

Original Research Article

Dry brush, light ink, and creating mood through reserved white space: The brush-and-ink language and artistic conception of Shao Mi's landscape painting

Yaoyao Qin

Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu, Anhui, 233030, China

Abstract: Shao Mi, one of the "Nine Friends of Painting" in the late Ming dynasty, developed a distinctive formal language centered on dry brush, light ink, a flat and extremely simplified composition, and the creation of mood through reserved white space (liubai zaojing). These elements together produce the unique aesthetic character that art history has called "lean, dry, and ethereal" (qing shou ku yi). Focusing on representative landscape works by Shao Mi, this paper analyzes, from three levels—Brush-and-ink technique, compositional paradigm, and artistic mood generation—His inheritance and personal transformation of the Yuan dynasty literati tradition. It reveals the high degree of unity between his brush-and-ink language and spiritual conception, and elucidates the typical significance of Shao Mi's landscapes as a visual expression of the reclusive mentality of a commoner-literatus in the late Ming.

Keywords: Shao Mi; landscape painting; dry brush and light ink; creating mood through reserved white space; lean, dry, and ethereal; late Ming literati painting

1. Introduction

In the late Ming dynasty, social turbulence prevailed, and reclusive thought flourished. Under the influence of Dong Qichang's theory of the "Northern and Southern Schools," literati painting generally revered the ethereal style of the Yuan masters, giving rise to an aesthetic mainstream that valued lightness, simplicity, and untrammelled elegance. Shao Mi (1592–1642), as a commoner literatus in Suzhou who never took an official position and remained aloof from worldly conventions, created landscape paintings that neither adopted the meticulous craftsmanship of the academic school nor indulged in wild and unrestrained brushwork. Instead, he developed his own style through extremely simplified brushwork and ethereal mood. Zhang Geng in *Records of Painters of the Dynasty* (Guochao Huazheng Lu) commented that his works are "lean, dry, and ethereal, with a leisurely and cool disposition matching the man himself," which precisely captures his artistic character.

Compared with his contemporaries, Shao Mi's artistic value lies not in founding a new school but in pushing dry brush, light ink, and reserved white space to their extremes, turning landscape into a spiritual space for the pacification of the mind. Existing scholarship on Shao Mi has largely focused on biographical verification and general stylistic overviews; special studies devoted specifically to the brush-and-ink language and artistic conception of his landscapes can still be deepened. This paper takes this as its starting point, grounded in formal analysis of the works, and presents a focused discussion of his core formal system.

2. Dry brush and light ink: The core brush-and-ink language of Shao Mi's landscapes

Shao Mi's landscape brush-and-ink traces its lineage from Song and Yuan masters, especially the "Four Great Masters of the Yuan," particularly Ni Zan and Huang Gongwang. Ultimately, he established a personal idiom through dry brush, light ink, and the interplay of dryness and moisture, achieving a unique texture described as "light yet substantial, dry yet vigorous."

2.1. Dry-brush texturing strokes: Fusing Yuan methods to achieve a dry, loose, and elegant quality

Shao Mi carried out a highly personal synthesis and transformation of the classic Yuan texture strokes

(cunfa). He blended the square, hard, and simple "folded-belt" strokes (zhedai cun) of Ni Zan with the round, relaxed, and soft "hemp-fiber" strokes (pima cun) of Huang Gongwang. Using mainly dry brush with dispersed tip, he applied texturing strokes while weakening the angularity and sharpness of mountain-and-stone structures, turning them toward warmth and luxuriance. In Ni Zan's originals, the brush is often held sideways and dragged flat, producing sharp turns and a clear, austere atmosphere. Shao Mi, in contrast, slowed the brush movement, used centered tip to establish the bone structure and side tip to achieve expression, paused slightly at the turning points, and exploited the paper's roughness to create natural "flying white" (feibai). The resulting lines are loose and elegant yet contain inner bone strength.

In the leaf imitating Ni Zan from his album *Landscapes after Ancient Masters* (Fanggu Shanshui Ce) in the Shanghai Museum, the mountain contours are extremely simplified, and the texturing strokes are applied as short, dry, scattered brush touches. Layers are few, but the mood is complete. This treatment of "simplicity without thinness" reflects a conscious aesthetic pursuit of "dryness": The brush is dry but the energy flow never breaks; the lines are lean but the spirit is self-sufficient. Shao Mi made extensive use of a thirsty brush (kebi), meaning the brush holds little ink yet moves with friction, producing a "lean, dry" (qingshou) brush-and-ink character that is different from Dong Qichang's mild and moist elegance as well as from Wang Shimin's dense and heavy richness.

2.2. Layering with light ink: Preferring lightness to darkness, achieving ethereality through clarity

Shao Mi adhered to a guiding principle of using light ink, rejecting dense ink and heavy washes. He insisted on multiple thin layers, seeking thickness within lightness. His ink method abided by the rules: Prefer lightness to darkness, clarity to turbidity, void to solid. By applying extremely light ink in successive layers, each allowed to dry completely before the next, he achieved a visual effect that is clear, transparent, ethereal, and subtly nuanced.

The most representative work is *Presenting a Crane and Sending a Letter* (Yihe Jishu Tu) in the Palace Museum collection. In the foreground, the rocks and pine trunks are outlined with light-ink lines and lightly textured with dry brush. The middle-ground river surface is presented entirely as reserved white space. The distant mountains are given only a single faint wash of light ink, with no complex texturing. The entire painting is clear and elegant in ink tone, not a single stroke muddy or turbid, truly achieving the effect of "light yet spirited, clear yet substantial." This ultimate lightness of ink is highly isomorphic with Shao Mi's aloof and indifferent personality, embodying the aesthetic of "clarity" (qing) directly in brush and ink.

2.3. Applying calligraphy to painting: Shared origin, bone in every stroke

Shao Mi excelled at calligraphy, and his landscape painting consistently embodied the literati tradition of "using calligraphy to paint." His calligraphy emphasized centered tip, dry brush, and lean strength. The same principles apply to his landscape contours, texture strokes, and moss dots: The uprightness of tree-trunk lines, the rhythm of rock contours, and the rise and fall of moss dots are all consistent with the brush sense of regular script (kaishu) and running script (xingshu). He stressed the quality of calligraphic expression and bone strength, eliminating craftsmanship and filling the painting with scholarly verve (shujuanqi). The bone strength of calligraphy and the rhythmic vitality of painting interpenetrate each other, forming the internal support of his "unity of calligraphy and painting."

3. Creating mood through reserved white space: The construction of artistic conception in Shao Mi's landscapes

The generation of artistic conception in Shao Mi's landscapes does not depend on dense imagery but on the combined effect of an extremely simplified "level-distance" (pingyuan) composition and large areas of reserved white space. It represents the ultimate development of the traditional Chinese aesthetic principle of "counting white as black."

3.1. Level-distance extreme simplicity: One river, two shores, reducing complexity

Shao Mi's mainstream composition inherits Ni Zan's "one river, two shores" paradigm and pushes it to further extremes: The foreground consists of a few rocks, sparse trees, and an empty pavilion; the middle ground is left as white space representing water; the distance reveals only faintly inked mountain peaks. The number of forms is reduced to the minimum, yet the spatial layering remains clear and complete. *Presenting a Crane and Sending a Letter* is a typical example: The foreground only shows pine, rocks, and

a bank; the middle ground is more than half white space; the distant mountains are lightly washed in pale ink, almost merging with the sky. The identifiable elements are few, yet the spatial vastness and artistic conception are self-sufficient.

Compared with Dong Qichang and Wang Shimin, Shao Mi used a higher proportion of white space and even fewer forms. Most of his contemporaries still retained relatively complete hills, valleys, and forests, but Shao Mi boldly cut away, keeping only the core imagery and ceding visual space to spiritual space, truly achieving the ideal of "using little to overcome much."

3.2. Reserved white space as mood: Void and substance interact, cold and secluded

In Shao Mi's compositions, reserved white space is not an absence but the main carrier of mood. White space can represent water, sky, mist, and clouds, but it can also signify the emptiness and transcendence of the inner mind. In *Presenting a Crane and Sending a Letter*, the white space is both the vast river and a spiritual symbol of the recluse who stands aloof from the mundane world. A solitary boat and a white crane are placed in the center of the white space, reinforcing the sense of detachment.

This method of "creating mood through reserved white space" strongly reinforces the overall atmosphere of "dryness, lightness, coldness, and ethereality": The picture is not noisy, not full, not warm, but presents a cool, sparse, and secluded character. This is precisely the visual externalization of the commoner-literatus's retreat into the inner mind and alienation from reality during the turbulent late Ming.

3.3. Extension in the handscroll: The realm of "traveling while reclining" in level distance

In the handscroll *Cloudy Mountains in Level Distance* (Yunshan Pingyuan Tu), Shao Mi expands the level-distance composition horizontally, following the logic of "traveling while reclining" (woyou) throughout. The forms remain extremely simplified, white space runs through the entire scroll, and the brush-and-ink moves from sparse and light to warm and moist and finally to archaic elegance, with a relaxed and unhurried rhythm. The white space of the handscroll extends as the eye moves, creating a fluid space of "changing views step by step," pushing his personal reclusive sentiment into the poetic realm. Even in the handscroll format, his principles of extreme simplicity and white space remain consistent.

4. Inheritance and breakthrough: The late Ming transformation of the Yuan ethereal style

Although Shao Mi took the Yuan masters as his models, he accomplished a crucial transformation from copying antiquity to expressing the inner mind:

He took the simplicity and untrammelled quality of Yuan painting but turned its cold hardness into warmth and moistness, better suiting the introverted inner world of the late Ming literati.

He took the light ink of Yuan painting but intensified the tonal quality of "clarity" (qing), forming a stable "lean, dry, and ethereal" appearance.

He reshaped landscape with the mindset of a commoner-literatus: Instead of depicting grand imperial or official scenes, he specialized in the charm of mountains, forests, and reclusion, grounding the Yuan ethereal style as a spiritual symbol of the late Ming commoner-literatus.

Thus, Shao Mi established a clear stylistic boundary among the "Nine Friends of Painting": Dong Qichang is elegant, moist, and harmonious; Wang Shimin is vigorous, dense, and substantial; Li Liufang is free, unfettered, and spirited; while Shao Mi, relying on the four characters qing (lean/clarity), shou (dry/lean), ku (dry/emaciated), and yi (ethereal/untrammelled), stands out with high distinctiveness.

5. Conclusion

Shao Mi's landscape painting, with dry brush and light ink as its bones and reserved white space as its soul, constructs a complete artistic system that is "lean, dry, and ethereal." His dry brush is not superficial; his light ink is not weak; his reserved white space is not empty; his extreme simplicity is not crude. He achieved a high unity of brush-and-ink technique and personality/spiritual state. In the critical transitional period of late Ming literati painting from "gathering antiquity" to "individual expression," Shao Mi, as a commoner with extremely simplified brushwork, demonstrated that the core of literati painting lies not in technical complexity but in sincerity of mind; not in imposing hills and valleys but in spiritual clarity and distance.

His landscapes are not only an inheritance of the Yuan ethereal style but also a cultural symbol of the

late Ming commoner-literatus who held fast to integrity, refused official service, and stood aloof in self-sufficiency. A focused examination of Shao Mi's brush-and-ink language and artistic conception can fill a gap in the case-study literature on late Ming literati painting and also provides a valuable historical reference for contemporary ink painting seeking a balance between inherited tradition and individual expression.

References

- [1] Xu Bangda. *Critical Biographies of Calligraphers and Painters through the Ages*. Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1983.
- [2] Zheng Wei. "Shao Mi's Life and an Overview of His Painting Art." *Duoyun*, 1989(4): 52–57.
- [3] Shan Guolin. "On the Landscape Style of Shao Mi." In *Collected Papers of the Shanghai Museum*, Vol. 8, pp. 112–118. Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000.
- [4] Xiao Yanyi. "Shao Mi and His Landscapes after Ancient Masters." *Palace Museum Journal*, 1995(4): 38–42.
- [5] [Qing] Zhang Geng. *Records of Painters of the Dynasty*. Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2019.
- [6] [Qing] Wu Weiye. *Complete Works of Wu Weiye*. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1990.
- [7] [US] James Cahill. *Distant Mountains: Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty*. SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2009.
- [8] Shih Shou-chien. *Style and Historical Change: Ten Essays on Chinese Painting*. Peking University Press, 2008.
- [9] Wan Xinhua. *A Study of the "Nine Friends of Painting"*. Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2018.