

# Shi Lu and Fine Arts Magazine: Resonance in the Age of Art

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**Abstract:** *Fine Arts magazine paid attention to and discussed Shi Lu for about six years in the 1950s and 1960s. It witnessed his transformation from traditional style to "strange changes in ink and brushwork" and the expansion of his subject matter. It also triggered discussions on the balance between traditional inheritance and innovation, as well as the renewal of critical standards. Through discussing Shi Lu's works, the magazine tries to guide the direction of Chinese painting creation, encourage attention to reality and innovation, construct a new discourse system and image paradigm, and trigger thoughts on tradition, innovation, and standards.*

**Keywords:** Shi Lu; Fine Arts Magazine; Artistic controversy; Inheritance and innovation; Modernization and transformation; Brush and ink.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-twentieth century, Chinese society was in a period of drastic change, and Chinese painting faced the challenge and opportunity of transforming from tradition to modernity. At this critical stage, Shi Lu, as an influential artist, experienced remarkable changes in his artistic creation, and the magazine *Fine Arts*, as an important position of public opinion in the field of fine arts, played a leading role in the movement of transformation of Chinese painting. The fourth issue of *Fine Arts* in 1962 published a letter under the pseudonym "Meng Lanting" which criticised Shi Lu's work, arguing that he had "no actual effort to inherit the tradition" and that "at best, there is ink but no brush", thus triggering a debate on the issue of innovation and brushwork in Chinese painting. This debate involved many artists and theorists who analysed and discussed Shi Lu's works from different angles. An in-depth study of the interaction between Shi Lu and the magazine *Fine Arts* is of great value in understanding the trajectory of Chinese painting during this period.

## 2. CONCERNS IN THE TRANSITION TO MODERNISATION

In the middle of the 20th century, with the goal of promoting the modernisation and transformation of Chinese painting, exploring artistic expression that meets the needs of the times became a key issue in the development of Chinese painting. Under the wave of social change, "how to innovate on the basis of inheriting traditions, so that Chinese painting can embody both the national spirit and the style of the times, has become the direction for artists to think and practice". In order to guide the direction of Chinese painting and stimulate the creative vigour of artists, a series of discussions and practical activities were launched in the art world. In 1959, *Fine Arts* magazine began to pay attention to Shi Lu's artistic creation. Under the influence of the times, Shi Lu, on the one hand, drew on the essence of traditional painting, and on the other hand, searched for inspiration deep into life, embarking on a unique journey of artistic exploration. His works such as "Turning to the North of Shaanxi" (1959), with a unique perspective, novel language of ink and brush, and a strong aura of the times, showed the style and emotion of a specific historical period, and attracted the attention of the art world. At this time, Shi Lu's creation was in a stage of transition and exploration, his artistic style was not yet fully defined, and his creative concepts were still deepening, but his unique artistic style had already begun to emerge. Art magazine was keenly aware of the innovative spirit and contemporary value contained in Shi Lu's works, and published related works and his creative thinking. From 1959 to 1964, the magazine continued to report and discuss Shi Lu's work. According to the focus of the reports and the depth of the discussions they triggered, they can be divided into three phases: the pre-focus phase (1959-1960), the in-depth exploration phase (1961-1963), and the follow-up summary phase (1964). The three phases are closely linked, placing Shi Lu's artistic development in the historical process of the modernisation and transformation of Chinese painting, not only showcasing his creative achievements, but also elevating the theoretical height of the discussion of related artistic issues, and generating a good effect of mutual promotion between creative practice and academic research. 1959-1960, *Fine Arts Magazine* published three articles on Shi Lu, and featured two artworks including Shi Lu's "Some Thoughts on Creation" and other articles, as well as works such as "Turning to Shaanbei". In the general environment of national art exploration, the targeted coverage of

Fine Arts magazine gradually drew attention to Shi Lu in the Chinese painting world, pushing his creations into the public eye in a gradual manner. At this stage, the seemingly brief introductions in Fine Arts magazine actually laid the foundation for subsequent in-depth discussions. From 1961 to 1963 was the stage of in-depth discussion. Starting from 1961, Fine Arts magazine began to explore Shi Lu's artistic creation in depth, publishing related theoretical articles and works. Some of these articles, such as "The Innovative Elements in Shi Lu's Works-A Memoir of a Symposium", recorded a symposium with the participation of Li Qi, Ye Qianyu, Li Kuchan, Hua Junwu, Wu Zuoren, Cai Ruohong, etc., to discuss the innovative elements in Shi Lu's works; "The Formation of Shi Lu's Painting Style -Exploring from Theoretical and Practical Perspectives" analyses the formation of Shi Lu's painting style from theoretical and practical perspectives. At the same time, works such as "The East Wants to Dawn" were also published. These initiatives built a professional academic platform for in-depth discussion of Shi Lu's artistic creation. In particular, in 1962, a letter from a reader under the pseudonym "Meng Lanting" triggered a discussion on the issue of "ink and brushwork" in Shi Lu's works. The letter questioned Shi Lu's works, arguing that there were deficiencies in the ink and brushwork, such as "no actual effort to inherit the tradition" and "at best, there is ink but no brush". This letter triggered widespread concern and discussion in the art world, with many artists and theorists expressing their views. Those in favour of Shi Lu believed that his works were innovative and based on inherited traditions, while those against believed that his works were too deviant and ignored the traditional norms of ink and brushwork. This discussion lasted for nearly three years, with an increasing number of scholars involved, and the issues discussed gradually deepened, forming a strong academic atmosphere. It was not until December 1963 that Wang Zhenwen published an article entitled "Re-examination of Shi Lu's Art" in Fine Arts, in which he made a more comprehensive evaluation of Shi Lu's artistic achievements, and summarised and responded to the relevant debates on Shi Lu since 1961. In his article, Wang Xiaowen affirmed Shi Lu's innovative spirit and artistic achievements, and at the same time pointed out some problems in his works, such as the inheritance of traditions that could be further strengthened. The discussion gradually subsided. However, even though the discussion had ended, the magazine's attention to Shi Lu's artistic development continued until 1964. The second issue of Fine Arts in 1964 introduced some of the circumstances surrounding Shi Lu's creation of Dongdu and analysed his creative thinking; in the then-important column of Talking to Everyone, an article entitled "The Spirit of the Times and the Inheritance of Traditions in Shi Lu's Art" was published, which explored Shi Lu's artistic style and creative concepts. Subsequently, a number of major art exhibitions were held one after another, gradually dispersing people's attention to Shi Lu's personal artistic development, but this triggered the discussion on "how to inherit tradition", "how to innovate", "how to shape artistic style" in Chinese painting. How to inherit the tradition", "how to innovate", "how to shape the artistic style" and other issues arising from this have become important topics that have been continuously discussed in the history of the development of Chinese painting.

In fact, it is not by chance that Fine Arts magazine has paid continuous attention to Shi Lu for six years, witnessed and recorded his work, and guided and promoted him. On the one hand, in the context of the modernisation and transformation of Chinese painting, Shi Lu's bold innovation and active exploration in artistic style, creative themes, brush and ink language, etc., has attracted the attention of the art world with a unique new style, which is in line with the expectation of the times for the development of Chinese painting; on the other hand, "Fine Arts" magazine, which is tasked with the mission of guiding the development of Chinese painting, has always been committed to looking for artistic cases of innovative spirit and contemporary value to be promoted. On the other hand, "Fine Arts" magazine, with the mission of guiding the development of Chinese painting, has always been committed to finding art cases with innovative spirit and contemporary value for promotion. It can be said that in a specific historical period, Shi Lu's artistic creation with its distinctive innovation realised a match with the spirit of the times, and this strong "match" is exactly what Fine Arts magazine expects to find and promote, and the common pursuit of the development of Chinese paintings between the two has led to their close connection.

In 1961, the magazine Fine Arts prefaced its article on the interview with Shi Lu with a clear statement of the reasons for its concern for him: "The reason why I am concerned about him is that his working art practice is a unique and valuable exploration and attempt under the tenet of serving the people and socialist construction. This exploration and attempt is based on his in-depth experience of life and deep understanding of tradition, and is also consistent with his personal artistic cultivation and creative style. In order to promote the development of art creation, we encourage theoretical discussions on related creations and are willing to introduce his creative experience to readers as a reference for art creation and theoretical research." Thus, in the face of the innovative spirit and contemporary value of Shi Lu, Fine Arts magazine followed the trend to build an academic platform, and while displaying creative achievements and promoting exploratory experience, through in-depth analyses, theoretical guidance and discourse construction by experts and scholars, it gradually established some key elements of Chinese painting in the process of modernisation and transformation, such as the diversification of

artistic styles and the modernisation of the concept of creativity.

### **3. IMPACT IN INTERACTIVE EMPATHY**

Shi Lu's art in the 1950s and 1960s continued to iterate and change. After the founding of New China, Shi Lu's creative themes and forms further expanded. He travelled to Qinghai, Tibet, Gansu, and southern Shaanxi to sketch, accumulating a wealth of creative materials. During this period, he began to focus on the innovation of the language of Chinese painting, especially the deepening of his use and understanding of brush and ink. He creatively fused the spirit of Western modernity with Eastern aesthetic thought, realising a new creation of the times in the language of ink figure painting. Shi Lu advocated that painters should study the tradition in depth, and at the same time go deeper into life, following the artistic principle of "reaching out to the tradition with one hand, and reaching out to life with the other". On this basis, he gradually formed a unique new painting style of "strange changes in brush and ink". His works break the traditional formula in the use of ink and brush, presenting a unique artistic charm. For example, in "Turning to the North of Shaanxi", he creates a brush and ink language suitable for expressing the Loess Plateau by drawing on the essence of traditional brush and ink, and uses his original dragging and chapping method to express the simplicity and thickness of the Loess Plateau in the north of Shaanxi Province, as well as melting the image of the Leader and the Loess Plateau into an integrated whole, creating a unique spiritual imagery.

After the founding of New China, the great changes in society put forward new requirements for Chinese painting. Fine Arts magazine came into being, shouldering the historical mission of disseminating mainstream artistic ideas and guiding the creative direction of Chinese painting. In the movement to transform Chinese painting, it was committed to promoting Chinese painting to adapt to the needs of the new era and exploring new paths for the development of Chinese painting. With the development of Chinese painting, the original standards of art criticism are no longer adapted to the new needs. Fine Arts magazine is actively exploring new standards of art criticism in its discussions. For the evaluation of the works of Chang'an School of Painting, it is no longer limited to the traditional "Six Methods", but takes into account the ideology, artistry, and contemporaneity of the works. For example, when evaluating Shi Lu's works, he not only pays attention to his brushwork and ink techniques, but also focuses on the spirit of the times and ideological connotations reflected in his works.

During this process, Fine Arts magazine, provided Shi Lu with an important platform to display his works, enabling his works to be understood by a wider range of readers and members of the art world. Through the magazine's reports and comments, Shi Lu's artistic style and creative ideas were disseminated, increasing his popularity and influence in the art world. The magazine's discussions on issues such as tradition and innovation in Chinese painting have guided Shi Lu's creative direction. In the process of creation, Shi Lu constantly thought about the relationship between tradition and innovation, and was influenced by the art tenets and critique standards advocated by the magazine, to further improve his own creative concepts and styles. At the same time, Shi Lu's practice of art creation has provided the magazine with a wealth of content for discussion. His unique artistic style and creative concepts triggered the magazine's in-depth discussion of many issues in Chinese painting, such as the issue of brush and ink, and the relationship between tradition and innovation. His works became an important case for the magazine to guide the direction of Chinese painting. Shi Lu's innovative spirit and unique style have promoted the magazine's development in constructing a new discourse system and image paradigm. The stylistic characteristics of his works, such as the "strange variation of brush and ink", have prompted the magazine to re-examine and improve the theory of brush and ink and the forms of expression of Chinese painting, injecting new vitality into the development of Chinese painting.

### **4. INSIGHTS FROM THE ART DEBATE**

In 1962, the magazine Fine Arts published a letter to Shideng under the pseudonym "Meng Lanting", in which he criticised Shi Lu's works, arguing that his works had "no actual effort to inherit the tradition" and that "at best there is ink but no brush", thus triggering a wide and deep artistic controversy. but no brush", thus triggering a wide and deep artistic debate. It also represents the view of the traditional conservatives, who emphasised the importance of traditional brushwork and painting norms, and questioned Shi Lu's innovations, arguing that his works did not conform to the traditional standards of Chinese painting.

However, different people hold different views on Shi Lu's art. Commentators in favour of Shi Lu start from the perspective of innovation, arguing that Shi Lu developed traditional techniques in the practice of exploring the expression of objects with new thoughts and feelings. Zhou Shaohua, in "A Brief Discussion of Chinese Painting's

Brush and Ink and the Promotion of Innovation", argues that the issue of brush and ink is one of the most important concerns in the process of promoting innovation in Chinese painting, and that Shi Lu's paintings can reflect the real life and express the feelings of the times, which recognises the importance of brush and ink from the point of view of art's reflection of reality, thus affirming the direction of Shi Lu's creativity. Pointed out that Shi Lu's splash ink baking, chapping, in many places is to express the Great Northwest Loess Plateau and the author's interest, this creation is unprecedented, "with the Four Kings technique can not draw such touching works. Shi Lu established an artistic attitude of expressing the true feelings and experiences of the moment with ink and wash discourse, and his unique ink and brush forms revealed new possibilities of ink and wash expression for later generations.

In addition to the discussion on Shi Lu's brushwork. Some traditional views may consider Shi Lu's choice of subject matter to be too bold and novel, deviating from the common range of subjects in traditional Chinese painting. However, Shi Lu's supporters emphasise his in-depth observation of life and capture of the spirit of the times. His successive sketching trips to many places, incorporating local customs and construction scenes into his creative subjects, are a kind of expansion and innovation of the subjects of Chinese paintings, which are in line with the requirements of the development of the times for art, and are able to better reflect the real life.

The themes of Shi Lu's works have also been discussed, with some arguing that the themes of his works are closely centred on the times and have a strong sense of the times. For example, some of his works reflect the social life and people's struggle during the construction of new China, reflecting an accurate grasp of the pulse of the times. However, others may question the depth and connotation of his themes, believing that in some works, the expression of the themes is not subtle enough or does not go far enough into the realm required by traditional aesthetics.

Shi Lu's works present a unique style. He creates a mood with his personal characteristics through his unique language of brush and ink and his way of composition. For example, in *Turning to the North of Shaanxi*, he fuses the image of the leader and the Loess Plateau into a whole, creating a majestic and expansive mood. However, some people think that his mood is too unique. Yan Lichuan points out that Shi Lu's works have some problems that he attributes to "wild and strange blackness", which does not conform to the aesthetic standards of harmony and elegance that are pursued by traditional moods. He explained that "wild" means that the artistic skills are not yet mature; "strange" means that the laws of art and the laws of life are perverse; "chaotic" is reflected in the structure of the brushwork is not rigorous and sophisticated, and lacks the proper sense of rhythm; "chaotic" is reflected in the structure of the brushwork is not rigorous and sophisticated, and lacks the proper sense of rhythm. The lack of due rhythm; "black" is the lack of change in the use of ink and colour, the lack of chiaroscuro, there is no relationship between reality and reality. He also emphasised that even though "wild monsters and chaotic blackness" may be loved by a few people, it is by no means a good tradition, nor is it the right direction for innovation and creativity. As more and more scholars participated in the relevant discussions, the value of the artistic exploration of the Chang'an School gradually became clear under the judgement of different viewpoints. 1963 was the end of the year, Dynasty Wenshi published an article titled "Exploration and Re-exploration" in the magazine *Fine Arts*, in which he launched an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the focus of the critics' attention. The article provided an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the "Chang'an School of Painting" represented by Shi Lu in terms of the choice of subject matter, the conception of the work, the use of the language of brush and ink, and the expression of the theme, and made a relatively fair and objective evaluation. According to Wang Xiaowen, "In terms of inheriting the fine traditions of culture and art of the motherland, Shi Lu has repeatedly explored and attempted to do so, with a clear and correct purpose. Therefore, regardless of the maturity of his works in this process, the path he chose should be recognised". In this way, the art "discussion" triggered by Meng Lanting's *Letters to the Editor*, which lasted for two years and attracted the participation of dozens of scholars, fulfilled its mission on the academic platform set up by *Fine Arts Magazine*, and sounded the melody of the innovation of new Chinese painting. In the process of the scholars' discussion, the focus of the discussion gradually shifted from analysing individual typical cases to paying attention to the general phenomenon, and then elevated the investigation of Chinese painting's brush and ink forms to the height of cultural spirit.

This debate has prompted artists and theorists to think deeply about the relationship between tradition and innovation. Instead of simply emphasising tradition or pursuing innovation, they explored more rationally how to innovate on the basis of inheriting tradition and how to balance the relationship between traditional techniques and modern aesthetic demands, providing a more comprehensive theoretical guidance for the development of Chinese painting. The controversy broke the single aesthetic standard, the traditional aesthetic standard was challenged, and at the same time, the unique style and mood presented by Shi Lu's works added a new dimension to the aesthetic standard of Chinese painting. The aesthetics of Chinese painting is no longer limited to the traditional

norms and patterns, and has begun to accept and accommodate more diversified forms of artistic expression and aesthetic concepts. It also stimulated the artists' enthusiasm for creation and their sense of innovation. Shi Lu's bold innovation and courage to break with tradition set an example for other artists, encouraging them to dare to experiment with new subjects, forms of ink and brushwork, and expressive techniques in their creations, and promoting the innovative development of Chinese painting in terms of subject matter, ink and brushwork, and expressive forms.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Shi Lu's artistic changes were closely linked to the role of the magazine *Fine Arts* in the movement to transform Chinese painting. Shi Lu's artistic practice during this period was one of continuous exploration and innovation, and his works embodied the spirit of the times and his unique artistic appeal. By constructing a new discourse system and pictorial paradigm, *Fine Arts* magazine guided the direction of Chinese painting and promoted its modernisation and transformation. The mutual influence between the two not only promoted the maturation and development of Shi Lu's personal artistic style, but also provided important theoretical support and practical experience for the development of Chinese painting during this period. In this day and age, a review of this history can still provide useful reference and inspiration for the further development of Chinese painting.

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