

UNUSUAL VISION

An artist, who is preoccupied with the purity of Song Dynasty aesthetics, has become synonymous with his paintings of expressive rabbits, **Lin Qi** reports.

A visit to Beijing-born artist Shao Fan's spacious home and studio on the city's northeastern outskirts reminds you of the sophisticated lifestyle led by Song Dynasty (960-1279) scholars.

Shao, 54, has transformed his modern residence into a time capsule that embodies the aesthetic pleasures valued by thinkers a thousand years ago, by following some of the cultural routines practiced by the gentry back then. He likes to drink tea, and ceramic tea jars occupy several shelves in his study. He burns incense sticks and hangs paintings on his walls — including several of his own works.

He also collects antiquities and arranges them sparsely around the rooms of his house, such as ancient Buddhist figures and articles of furniture picked up at antique markets like Beijing's Panjiayuan. He tends to his plants and trees and has even built a small pavilion, turning one of his courtyards into a classic Chinese garden.

The Mandarin word for "pavilion" is *ting*, which sounds like the word for "stop". "Pavilions are designed to be a place for people to stop, not just to rest, but also to gaze and think," Shao says.

"As you admire the vista from the pavilion, you in turn become part of the landscape for people looking back at you. You can't help but wonder how you seem from this alternative point of view."

Such philosophical thinking about the exchange of perspectives and the relationship between an individual and his or her surroundings is central to Shao's creations, especially the *shuimo* (ink-and-wash) paintings he has been working on for the past five years.

If you visit Shao's ongoing exhibition, *You*, at the Ludwig Museum in the German city of Koblenz, it's clear that the artist has maintained his consistent preference for symmetrical composition over the decades. And whether he uses canvas or traditional Chinese rice paper as his medium, Shao also likes to place the single subject of his work front and center. It's also clear that Shao has shifted his focus from oil paintings to ink monochromes since 2013.

The exhibition, which runs through July 22, and shows Shao's paintings, installations and furniture designs since the late 1980s, is based on a collaboration between the Ludwig Museum and Shao's international collectors and sponsors — including the Uli Sigg Collection, the Galerie Urs Meile in



Chinese artist Shao Fan is holding an exhibition at the Ludwig Museum in the German city of Koblenz. Shao likes to paint animals to evoke reflections about people. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Lucerne and the Erlenmeyer Foundation of Switzerland.

Whether he works with oil paint or Chinese ink, Shao endeavors to blend his yearning for the simple life with the unsophisticated beauty of Song-era artistry into his contemporary works. And through his layers of intricate strokes executed with ultimate patience, Shao prompts enduring questions about the nature of eternity and human existence itself.

One recurring motif in Shao's work has been a larger-than-life rabbit. The furry mammal that seems so vulner-

able in the natural world is instead depicted as an imposing creature with upright ears and a fearless, almost confrontational stare.

The rabbit motif became the focus for Shao's painterly work years after a friend gave him one as a gift. He later found the rabbit a mate and has since raised several of their offspring at home.

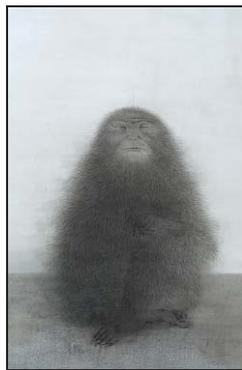
The statuesque rabbit in Shao's paintings sits on the ground, as steady as a pyramid, exuding a sense of volume and momentum.

Confronted with the image, the viewer "no longer feels the

superiority of being human, but shares the vulnerability of a small creature being looked down upon by something much bigger", Shao says.

While the rabbit image tends to evoke reflections about human self-centeredness, Shao adopts the imagery of an old monkey to discuss the process of aging. Under his brush, Shao personifies the monkey, making it look like a peaceful monk deep in meditation, impervious to the passing of time and the changing world.

On one hand, the monkey symbolizes Shao's attitude of keeping his distance from the



hustle and bustle of contemporary society. On the other hand, it conveys a view of eternity that embraces the ageing process and the calmness it brings, while gently contrasting this with the eternal pursuit of youthfulness through cosmetic surgery.

Old objects — with their refreshing, tranquil quality — form an important part of Shao's life. Besides the antiques he uses to decorate his home, Shao also keeps a large curved trunk of a camphor tree which he "saved" years ago from being sawed into pieces at a Beijing furniture workshop. And the centuries-old furniture in his collection have inspired him to create chair-shaped installations reminiscent of the purity and elegance of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) furniture.

Although Shao's interests mainly revolve around his cultural roots, people often misunderstand his work as a call to return to the past — or a refusal to acknowledge the present.

But what Shao conveys is a serious consideration of both the past and the present, to allow him to envision the future, according to German art curator and historian Ruth Noack in an article in 2016. "Someone is doing this by painting rabbits. And through his ink paintings, we can do it too," she wrote.

Contact the writer at linqi@chinadaily.com.cn

Workshops promote craft in rural Guizhou

By YANG JUN
yangjun@chinadaily.com.cn

Fashion from Southwest China's Guizhou province impressed visitors at the 2018 International Women Sustainable Development Forum and Handicrafts Exhibition held in London recently.

The products, which feature a fusion of Western fashion and Eastern motifs inspired by ethnic Miao embroidery and batik fabric decoration by rural women of Zhijin county in the province, were the fruit of a poverty alleviation program.

At the Fourth World Internet Conference in China last year, online discount retailer Vipshop had signed an agreement to help the impoverished county.

Traditional Miao embroidery and batik craft are important parts of China's intangible cultural heritage. As handicrafts of the Miao ethnic group, local women often learn embroidery and batik work when young.

However, the art typically fails to bring them enough income, so they have to find jobs outside their hometown. Official data suggest there are 40,000 seamstresses in the county, of which 7,000 live below the national poverty line.

"The best method is to let people, especially the younger generations, understand and respect traditional craft techniques. Once recognized by the market, such items can sell more and also help sustainable development," says Huang Hongying, vice-president of Vipshop.

So, an embroidery and batik workshop was set up in November to encourage local women to begin their own business. The workshop helps them make a living at home by broadening their sales channels through e-commerce. Since its foundation, the workshop has

brought 250,000 yuan (\$37,780) to its employees.

"I used to think that Miao embroidery and batik works were just part of our traditional culture. I never imagined that they would be so popular among Westerners," says Yang Linxian, a seamstress in Zhijin.

She is currently a master seamstress at the workshop on the recommendation of the local women's federation and was invited to attend the exhibition in London.

Vipshop also set up another workshop and signed an annual production order with the county in May, which is expected to bring further income of 10 million yuan for the local women.

Additionally, seven well-known brands that use the platform have partnered with the county to place orders and raise the popularity of Miao embroidery and batik craft. According to the agreements, each brand will provide orders of at least 100,000 yuan to the local seamstresses.

Now, the workshops have become a new way of protecting and developing local cultural heritage, and to help alleviate poverty. A total of 66 handicraft cooperatives have been set up in 32 villages of Zhijin.

It is reported that over 30,000 women will engage in traditional handicraft production by 2020, aiming to lift up to 60,000 people out of poverty.



Top: Members of China's Miao ethnic group pose with models at the recent International Women Sustainable Development Forum and Handicrafts Exhibition in London. Above: Miao women show off their embroidery skills at the event. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Photography festival puts spotlight on ancient city

TAIYUAN — In September, the Pingyao International Photography Festival will celebrate its 18th anniversary in the ancient walled city of Pingyao in northern China.

Advocating diversity, internationalism and professionalism, the annual festival is considered an important stage for international photographers to display their talent.

Over the past 17 years, the festival has attracted 4.5 million visitors and exhibited over 220,000 works of 37,000 pho-

tographers from more than 100 countries and regions.

Cui Bo, 50, has attended a total of 15 festivals in Pingyao, over which time he grew from a photo editor into an acclaimed curator.

The festival is an excellent stage for photographers to open up to the world, Cui says.

"I am very grateful for the festival, both personally and professionally," he adds.

Wang Xiaojun opened her homestay on the first day of the second festival in 2002

when she gave birth to her daughter.

While taking care of her baby, she often spoke with foreigners at the festival.

Now, she not only speaks fluent English, but is a poet and an amateur photographer.

The ancient walled city of Pingyao was built in the 14th century, and was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, as "an exceptionally well-preserved example of a traditional Han Chinese city".



The Chinese city of Pingyao, built in the 14th century, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site for being an exceptionally well-preserved example of a traditional city. CHEN YAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

The city boomed in the 19th century as China's financial center, as Shanxi merchants expanded their businesses

across the country.

Now, the well-preserved compounds of these affluent merchants have made the

town a unique site to hold exhibitions.

Song Linmao, a local resident, is devoted to protecting the residences of the Shanxi merchants. And he spent four years transforming three rundown compounds into a quaint guesthouse containing structures in the Ming and Qing styles.

"Famous French photographer Alain Jullien stayed here in the 1990s, and he told me to take good care of the local buildings," says Song.

While maintaining traditions and professionalism, the festival also pursues innovation and creation. This year's festival, which opens on Sept 19, will for the first time feature a multimedia exhibition of photographic works, according to Zhang Guotian,

the festival's art director.

"We will transform an old diesel engine factory into a movie theater during the festival to give audiences a combined experience of video, sound and still pictures," says Zhang.

So far, this year's festival has received works from around 2,000 photographers from more than 30 countries and regions.

A highlight of the event will be an exhibition of works by Neal Slavin, an American photographer specializing in group portraits.

For his first exhibition in China, he will bring his magnum opus *Neal Slavin: Group and Gatherings* to the festival.