome. Greece, as it is known in our so-called language, necessarily holds this layer of meaning. This is because ancient Greece remains as the fount of Western science and art.

Almost 1,000 years ago, in the hurly-burly of one's literary endeavors and official career, one's heart was often unable to vanquish a certain sense of ennui and anomie, and the following poem encapsulates this sense of depression on the part of an official, Wen Tong (1018-1079), in a spontaneous outpouring:

Westbrook, my old home, is ringed with tall bamboo stands,
Thousand of stalks abound where water soaks the sands.
I've accomplished nothing in my official place,
I should just go back to my old home in disgrace.
Composed While Thinking of Bamboo in My Old Home
Wen Tong (1018-1079, Song Dynasty)

The meaning of this poem is that we can use the concept of our spiritual home to seek resolution of our psychological distress. Mr. Xu Jiang once bestowed a short poem on Mr. Shan Fan, which likewise addresses the concept of home. The poem is pure and simple and brims with affection, together with the poetic spirit that courses through the heart of Wen Tong's writing. It also reveals and explains the profound significance of Mr. Shan Fan's paintings. Mr. Xu Jiang titled it: *Shan Fan: Painting the Moment and Painting Slowness*, and it appears in the foreword to a volume of his paintings. Amiable in tone and free-flowing, the poem reads:

Bamboo is not just a childhood memory,
Not just each day's glory in my window view,
In my wandering life yet the more is bamboo,
A portable home that I carry with me.

Bamboo is neither a grass nor a tree, yet it lives for all that, and over many, many years it has offered a symbol of identity and status for and a spiritual home to Chinese intellectuals. Even when they depart their homeland to a distance of thousands of leagues, they may not discard their close bond with bamboo. It is probably just that its modesty and its close proximity to their very natures – neither glorious nor mean – which is the reason it seems to resonate with such meaning.

Mr. Shan Fan, however, has long been active in the European art scene, where bamboo is an obvious rarity. And yet he could not distance himself from it, so he diligently painted it for his own pleasure, just as the old masters did. In the process, he inadvertently created a unique world of bamboo.

II.

The Detailed Guide to Bamboo by Li Kan (1245-1320) states, in summary of our forebears' creation of bamboo drawings:

“Bamboo ink drawings first arose during the Tang period, but their derivation remains obscure. Of old it was said that Li Shi who lived during the Five Dynasties [907-960 AD] traced shadows on window shades, and that the public then started to imitate this [technique]. Huang Tingjuan (1045-1105) suspects that it all started with Wu Daozi (ca.680-759). Up until the Song Dynasty, authors were prolific, and culminated in Wen Tong (1018-1079), whose artistic talent was as bright as the sun coming out that extinguishes all lesser lights, just as a brass bell makes a louder sound than a clay bowl, and his art was as majestic as Su Shi (1036-1101), of whom all the world wanted to know the secret of his art, but had no way to find it out.”

Li Kan lavishes praise on Wen Tong; his ink bamboo drawings are classical works. His regimen is also ink bamboo founded on classical rules. Su Shi (1036-1101) gave a description of bamboo's essence, explaining:

When a bamboo shoot is born, it starts as a one inch sprout, but already the leaf segments are all in place. It is like a cicada emerging from its shell and, like a snake, forms its scales as it grows, until it is as long as a sword drawn from its scabbard to a length of eight rods, replete in one sweeping act of generation. Is the style nowadays whereby painters still create it segment by segment, and then add the flourish of foliage leaf-by-leaf, really enough to recreate an entire living bamboo? For bamboo ink drawings, you must rather first imprint the image of a whole bamboo in your heart; grasp the brush only when you have gone and fully observed, then observe the bamboo stem you wish to depict, then draw yours to make it rise in the same rapid way, move your hand so as to draw it in one uninterrupted breath, so as to capture what you have observed, as the stooping falcon grasps the opportunity when the rabbit leaps to seize it. This is the essence of what Wen Tong teaches.

Generally speaking, there are at least two layers of meaning here worthy of thorough study. And that first and foremost entails fixing the image of a bamboo in your heart, then following this up with your moving brush, while keeping in mind that this is primarily calligraphy, not painting. Shan Fan's bamboo ink drawings clearly abide by these permissible literary rules. The bamboos he depicts do not crowd into a dense bamboo forest, and there is also no hazy mist or cloud. Even stone motifs are eschewed and, apart from a pair of bamboo stems, there are virtually no extraneous objects at all. Bamboo becomes simple to the point where it is no longer even simple any more. Nearly all compositions are done in one sweeping flourish, in one breath, the execution of each bamboo fixed in the heart producing a counterfoil specimen, as is proper. Each bamboo stem is created by wielding the brush, apparently unthinkingly, so that the bamboo seems to leap out from the paper. What people find surprising is the ideal of fixing the bamboo in the heart and that one naturally tends to use the same brush style with a similar scheme and that, by so using an ordinary brush with only a few variations, one can produce infinite permutations from such a sparsity of scene and aspect, and thereby nonetheless truly get in touch with the dim, remote depths of Nature.

Shan Fan has certainly spent a long period using the same brush style to draw bamboo, and his technique thus appears as a consummate skill subject to daily cultivation, incessantly, day in day out, as if he never tires of it. This seems to help him master the knack: putting brush to paper as desired guides the intended separation of the empty top of the paper, but there is a space for everything, seemingly as if to ensure the preordained harmony (*harmonia praestabilita*), which is the key to the mystery of how he creates works in a moment. Or as Western scholars would say, this is the key to his principle of composition.

This concept of composition, as the amalgamation of discrete components, had its advent in the West in the 15th century with *De Pictura* by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), and thereafter assumed ever clearer significance. In the early 17th century, Johann Heinrich Fussli (1741-1825) declaimed in a lecture that:

Composition, in its stricter sense, is the dresser of Invention it superintends the disposition of its materials. Composition has physical and moral elements: those are Perspective and Light with shade; these, Unity, Propriety and Perspicuity; without Unity it cannot span its subject; without Propriety it cannot tell the story; without Perspicuity it clouds the fact with confusions; destitute of light and shade it misses the effect, and heedless of perspective it cannot find a place.

Obviously, this primarily relates to Western narrative painting [Istoria], and can only with difficulty be reconciled with Chinese literati works, and especially ink drawings. Accordingly, let us consult an ancient Chinese discourse on the subject:

For a bamboo ink drawing's layout, the four elements are stems, segments, stalks and leaves; this is dictated by the rules, and neglect of them will end in inability to produce a consummated work. The moistened ink has depth and shallowness, brush strokes have weight and lightness and go back and forth knowing just where to go, there is concentration and dilution, you must perceive the bamboo both flourishing and withering; its growth of shoots and spreading leaves must coordinate with one another. Huang Tingjian (1045-1105) said: "The shooting stalks must not overwhelm the segments; falling leaves must pass into eternity. Each brush stroke must express sense, and every facet reflect Nature. With the four sides uniting, stalks and leaves must come to life. This is the way to create bamboo."

Adopting this kind of position of non-ocular composition to look at Shan Fan's paintings anew probably thus renders them easier to understand. Yet how does the so-called bamboo fixed in one's heart encompass the sprouting of the stem, generation of stalks, production of segments and opening of leaves, each of which is presented on the paper: wind, clearing skies, rain, dew, each of which has its own aspect. Face the facade, back off, close up, face upward: each has its own setting. But turn to the side and lower and then raise the head and see that each also has meaning and significance of its own.

This kind of aspect, situation, meaning and sense is most classically embodied in a shoot emerging in one of Shan Fan's drawings. This is indeed the pivot of the hub that spawns the infinite variations in bamboo ink drawing, and thus also includes many items: the areas of leaf generation, known as clove heads; points of convergence, known as bird's claws; straight stems, known as needle sections; the addition of external drawings, known as stacking; drawing out from within, known as bursting forth. Shan Fan creates continuous meaning with these items; everywhere is alive and vigorous, and the graceful, smooth portions refresh with their exquisite air. This is a true foray among the rules, as free and easy as the blowing dust, as the body and the bamboo unite and become one.

Needless to state, these superlative, heavenly-crafted creations all employ a calligraphic brush style, which creates the entirety stroke-by-stroke. Literati painters assert that they shun the painting style the most, as dictated by the theory of Wang Shigu (1632-1717) who advises: "Use only character strokes to create a work." Wang Xuehao (1754-1832) upon hearing these words very early on, declared at once with pathos: "This statement is most pertinent; characters are written, not drawn. Likewise with painting, if one starts drawing, then this becomes mere vulgar artisanship." With the bamboo Shan Fan depicts, every stem is straight, with the circles regular at both ends and the ink tones even as the ink stops absorbing, and with no propensity towards the iniquity of using bloated lines. Spreading leaves fall from his brush forcefully, with firm and light pressures occurring in one sweep. Areas of emphasis are not bulbous; areas of detail are not willowy: it is neither less nor more. Shan Fan is gifted enough to draw lonely leaves - something rarely done by our forebears - with immaculate brushstrokes and profound meaning bound in with the force of their application. It seems that this is the more natural creation of the great original invention than an artist's original approach, but this causes us to forget that this is in fact an artist's original creation. Artists' esthetic sensibility arises through traditional training, but this nevertheless comes into such intimate contact with the creative force of Nature that it causes us to feel at times that the artistic impulse indeed holds the power to impose its own rules on Nature in a collusive act of co-creation.

If artists humbly acknowledge that this is a power bestowed by tradition, then Shan Fan must harbor an even greater sense of gratitude, cognizant as he must be that tradition is not just a set of tacit rules. Tradition has further led Shan Fan's pen to afford him greater coherence and grace, and to grant him the enjoyment of greater freedom amid restraint. When he compiles his bamboo inks using this "composition" method, we suddenly discover that these in actuality harken back to their pedigree of traditional bamboo, since they resemble those works by the great masters in history, such as Li Kan, Ke Jiusi (1290-1343) and Wu Zhen (1280-1354), who outlined the concepts of bamboo composition. They personified the pursuit of the man of

letters studying natural phenomena in order to determine a set of rules. But Shan Fan's bamboo compositions are not traditional scroll-type at all, and also are not albums available for reading, but rather encompass contemporary art suitable for exhibition in large halls. Simply stated, this is a type of new-style bamboo composition, one wherein he transforms these poeticized small bamboo ink works into those giant structures emphasizing philosophical theorization. Particularly noteworthy is that, notwithstanding Mr. Shan Fan's long sojourn in exotic occidental realms, his sublime esthetic sensibility still lofts him up to dizzying heights, and it has suffered from no taint of modern philosophy. These works, although exhibited in museums of modern art, yet remain redolent of and still yearn for the flavor of a classical mold. His seemingly Western composition method is really nothing but an implied coincidence; he sets the layout into a naturally separating and reuniting whole, through his desired movements, thereby narrating the inter-relationships between the rhythms of life. Although he pays deference to the so-called "butterfly effect" enshrined in chaos theory, this seems to be really naught but a pact with the Devil, since he undoubtedly derives even greater sustenance from the classical Chinese tradition. In *Sculpting the Dragon with a Literary Mind*, the *Hidden and Revealed* Chapter states:

The system of rules is hidden; righteousness derives from outside the text. You must grasp hidden meanings: literary talent grows in the dark. The Eight Trigrams, each with their six *yao*, are always in flux. A treasure hoard lurks hidden in the river. The *yao* shift the matrix, turning into the four forms. Treasure lies sunken beneath the water, but the wave betrays its outline.

An elegant exposition of this kind by such dazzling literary talent always imparts to an artist stylistic rules and scintillating brightness and beauty, but it further animates his execution of a work, so as to afford people material for 10 days' reflection after just one view of the layout of a composition. Mr. Shan Fan creates a kind of scroll whose hidden meaning and latent literary talent form a gigantic bamboo ink compositional structure, one into which he undoubtedly pours his lifeblood. Yet what we see is this: if any component in the layout changes, then all of it exhibits a completely brand-new appearance, and yet the structure itself remains essentially unchanged. Viewers are physically moved and stirred to their depths by such subtle elegance which wields the power to shift the spirit and arouse the ardor. People enjoy looking at what results with a tranquil heart. Probably one can neither know nor feel the homecoming to tradition this represents, but we should note that this doesn't necessarily require an epiphany: tradition is created this way; it favors beauty and people and, right at just such a juncture, Shan Fan's bamboo compositions therefore metamorphose into an allegory for value.

III.

Tradition is likewise a giant structure, one which always restricts human creation, because it does not lightly grant people freedom. By restricting power, it appears even more mighty and monolithic. Unless one spends two decades in stasis becoming well-tempered, one dies with white hair still a pupil, without knowing its magnificent spirit. But Shan Fan's point of value is that he continuously woos the true release of traditions' subtlety, and he approaches tradition with thankfulness, so as to fortify and expand his spiritual world. The *Soup Chapter* in the *Liezi* written in approximately the Wei-Jin period, chronicles the vicissitudes of a series of artists, at least one of whom must likely have served as Shan Fan's predecessor model:

Gan Ying was a master bowman. When he drew his bow, the beasts all dropped to the ground and the birds plummeted to the earth. His pupil was named Fei Wei, and studied archery with Gan Ying until his craft surpassed that of his teacher. Ji Chang also studied with Fei Wei. Fei Wei quoth: "You must first learn to fix your eye on a target and not blink; only then can there be talk of learning to shoot." After Ji Chang returned home, he lay on his back under his wife's loom, and fixed both his eyes unwaveringly on the loom's treadle. Two years later, even if the tip of an awl quickly stabbed at his eye, yet still he would not blink. Ji Chang told Fei Wei of this circumstance. Fei Wei responded, "This is still not enough;

[TR: This refers to Chinese traditional divination, whose practices are compiled in the I Ching (Book of Changes), which is a subject whose complexity places a detailed discussion thereof beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, however, that the *yao* act as the variables driving change in a system of cosmology somewhat analogous to a Rubik's Cube.]

you must further train your eye: practice looking at small objects as if they were large, and looking at tiny things as if they were distinct, then come back and tell me.”

This was a discussion of how to practice and develop basic ability; Lu Chongxuan (Tang Dynasty; dates unknown) states in his commentary to the *Liezi*:

When birds succumbed to this master’s bow; his craft was transcendent, his skill exceeding that of his teacher, and comporting with the divine. Sublime wonder lay in his training; the divine nature lay in his perception of the diminutive. First he studied keeping his eyes unblinking, which was the key to his accuracy. Being unmoved by a needle jabbed into the eye is a divine calm, but lacking knowledge of the importance of this calm is still a step away from becoming a master.

Whereupon:

Ji Chang used a very long strand of yak hair and tied it to a louse which he then hung in the middle of a window, and facing south he gazed from afar at the louse. Within days, the louse became larger and larger. Three years later, the louse appeared in his eye as big as a wheel. Turning his head to view other objects, these all seemed the size of mountains. Ji Chang used animal horn from the kingdom of Yan and young fleabane to make his bow, and then shot it at the louse in the window, transfixing the louse through the heart, yet without breaking the yak hair. Then he told Fei Wei this. Fei Wei exclaimed excitedly, “That’s it; now you have it!”

When you have learned to this extent, and you can see small as big, acknowledge and possess a profound craft, then you have succeeded. The essence of traditional Chinese art also certainly inheres herein. In this tradition one may discern this subtlety and experience it, ponder it and relate to it, until you can see tiny as large, illusion as reality, and thus grasp the spirit of Chinese art. This is the perpetual touchstone by which to assay an artist’s vision and accomplishment. However, to attain to this sublime spirit, the rules do not dictate an age of application, or constant reinforcement. The *Liezi* recount a series of parables that prompt the awareness that any given individual’s power of concentration depends on that individual. Shan Fan’s avenue of approach derived from this recognition is, in executing ink bamboo drawings, to use a slow-painting technique to sharpen his static. In his own words: “Slow-painting is an esthetic experience.” He draws several scanty leaves for each stalk, sometimes unexpectedly wasting a half-month of mental effort thereon, with the medium changing from paper to canvas; then no more is there that appearance of a mechanical application of the brush disguising a lack of interest, but rather the ink nimbus creates a continuing illusion of abstract brush meaning and, when the ink stops evenly, the bamboo stems become virtually non-existent, their trajectories so appear to dwindle into vastness. However, one sees other images amid the amorphousness, which might represent the black and white strife among living creatures, but these tend rather more towards geometrization. The process of creating the drawing then slows and becomes ever more complex. Wishing to continually magnify one bamboo stem, he keeps a wary eye on the critical voids between strokes. He avails himself to the full of modern lighting in order to assign a point of emergence for each tiny budding shoot. In sum, his cool-headedness and patience, and his meticulous insight into the essence of the tradition toward modernization are reminiscent of that of *In Search of Lost Time* and *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust (1871-1922), which states: “Art works are but to provide a perspective lens via which a viewer can see things he originally had no means of seeing.” This also means opening up new areas to offer more refined observations, but entering into a new era does not mean you can still recognize the area. This is called a modern classic spirit, but it is in essence that which the *Liezi* expressed one thousand years ago.

In bygone days, in my old review of Zeng Guofan (1811-1872), I said that when he wrote verse its solid language filled empty space, his resolution subsumed courage, his generosity infused his elegies, but without undue deference to Chen Zilong (1608-1647). I stated moreover that he used unusual diction in writing, with an uplifting air driving it forward, and used hackneyed phrases only to represent vanity. Ideally, he said, one should retain an air of reverent calm and scrupulously abide by the rules of living, while remaining firmly focused. These rules consist of several articles that prescribe that:

With strict orderliness, one fears nothing, since the heart is in tune; when you are engaged, focus on one matter alone without distraction; maintain the clarity of your person, and rise with the sun.

Every day, any time you are unoccupied, sit quietly for an hour, experiencing returning benevolence. An upright demeanor concentrates life, so be as cool as a cauldron.

So one can remember all one has learned: write a number of poems every month, then examine the sum of their cumulative reasoning and see whether or not they succeed in nurturing the life force. Do not delay in this: the faint heart forfeits its ideals.

The essence of Shan Fan's slow drawing of bamboo ink is that he rids himself of the burden of abstruse thought, and is reinforced by a static depth reminiscent of Zeng Guofan's daily poems. Drawing bamboo is thus like painting, yet it is even more of a philosophy of practice, a meditation in a credo of static lines. Paradoxically, this is not only the most generally deficient, but also the most modernist view of art.

Thus, when we look at the 2007 work *Leere Füllen*, we experience this essence even more vividly. This is a painstakingly slow and careful work, in which he carefully scrutinized multiple times and in minute detail Wen Tong's bamboo ink. At the same time, it is executed in a controlled, even breathed with each stroke delineated in white. White is the main color used by literati, although it is usually not an ornamented color, but rather one created by the blank spaces. Shan Fan chooses to actively use physical white pigment, which is likely not only to strongly emphasize the white spaces in Chinese paintings, but probably also serves as a tribute to the great Western master Alberti, because Alberti's favorite color was white, with its purity, simplicity and elegance in Western culture, together with its sense of esthetic virtue. Pure and simple white is easy to use and concrete in application and thus it is easy to cultivate skill with its use by adherence to rules. It does not afford the least leeway, however, although it always acts as a goad. One stroke, another and then another, and one simply doesn't know when to bring it all to an end. The brush just keeps traveling along the paper, propelled stroke-by-stroke along the brush tracks to produce a world laced with white, and this white-laced world then takes form as a set of simplistic principles. At this time, one abruptly realizes that these principles are concentrated both within one's heart and Wen Tong's bamboo inks, though, his bamboo ink drawings are not in the form of small scrolls, but are rather huge works – and incidentally the greatest works in the history of bamboo ink – which will afford unbounded inspiration to later generations of artists, and send a signal to a sympathetic god to unfetter the artistic muse. Painter Shi Tao (1642-1707), one of the *Eight People from High Mountains*, expressed the condition of things in a state of intensity and misery which was able to strongly stir people's feelings, but when he came to paint in a tranquil style, he inevitably praised Wen Tong. That was at a time of earth-shattering changes, and was a tribute to splendid culture, and an enjoyment of a brief respite of peace and quiet amid all the tumult. Without doubt, Shan Fan's *Leere Füllen* holds deep significance. It is a series of works in the style of "use things, do not be used by things" (Zhuangzi, *The Tree on the Mountain*), but its miraculous brightness casts its light onto only one spot. Perhaps it is monotonous, ordinary, lonely work, but when one parts company with Zen, this is what happens.

IV.

In China, from the Ming and Qing periods on down, many artists have been Zen practitioners. Although Zen originated in India, Chinese literati nevertheless claim to have independently invented it. The link between Zen and painting is illustrated by Wang Wei's (701-761, Tang Dynasty) *Plaintain in Snow*. Zen also has a nexus with poetry, as Yan Yu (Song Dynasty, dates unknown) clearly expressed in the *Theory of Poetry of Cang Lang*: "Poetic theory is like Zen theory". He further declared:

A poem has distinct substance unrelated to its written expression, and distinct interest unrelated to its reasoning. Therefore, do not stray down the road of mere reasoning, and get caught like a fish in a trap, but rise upwards: grasp a passage without clinging to a too-literal interpretation. A poem is an intoned recitation of feeling. The Tang poets reveled in the analogy of the antelope sleeping hanging suspended from its horns in the branches of a tree to avert calamity, aloof from the earth and revealing no trace of its presence to the prowling hunter. In the face of sublime and penetrating beauty, therefore, do not moor yourself in a puddle, but rather intone a poem as if in the midst of a great empty ocean. In aspect,

there is also tone; the moon shines in the water, just as the image is reflected in the looking glass.
Language has limits, but meaning is boundless.

This famous essay is frequently cited by posterity, and You Dong (1618-1704) in the Qing dynasty was particularly inspired by it, he who once combined the five-character poems of Du Fu and Shao Yong (1011-1077):

My calm heart can't contend with this roiling flow,
With balm, my mind is like the cloud sailing slow ...
River Pavilion, Du Fu (712-770, Tang Dynasty).

Bright moon rises into the heart of the sky,
Right as the wind over the waters blows nigh ...
Recital on a Clear Night, Shao Yong (1011-1077, Song Dynasty).

Fusing the two, here Yu Yan declaimed:

Cloud aloft, beneath waters flow,
Moon lifts as the wind starts to blow ...
An Account by a Herder of Clouds

He further stated: "One may grasp the sense immediately from a scene such as this." When we look at Shan Fan's installation: *The Digital Pond*, it indeed features such allusions: a moon in the water and flowers in the sky, and thus imparts a sense of the confluence of the ancient and modern. The subtitle of this installation, "An Illusionary, Not Available Reality," could also be translated into the paraphrased language of Yan Yu as: *A color in an image can't be found in reality*. Thus, Shan Fan inadvertently offers a new interpretation of an ancient poetic proposition, or as the German philosopher Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) put it: "[A]ll things exist in actuality and non-actuality." *The Digital Pond* may thus become a primordial abyss [Urgrund] jetting Böhme's concept forth to be ruminated upon again and again.

Just as it seems that we often feel that good art is something hovering in a mystical atmosphere, we may at the same time get the feeling that this is ineffable, and thus we may refer to it as a gut-feeling. In truth, this also surpasses the boundaries of our reason, so it is small wonder then that philosophers stress the power of the mystical to move and shock, and recognize that only with a degree of power can you impel the mind to move to an even higher plane of shock value. The great poet Friedrich Schiller praised this "power of understanding" in a poem titled *The Artists* (1789):

What, thousands of years flowed hence,
The aging reason did find,
Lay in the symbol of beauty and magnificence
First shown to its childish mind ...
Ere the thinker's intrepid spirit,
Conceived the space of time infinite,
Who looked aloft at the starry stage,
Without this in feeling to presage?

From the viewpoint of modern cosmology, there is nobody nowadays unable to conceive of infinity. However, the true meaning of this poem is that an image provides a symbol for the mind, one which enables a grasp of hidden truth. Thus we can perceive that Mr. Shan Fan's series of ink bamboo drawings not only depicts traditional elegance and taste, and chronicles modern sentiments and ideas, but it also stands as a metaphor for a mystical world. And that is a unique world of bamboo.

Translation: Ben Armour