

# **A Comparison of the Paintings of Bada Shanren and Shitao of the Qing Dynasty**

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## **1. The respective backgrounds of Bada Shanren and Shitao**

Bada Shanren, the last and best known of many names used by Zhuda (1626-1705/6), was a member of the royal household in the Ming Dynasty before he became a monk in 1644. Shitao was also a Ming prince who had grand stature as a painter. Fifteen years or so younger than Bada Shanren, Shitao was born probably between 1638 and 1641 and died possibly before 1720 (Loehr, 1980, p. 299 and 302). Both Bada Shanren and Shitao were forced to be monks and lived poor lives after the extinction of the Ming Dynasty. Due to their misfortunes, they both suffered great pains during their remaining years, which had a great influence on their paintings.

Although Bada Shanren was famous when he was alive, his only artist friend was Shitao (Cai & Xu, 1998). Despite their common backgrounds and mutual understanding, their paintings display a considerable amount of differences because of their divergent characteristics and attitudes toward life. In this essay, I will discuss the similarities and differences between their artwork through some painting examples, and give my own interpretations.



Figure 1  
 Autumn Eagle  
 Painted by Shitao  
 An eagle standing on a tree is staring at two magpies which are flying away.  
 From:  
<http://s11.sinaimg.cn/large/c88d18fagdeb731cb453a&690>



Figure 2  
 Eagle  
 Painted by Bada Shanren  
 An eagle standing on rock, with a pine tree nearby.  
 From:  
<http://static.duwenxue.com/attachments/image/55/55025/201501/20150110001350-99934.jpg>

## 2. Comparison of their bird-and-flower paintings

Examination of the bird-and-flower paintings of the two artists is the first area of comparison, with *Autumn Eagle* (Figure 1) by Shitao, and *Eagle* (Figure 2) by Bada Shanren. There are an eagle and a tree, common objects in Chinese paintings, in both of them. However, it is evident that the basic atmosphere of the paintings is completely different.

In Shitao's painting, two magpies see an eagle standing on its feet in a tree overlooking them, indicating the eagle is ready to fly to catch them, and they quickly fly to escape. In the painting of Bada Shanren, a single eagle stands on a bleak pine tree on only one leg, which means the eagle is having a rest, and its eyes are cold and solemn.

There are some doubts among modern artists and critics about the artist of *Autumn Eagle* (Figure 1) because Shitao rarely displayed techniques like this. Still, it is widely believed that the poem and some grass and flowers were drawn by Shitao (He, Wu & Tang, 2005).

The rough meaning of the poem from Shitao's work translates as follows: "Eagles can fly between sea and sky. They preserve their energy in February and start

predation in August. Although they may have no nest to have a rest, they aim to triumph in the sky.” To some extent, this poem indicates Shitao’s positive life attitude and ambition. In contrast, Bada Shanren’s painting style is gloomy; it seems that the eagle is staring at something hateful. It is significant that the eagle in Shitao’s painting is staring at its prey, while the eagle in Bada Shanren’s is staring at something unknown. What the eagle is staring at is much debated. I hold the view that the eagle may be staring at the abhorrent Qing Government who destroyed the Ming Dynasty, or some of the Han people who wanted to work for Manchu to achieve high official positions and riches.

In the face of the extinction of the Ming Dynasty and the artists’ great life changes, it is recorded that Shitao struggled to make friends with influential officials and even knelt to the Kangxi emperor twice during his later years. Despite that, Shitao also characterized himself often as yimin, ‘remnants’, people left over from the Ming Dynasty and unable to fully give their allegiance to the Qing (Clunas, 2009). This indicates that Shitao’s self-orientation was contradictory and changeable.

In contrast, Bada Shanren pretended to be a deaf mute in order to keep away from the Manchu government (Loehr, 1980), but he could not rise above his poor existence. He expressed his deep love for the Ming Dynasty and his strong sense of dissatisfaction with the Qing Dynasty obscurely in his paintings.

After a comparison of these bird-and-flower paintings, it can be seen that Bada Shanren’s paintings have a unique and distinctive visual perception, which is much stranger than Shitao’s and his contemporaries’ and predecessors’. Thus, it makes Bada Shanren’s paintings difficult to understand.

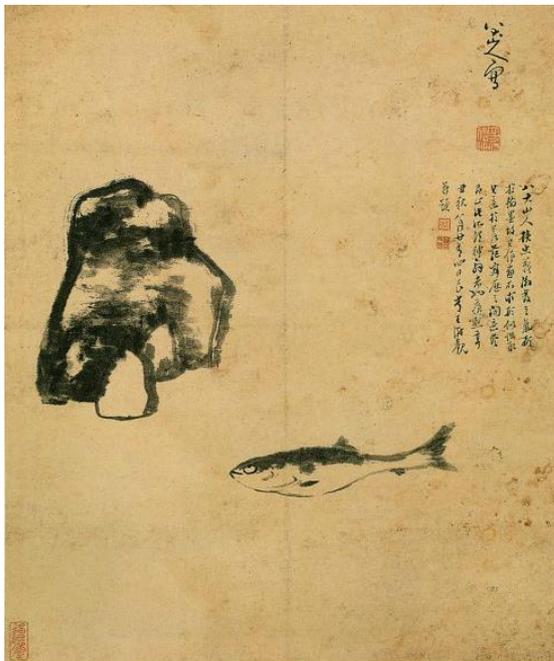


Figure 3

Fish

Painted by Bada Shanren

A fish is standing with a simple rock, with the other parts of picture blank.

From:  
<http://s8.sinaimg.cn/large/74cceddcxc1ce3a26404e&690>



Figure 4

Bird

Painted by Bada Shanren

A bird is standing on one leg, with the other parts of the picture blank.

From:

<http://static.duwenxue.com/attachs/image/55/55025/201501/20150110000110-77444.jpg>

### 3. Bada Shanren's artistic characteristics and his learning experience

The negative and obscure emotions of Bada Shanren can be found in many of his other paintings with succinct pictures and unusual objects. Two typical examples of the strange fish and birds painted by Bada Shanren are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4. His unique painting technique and characteristic way of expressing emotion can be felt deeply. It is noticeable that there is much blankness left in the picture. During the more than five-thousand-year history of Chinese painting, Bada Shanren is the only painter who dares to draw the object in an area less than one-tenth of the picture and leave the other parts blank (Zhang, 2009).

Blankness is a unique technique in Chinese painting. Sometimes it represents cloud and fog, sometimes it represents earth and sky, and sometimes it gives viewers emotional imagination or suggestions. The blankness left in these two paintings highlights the object in the center of the picture and suggests a strong feeling of loneliness. When focusing on the fish and the bird, we can discover that their eyes look very unusual. My view is that they are showing the whites of their eyes to the Manchu government, who destroyed Bada Shanren's noble life. Actually, both the fish and the bird represent Bada Shanren himself. The blankness in these two paintings also suggests that the Manchu government has cruelly taken everything away from him, leaving him with only an ugly stone, or nothing. Under this circumstance, the fish and the bird are both angry, alone and full of hatred and stubbornness, which is vividly expressed through the whites of their eyes.

Bada Shanren's highly distinct work, resulting from his extreme mental state, is unlike anything previously produced by a painter in China (Clunas, 2009). In the

process of forming his unusual painting styles, Bada Shanren incorporated excellent traditional knowledge from his predecessors, and simultaneously found a new path.

In Bada Shanren's early years, which are called his "imitation period", the basis of bird-and-flower painting was learned from the wild style of Xu Xi in the Five Dynasties and Chinese literati painting in the Song Dynasty (Jiao, 2015). Meanwhile, he was also influenced by the extensive painting techniques of Lin Liang, Lv Ji and Lu Zhi. As for his landscape painting style, it imitates predecessors like Dong Qichang and Mi Fu. During the second period of his life, called the "exaggeration period", the fish, bird and insect are all simplified and exaggerated just like Figure 3 and Figure 4. His third period is called the "transformation period", during which the inscription of "Bada Shanren" began to be used. His "recovery period", which is the fourth period, refers to his recovering his original simplicity. During this period, his painting techniques became more skillful and implicit (Jiao, 2015). Bada Shanren stayed single all his life. In his extraordinary and lonely life, Bada Shanren developed unique painting techniques and became a master of "freehand brushworks" (or "Xie Yi Hua").

#### 4. Shitao's artistic characteristics and his learning experience

Similarly, Shitao's painting technique is very unique, creative and full of emotion compared to most of the artists' contemporaries. In the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty, imitation of the ancients was the mainstream painting style. A comparison of two artworks from Wang Shimin (Qing Dynasty) and Huang Gongwang (Yuan Dynasty) reveals that the structure and outline of these two paintings are very similar.



Mountain  
Painted by  
Wang  
Shimin  
(1592-1680)  
Qing  
Dynasty  
From:  
<http://s10.sinaimg.cn/large/c88d18fa000000000000000000000000>



Mountain  
Painted by Huang  
Gongwang (1269-  
1354)  
Yuan Dynasty  
From:  
<http://p1.so.qhmsg.com/t0119ff77b4af1e09c1.jpg>

From this environment of imitation of the classics, Shitao and Bada Shanren were dedicated to innovation on the basis of inheriting from their predecessors. Four monks, including Shitao and Bada Shanren, best represent the renovationists of that

time (Zheng & Lan, 1989). Although their artworks were based on traditional paintings, they emphasized the development of Chinese paintings by learning from the past. Shitao, whose landscape paintings were derived from real-life, was the most prominent among the four monks. As a result of frequently wandering the hills and mountains to find inspiration in his life, Shitao's landscape paintings, which imitated nature, are full of passion and variety.



Figure 5

Mountains and Hermits

Painted by Shitao

A typical landscape painting of Shitao, which contains many painting techniques and nearly all basic elements of Chinese landscape painting.

From:

[http://img.ph.126.net/YExr\\_zfaOx8tBeRnjzhoLw==/1331658114834906453.jpg](http://img.ph.126.net/YExr_zfaOx8tBeRnjzhoLw==/1331658114834906453.jpg)

Figure 5 depicts one of the paintings from the highest level of Shitao's artistic mastery. The basic atmosphere of this painting is wild. There are various peaks which vary from light to dark and high to low in the top half part of the canvas. Splash-ink and outline are used for drawing the mountains. Different kinds of trees are growing from left center, which indirectly indicates the existence of wind (Mao, 2012). A great deal of blankness is placed in the center of the picture to indicate clouds and mist. Simultaneously, the blank space highlights the height of the mountain. A waterfall flows through the lower left quarter of the picture. Two hermits are sitting face to face in the log cabin, which is surrounded by various plants.

In my view, this painting may have been composed while Shitao was traveling on this beautiful mountain, and then he imagined himself living in this kind of peaceful

place without sorrow and anxiety. So, he created this painting smoothly with the emergence of inspiration. It reflects that, after suffering much pain and disappointment, Shitao was looking forward to staying away from worldly success and leading such a quiet life.

An appreciation of Shitao's paintings reveals that his painting style is quite varied, depending on his learning experience and life course. In his early years, his painting style of landscape paintings was influenced by Mei Qing, who used many angles and wrinkling and rubbing skills to make objects beautiful, vigorous and strong. (Anonymous, 1970). Accordingly, he was called 'fine brush Shitao' at that time. He regarded nature as his teacher and traveled around well-known Chinese mountains and rivers like Mount Huangshan, Mount Huashan, Mount Lushan, Mount Tiantaishan, Yangtze River, Dongting Lake, and West Lake. He learned a great deal from the inexhaustible resources of nature to enrich his creation. Otherwise, he learned the broad techniques of painting from various previous painters, especially Ni Zan, Wu Zhen, Huang Gongwang, Wang Meng in the Yuan dynasty, and Shen Zhou and Chen Hongshou in the Ming dynasty. Gradually, Shitao's personal art style was formed, which is bold, unconstrained, natural, vigorous, fantastic and creative (Anonymous, 1970).

Shitao's rich painting experience and knowledge built up his masterful ability of controlling his paint brush. As a result, his style of painting is flexible, diverse and indulgent. The structure of Shitao's paintings is highly original, which reflects his deep artistic conception and attainments. In addition, his unique life experience of wandering the hills and mountains gave Shitao the talent for displaying and arranging the objects in the painting.



Figure 6

Home-coming after Fishing

Painted by Shitao

The sight of fishermen coming home after fishing.

From:

<http://img.bimg.126.net/photo/5h0KkmNXx-RU7aGQ0eI6eA==/5773614722289620596.jpg>

Shitao's study of the laws of nature is exemplified in these two paintings, Figure 5 and Figure 6. The clouds and mist of both paintings are similar. Using his refined technique, Shitao created some blankness between mountain and mountain or mountain and tree to portray the existence of clouds and mist. In my view, the inspiration of the clouds and mist comes from Mount Huangshan, which is famous for its marvelous spectacle like a sea of clouds, shown in Figure 7. This innovative kind of technique, which originates from Shitao's experience in nature, frequently appears in his landscape paintings.



Figure 7  
 Photos of Mount Huangshan  
 From: <http://www.colourhs.com/html/yingrenfengcai/lvyouwenhua/2012/0510/4519.html>

### 5. Personal evaluation of Bada Shanren's and Shitao's paintings

Both Bada Shanren and Shitao are great masters from the long history of Chinese painting. They were gifted painters who had their own unique thoughts, creative techniques and characteristic styles in that era in which copying the ancients was the norm. They learned from predecessors in their early years. As time went by, with the development of their knowledge, they transfused their personal feelings and life experience into the artwork, effectively forming their own style. Even though their early background was similar and they were mutual friends, their painting styles and central themes are divergent. Bada Shanren's paintings styles are strange, unconstrained, obscure and sometimes succinct. As for Shitao, his paintings are generally full of enthusiasm, and his painting techniques are various and skillful.

In my interpretation, appreciating Shitao's landscape paintings and bird-and-flower paintings is like putting yourself into nature to look for a peaceful life. Appreciating Bada Shanren's paintings is like touching his sorrowful and angry soul.

### 6. Conclusion

Both Bada Shanren and Shitao had the courage of innovation. Although they learned from predecessors, their paintings are beyond imagination. Hence, their distinct personal painting styles, including layout, technique, subject and philosophy, are formed respectively. Both artists told painters of later generations that learning how to convey your views in paintings is more important than learning how to use your brush.

In spite of their similar identity as society's "remnants", the differences in their life experience, cultural attainment and ideological levels make their paintings distinct. As a result of exploring the well-known mountains and rivers of China, Shitao is skilled at painting landscapes. In Shitao's landscape paintings, it is easy to find the impacts of "Master Nature". As for Bada Shanren, whose typical painting subjects are lonely fish and birds, his paintings are simple, strange and typically leave a large area of blankness. When it comes to deep meanings of their paintings, it is hard to posit a context for making such pictures, other than the person who painted them. But we can still feel the angry, sad and unruly soul of Bada Shanren and the positive, struggling and peaceful heart of Shitao. Using literary form as a metaphor, the style of Bada Shanren is like poetry, while the style of Shitao is like travel prose.

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