

Dali Dreamstones

REVIVAL OF AN ANCIENT ART FORM

by Michael C. Teller IV

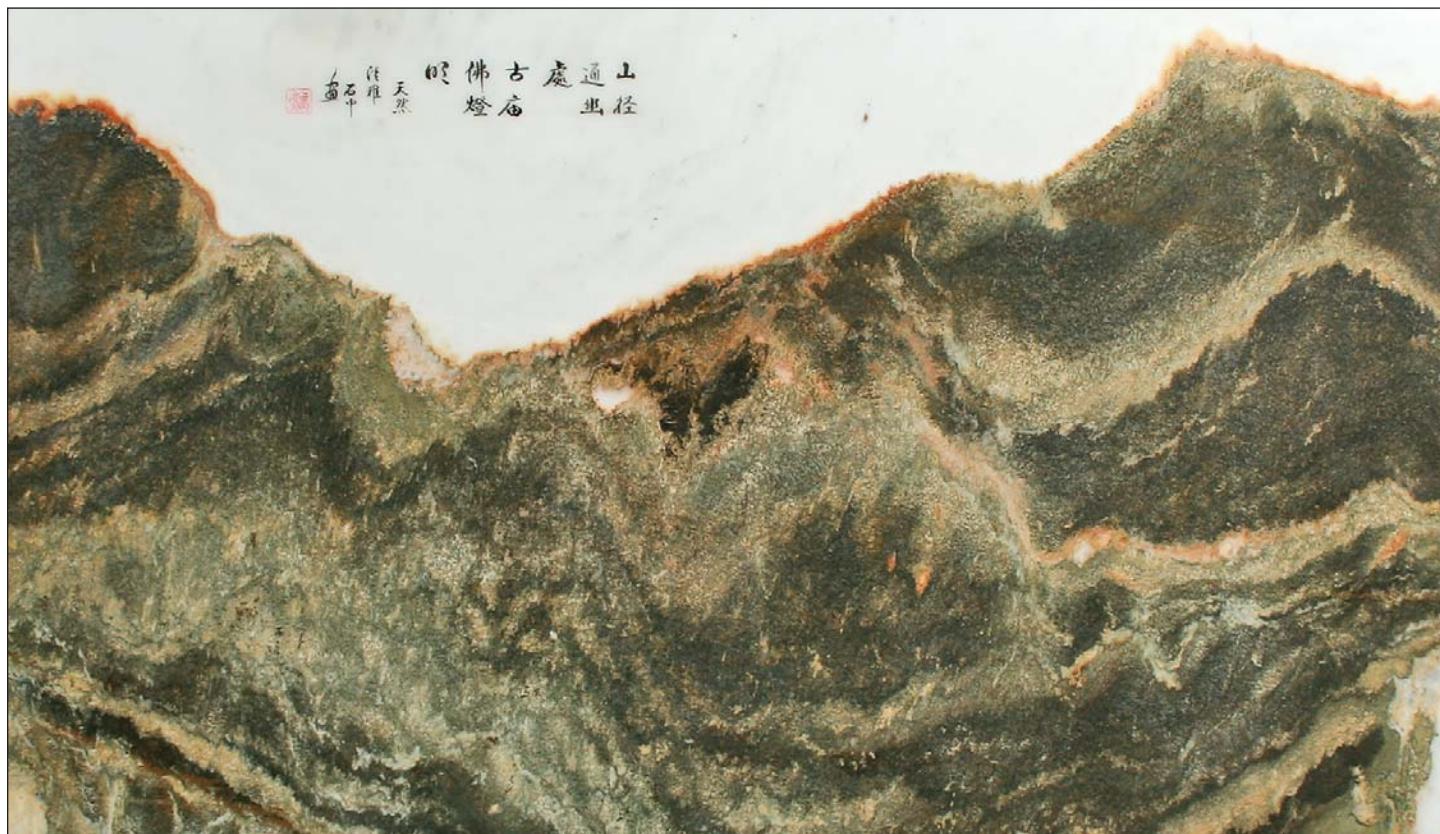
Near the ancient town of Dali in Yunnan Province in Southwest China is the towering massif called Cangshan that contains extraordinary marble deposits noted for their unique twisted striations and explosive combinations of colors. This Yunnan stone was esteemed so early in China that the Chinese word for "marble" is "dali." This marble is also the source of Dali Dreamstones, natural canvases that reveal mysterious variegated patterns within each formation.

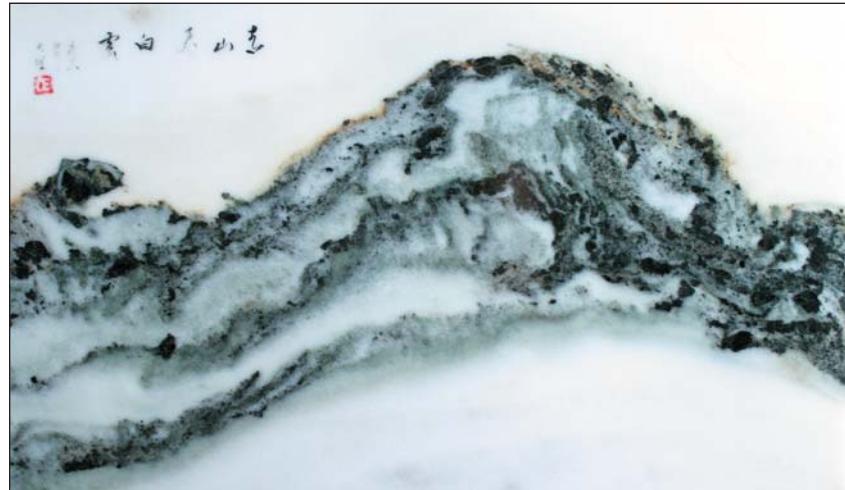
To the Chinese, man and nature are only parts of the cosmos and although man is an integral part he is neither incidental nor extraordinary. To aid in their contemplation, Chinese scholars have looked to earthly objects whose forms appeared to encapsulate nature: bizarrely eroded stones, a perfectly

proportioned forest fungus, driftwood or baroquely contorted bamboo, left in their original states or somewhat altered by the hand of man. The designs revealed in the stone after cutting have traditionally been assigned to one of three basic types: *yunhui* (grey clouds), *moshi* or *baishi* (white jade), and *caihua* (colored flowers). The immense number of designs, however, defies categorization and allows for virtually the full spectrum of everyone's imagination to be realized in a physical manifestation. The famous Ming Dynasty chronicler Xu Xiake (1587–1641), wrote that caihua marbles dwarfed all paintings in conveying the true essence of nature. One of his poems reads, "Blazing with color, exquisite, glistening, magnificent, so marvelous and picturesque that no painting in the world can compete with it. The great variety

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Mountain path leads to quiet places, the light from the oil lamp in front of the Buddha brighten up the old temple. This stone was collected from Sichuan Province in 2010 by Yang Jun.





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

The mountain flowers are in full bloom and the sound of the waterfall appears to be calling the birds. The stone was selected from the Cang Mountain in Da Li of Yunnan in 2009 by Yang Dai Ze.

Bounding Deer. The stone was carefully selected from the Dian Cang Mountain in Da Li of Yunnan in the year 2009.

The green hills were covered with floating white clouds. The stone was selected from the Cang Mountain in Da Li Province of Yunnan in 2009 by Du Ke Gui.

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of color and patterns present the life of man and the beauty of nature."

Dali stones have been prized and contemplated since at least the early Tang Dynasty (618–907). During the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) a portion of the Dali Kingdom's annual tribute to the Song Court was stipulated to be Dali marble, and this exquisite marble was used in the construction of the Forbidden City (1403–1425) and in the Ming Dynasty Imperial Tombs. Due to the extreme turmoil in China's twentieth-century history, however, both the "art of selecting" as well as the preponderance of knowledge of Dali dreamstones was essentially removed from the consciousness of two generations of the Chinese population, with the additional consequence of keeping the awareness of this extraordinary art form from being appropriately acknowledged in the Western world.

In the 1990s, however, a small group of people, primarily Bai Nationality descendants centered in Dali, were actively finding, selecting, and collecting dreamstones in the traditional manner. Their income to fund their endeavors was essentially derived from selling souvenir quality stones to tourists as well as mining building-grade marble for resorts and residences. By the year 2004, however, an encouraging number of publications, a monthly magazine, and a scholarly text had been produced, and serious buyers were beginning to travel to Dali. Increased interest resulted in the "suppliers" and Master Selectors producing more variety than had been available for nearly a century. Even with this increasing awareness, the West has still remained relatively uninformed about the revival of this activity because virtually all of the publications have been in Chinese. That being said, when sold on the American market,

prices for Dreamstones have risen upwards of \$250,000, although many superb artifacts are still sold in the low thousands. The demographic of the buyers ranges the full spectrum; there is no barrier to the fascination, if not outright awe, of the Dali Dreamstones. As more exhibitions and scholarship become available in both the Eastern and Western worlds, it is unquestionable that this ancient art form will, once again, come to the forefront of appreciation by the art community, be they established collectors, artists, or those at the beginning of their journey to establish an aesthetic connection to the natural world around them. **AFA**

Michael C. Teller IV is the founder and president of TK Asian Antiquities, and chairman of the International Dali Dreamstone Association.