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Perhaps the last of all the varied manifestations of the millennial ranges of Chinese art to reach the appreciation of the public is Chinese furniture. *George N. Kates*

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The San Francisco Symposium on Classical Chinese Wood Furniture

Curtis Evarts

The Dr. S. Y. Yip Symposium on Classical Chinese Furniture, held in Hong Kong last year, marked the first of a series of symposia to share knowledge and viewpoints in the quickly developing field of Chinese furniture. Since this inaugural event, two more have occurred in mainland China, while the first American symposium was held on 31 October 1992, at Cowell Theater in Fort Mason Center, San Francisco. It was organized in conjunction with the exhibition, "Classic Chinese Wood Furniture," at the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum. Although the exhibition was modest, the organizers of the one-day symposium attracted a number of the leading authorities in the field as guest speakers, and drew an audience of more than three hundred.

In his opening address, Weldon Smith, director of the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, gratefully acknowledged the California Council of the Humanities and other sponsors of the symposium. Clarence Shangraw, formerly the director of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and now director of the new T. T. Tsui Museum of Art in Hong Kong, then assumed the role of moderator, introducing the speakers and their topics with insightful remarks that revealed the breadth of his

own knowledge of Chinese art and history.

The symposium offered a balanced program of speakers and topics, beginning with Harold Kahn (professor of Chinese history at Stanford University), who painted a colorful portrait of the *mélange* of life in Ming dynasty China, emphasizing the complex

social and historical context that must be considered in any study of late Ming and early Qing furniture. Sandra Chin, who teaches Chinese art history at Dominican College in San Rafael, California, followed with a paper that traced the flow of New World silver into a stagnating Chinese economy during the latter half of the sixteenth century, maintaining that this trade helped to stimulate the rapid rise in prosperity that created a relatively broad-based market for Ming-style furniture. In a more vi-



Clarence Shangraw

sually-oriented presentation, Sarah Handler wove together two contrasting themes—the development of the Bauhaus aesthetic as represented by Marcel Breuer's tubular steel "Wassily" armchair, and the evolution of a similarly minimalistic aesthetic seen in some Ming pieces, as represented by a *huanghuali* meditation chair—to convincingly illustrate the reasons for the twentieth-century Western romance with Ming-style furniture, while focusing on a truly

unique example of classical Chinese furniture.

Following the morning lectures, a special luncheon for ninety was catered by a local *dim sum* restaurant, Yank Sing, with wines poured from Renaissance Vineyard and Winery. The speakers and those in attendance sat at large round tables, and the room resounded with lively conversation. During the lunch break, participants were able to visit the furniture exhibition at the nearby San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum. The furniture for the exhibition was selected by the guest curator, Sandra Chin, and included nearly twenty pieces from five Bay Area collections, comprising a variety of types and forms of classical Chinese furniture. Of particular note were several pieces from the Reverend Richard Fabian Collection, which furnished nearly half of the pieces in the exhibition.

The single *jumu* tapered cabinet (catalog no. 13) (fig. 1) is of excellent proportions and, although the fact is not mentioned in the catalog, it is one of a pair. The highly figured and book-matched panels of the doors testify to the beauty that can be found in other woods besides *huanghuali*, *zitan*, and *jichimu*. The *huanghuali kang* table (catalog no. 3) (fig. 2) can be compared with a similar, but less decorated, *kang* table in the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California (see Sarah Handler, "On a New World Arose the Kang Table," *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Summer 1992, p. 35). The cabriole legs terminating in a leaf-and-ball motif are so

similarly shaped in both examples that it is now possible to see from the Fabian table how the original leaf on the Museum's more worn example originally appeared. On both tables, the pads carved below the feet begin with faceted sides; those on the Fabian table, however, flare outward, and are almost bell-shaped, suggesting again that the Museum's example has seen more wear. Considering other similar details of construction, it is entirely conceivable that

these two tables originated from the same extended family or village workshop.

The *huanghuali* horseshoe-back armchair, carved to resemble bamboo (catalog no. 6) (fig. 3), reminds us that furniture was often made in large sets. Six of these chairs are now known, and possibly there are more. Four can be seen on display at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, and another single chair is in a private collection in Seattle. Although one side post has been replaced, the Fabian chair seems to be the most complete. All of the Nelson-Atkins chairs have empty mortises below their foot and side stretchers, where decorative aprons shaped like bamboo were originally placed; the aprons on the Seattle chair are more recent undecorated replacements. Nevertheless, these chairs successfully combine a bold Ming form with the sensitive shaping of an inflexible material to resemble yielding bamboo.

The forty-eight-page exhibition catalog with

plates and captions for all the exhibits was prepared by Sandra Chin, and also featured an article by Lark Mason, Jr. His essay, "Chinese Furniture and American Collectors," gives an interesting perspective of the formation of American collections from the late nineteenth century to the present. He concludes with an appeal to scholars, dealers, and collectors to take a broader approach toward classical Chinese furniture, and recommends that more emphasis be given to lacquer and softwood furniture, as well as pre-Ming materials, to quicken advancement in the field. His

suggestion may be somewhat idealistic, given that only a handful of pre-Ming furniture pieces has survived, and that the fragility of the relatively limited amount of extant lacquer furniture from the Ming dynasty creates a multitude of problems for today's collectors. That this material should be included within the developing scholarship on classical Chinese furniture, however, few will dispute.

The symposium reopened in the afternoon with



Weldon Smith

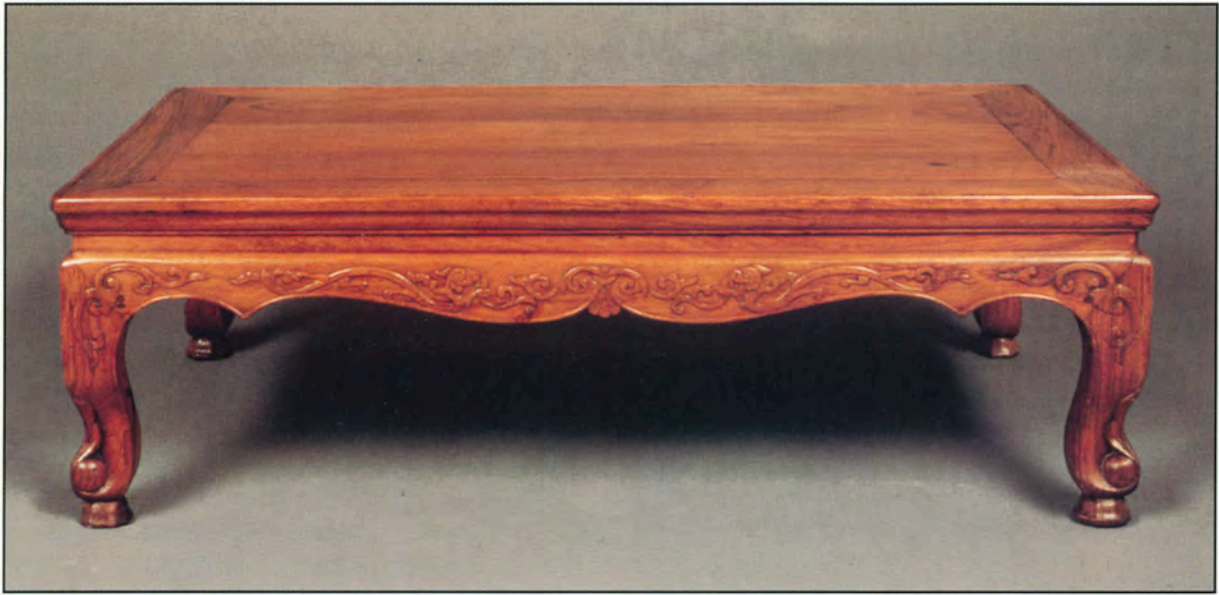
two technical discussions. Wang Shixiang illustrated eight joints used by Ming cabinetmakers in common furniture types, and traced the gradual deterioration in their construction, which was part of the collapse of craftsmanship in the later Qing dynasty. Lark Mason, Jr., drew on his years of experience examining furniture as Sotheby's vice-president of Chinese art, and revealed many of the common deceptions he has encountered while attempting to verify the original condition of early Chinese furniture.

Craig Clunas (deputy curator of the Far Eastern Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London), was the symposium's keynote speaker, and had the

audience in stitches several times. His animated social commentary astutely traced the fashionable trends of Western society that, in the eighteenth century, created the market for China's chinoiserie export goods and, in the twentieth century, created the concept of "classical" Chinese furniture, reminding us that the winds of time sing their own praise. His own song appeared to be somewhat embellished, however, when he arguably maintained in his dramatic conclusion that Wang Shixiang has taught us that today's masterpieces of classical Chinese furniture began their life as "the vulgar taste of the lowest and most despised stratum of petty government clerk."

After the papers were presented, written questions were directed to a panel composed of the six guest speakers. Several questions were asked about the woods used in Chinese furniture. Wang Shixiang stated, "We can be quite sure that most of the hardwood came from Hainan Island, because in a book written by a Chinese person (Qu Dajun) called *New Talks on Canton*, there is a chapter devoted to hardwood from Hainan. He mentions *huanghuali*, *zitan*, *jichimu*, and all kinds of hardwood used for furniture, so we are very sure about that." In regard to a question regarding *zitan*, Wang Shixiang said that he believes that several species of wood, varying in color and grain, are called *zitan*, and suggested that more thorough research be carried out by botanists to analyze these woods. Lark Mason, responding to a question on whether softwood furniture traveled better than hardwood furniture in terms of shrinkage and cracking in response to changes in humidity, reminded the audience of the inconsistent use of the terms "softwood" and "hardwood" relative to Chinese furniture. Chinese furniture dealers and scholars tend to call certain woods—like *jumu*, *zhajing*, and camphor—"softwoods," when, from a botanical point of view, they are actually hardwoods, thereby perpetuating the confusion. Another common misunderstanding, regarding the shrinkage of hardwoods versus softwoods, was, however, incorrectly addressed. All woods shrink,





and hardwoods on the average shrink more than softwoods. It is the moisture content of wood before it is put into use that, to a large extent, determines how much more it will shrink before it reaches a state of equilibrium with the surrounding atmospheric conditions. Once properly dried, some softwoods are just as stable as some hardwoods, and, likewise, other examples of both categories can be equally sensitive to changes in conditions of humidity. For instance, *hongmu* is a tropical hardwood that has considerable movement relative to changes in humidity, while redwood (*sequoia sempervirens*), a true softwood, is extremely stable.

In a question addressed to Craig Clunas concerning the influence of Chinese design on Western furniture, Clunas noted that most of his research on this subject

has concentrated on Chinese influence in Britain, and suggested that evidence of Chinese influence in other northern European countries that were trading



Fig. 1, facing page. Cabinet, c. seventeenth century. Jumu; height 176.5 cm, length of top 90.2 cm, width of top 48.3 cm. Reverend Richard Fabian Collection, San Francisco.

Fig. 2, above. Kang table, c. seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 30.5 cm, length of top 96.5 cm, width of top 61.6 cm. Reverend Richard Fabian Collection, San Francisco.

Fig. 3, right. Horseshoe-back armchair, c. seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 97 cm, depth of seat 47.5 cm, width of seat 61 cm. Reverend Richard Fabian Collection, San Francisco.

directly with Canton should be examined as well.

From the variety of responses to a question regarding the proper methods of refinishing and maintaining a piece of Chinese furniture, it became apparent that standard restoration and conservation practices have yet to be established, and that practices in the East are usually inconsistent with those in the West. This explains why so many pieces have lost their aged surfaces, and why only a handful of pieces with any of their original lacquer finish remain today. In a future symposium of this type, the participation of a qualified restorer would be a welcome addition.

Responding to a question regarding regional schools and styles, Craig Clunas commented that it is one of the most important topics for future research. Wang Shixiang agreed, remarking that, although he had been able to travel to some extent while collecting material for his books, very little investigation has actually occurred because China is so large and contains so many small districts. He candidly admitted, "Now smugglers know more than I do. They have been buying in different places, and if they really paid attention to the same district, [they could] find the same kinds of pieces, and gradually would know the facts about the styles of that district. There are so many gaps. I am a little too old now to do that! Really, we need some new students to do this in order to learn more."

The value of a symposium that embraces a broad spectrum is the relative understanding it brings to its subject. Yet when much light is shed on a large area of uneven ground, the shadows created by the peaks and valleys become more apparent. Both the papers and the questions exposed several areas that call out for further research and development. It is time to take a much closer look at the materials of Chinese furniture, and to develop restoration techniques that conserve original finishes. An attempt must be made to gather data about regional styles before the little information that exists is scattered and forever lost. An increased knowledge in these areas may also help to solve some of the many questions of dating that most scholars evade, for it is a subject that remains quite sketchy, full of assumptions and presumptions. And last, but most important, we must not forget the few remaining masterpieces themselves. Although in their own time they were common objects and were perhaps not as revered as romantics might lead us to believe, they have nevertheless survived the turmoil of time and destruction, and are now imbued with and distinguished by their antiquity.

Note: Catalogs of the exhibition are still available from the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum. For further information call or write: San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, Fort Mason, Building A, San Francisco, CA 94123. Telephone: 415-775-0990.

Acknowledgments

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