

## Let Rock Talk

By Zhao Li

### Painting style as the creator himself

Xue Song has developed a strong inclination towards painting. Such an inclination takes root both in his heart and in the education he ever received. In 1980s when Xue Song read for his bachelor degree, the Sichuan art circle was in its golden period. Against the context where various schools of thoughts were competing with each other, Xue Song's works left a peaceful impression as his restrained temperament. For him, painting is not only a means of creation but also a proper medium for culture understanding and emotional release. So, Xue Song grew more and more indulgent in it and enjoyed the pleasure and excitement it brought, to the point where he gradually became addicted to painting. He did not care about how time passed by, nor how the trend changed. He considered painting as a kind of spiritual cultivation in some sense, as the painting itself has a long tradition. In other words, "his painting is something that naturally grows out of his heart", the part that constitutes the experience of his life. It is on this ground that in his works clearly observable are his joy, sorrow, sensitivity and emotional sighs. The style of painting is the creator, as an old Chinese saying goes, although it is often forgotten or ignored in its frequent mentions. However, Xue Song's persistence in painting, which can find its origin in his personal temperament, may be called a contemporary footnote to the old saying "the style of painting is the creator".

### From external rocks to internal rocks

Xue Song started to paint rocks, and entitle a series created from 2007 as "Rocks Series". In China, rocks are special aesthetic objects and "the culture of rock appreciation" can be traced far back. Representative rock appreciators include Bai Juyi, a poet of the Tang Dynasty (claiming the size of rock can be categorized into four); Mi Fu, a calligrapher of the North Song Dynasty (summarizing the four-character formula of rock appreciation); and Zheng Banqiao, a painter-calligrapher of the Qing Dynasty (having a craze for grotesque rocks). Rock is created by nature, but its appreciation is a process in which human's emotion, philosophical views, beliefs and values are mapped to it. For the appreciation in ancient times, "grotesque rocks of big size" can be used to rockery building; "marvelous rocks of small dimension" can be placed on the desktop as special displays. Writing a poem or painting a picture with rock as the theme can be called the "upgraded version" of rock appreciation. Rockery building is interesting in that it has an effect of seeing a world in a grain of sand; desktop display of rock is valuable for the wonder it makes by bringing mountains and rivers in miniature onto the desk. However, whether it is rockery building or desktop display of rock, what is appreciated is the

wonder of external rocks. Only rock-themed creations are the organic conversion of external rocks to internal ones, which upgrades the appreciation of natural landscape in microcosm to the creation of emotion. Xue Song, who is not Mi Fu who was too addicted to rocks to take his official duty, or Ji Wufou who was interested in novelty seeking, is rather like Lin Youlin who painted everything the eye could reach. Lin Cheng, a painter of the Ming Dynasty, wrote a book *A Collection of Rocks in Su Garden* (Suyuan Shipu), attaching importance to the association of rock with buddhistic meditation. Like Lin Youlin, Xue Song, who admires the naturalness of external rocks and takes rock appreciation as a means of amusement and painting as a habit, is not ready to become a stander-by of rock appreciation but inclined to internalize those rocks in his artistic creations.

"Rock of empathy" and "roof-leak trace"

Xue Song started his painting of rocks with much attention first directed to the modeling and dimensions of rocks. His attachment to painting often prolonged the process of his creation to several months or years. Those rocks thus created are rarely seen in reality, as if a collection of peculiar features of grotesque rocks; although better demonstrating his skills and adhering to the requirements of painting, they turn out to be constraints of form and are found lacking his own characteristics. For Xue Song, the true principle of creating "internal rocks" is pursuing the "naturalness" of painting. Therefore, he consciously drops the attempts at the complete composition of painting and the scrupulous portrayal, but turns to highlight the air and spirit of rocks, which fall outside the representation of rock shape. "Majesty, straightforwardness and sturdiness" are out of question the nature of rocks, which should be enriched and penetrated by the spirit of the creator, or the rock is nothing but a rotten bone. "Rock of empathy" is a metaphor used to indicate the mental association between the creator and his rocks, which will finally lead to their harmonious unification. Perhaps, the rocks on canvas are "rocks of empathy" in the eye of Xue Song; they are not objects of amusement but the representation of life and the embodiment of his personal emotion. Naturally, he attaches more importance to the naturalness than to the accuracy in his creations. On the one hand, he stresses there is no difference between painting rocks and painting trees. He represents the massiveness of rocks and the spatial dimension by alternating big and small rocks to form a randomly arranged rock complex; on the other hand, as if inspired by "roof-leak trace", he uses lines in his creations as if they were traces of flowing waterdrop, "a concrete visual language".

To create another "Jieziyuan"

Doubtlessly, what Xue Song needs is not to become a transporter of exotic flowers and grotesque rocks, but to create another "Jieziyuan" (a very famous textbook of Chinese painting). In his "Rock Series"

from 2009, the seeming change is that the image of single rocks is replaced by that of rock complex. It seems that he is not satisfied with portrayal of single rocks but inclined to create more magnificent scenes on a large scale. His approach is a little like rockery building. In his creation, he arranges every single rock in an order as envisaged and specifies their shapes, volumes and positions; meanwhile, he keeps deconstructing or blurring the entirety of this composition. Just like the spot light on a stage, he always highlights some and obscures others in a conscious manner. This approach perhaps finds its origin in the conception of Chinese garden – "hide"; however, it is actually intended to realize the spatial construction on a plane. To create a magnificent space in the two-dimensional painting is not only a classic proposition but also an issue an artist has to address. It is like the legend of "Jieziyuan". Its physical existence has vanished into air but its life has remained for in every mind there is a different "Jieziyuan". What Xue Song takes great pains to create is his own "Jieziyuan"; similarly its unique effect of seeing a world in a grain of sand reflects our respective "building approaches".