

CHRISTIE'S
NEW YORK

From Elegant Mansions:
Fine Classical Chinese Furniture
and Works of Art

Wednesday 16 September 1998



In Pursuit of Elegance and Majesty: Traditional Living Spaces of the Elite in Late Imperial China

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Much of the 'classical' Chinese furniture admired today once furnished elite households of late Imperial China. These isolated treasures can be further appreciated with some knowledge of the traditional environments which they once graced. Living spaces of such households were divided according to various social functions, and can be generally categorized as the main hall, studio, and private apartment; moreover, the furnishings of these spaces were commonly rearranged to meet occasional needs.

The Main Hall

Main halls were generally situated along the centerline of the axially oriented courtyard complex. Their number and size varied according to rank and wealth of the owner, and their function served a range of ritual and secular needs. Spacious halls required furnishings of complementary scale. A large scroll painting (Lot 22) was frequently hung on the back wall, flanked by poetic calligraphic couplets. Standing below, a massive, long table (Lot 34) was appropriately arranged with a censer and incense accessories, and perhaps an exotic rock (Lots 17, 24, 101), seasonal flowers in an antique vase, or potted landscapes - each according to the season and appropriate to the occasion. When not in use, these and other household commodities were stored under lock and key in large cabinets which stood along the side walls.¹

The front hall served as a place to receive and entertain guests. A single chair of significant stature - such as the *huanghuali* folding chair in this sale (Lot 32) - was arranged for the master of the house in front of a large decorative screen. The screen served to enhance the sitter's status, and it also shielded such formalities from the inner private chambers. In addition, screens placed at the entrance served as windbreaks. Those were also thought to block evil spirits from entering. After making their obeisances, callers would sit on stools of subordinate stature. Sometimes, a pair of chairs or more were arranged respectfully to accommodate guests of equal stature. A censer atop a small table or incense stand was placed to the side of the screen.

The hall was used for various ceremonies and festivities, each requiring special arrangements. An episode in *Jin Ping Mei* describes a wedding banquet held in a large reception hall which was specially arranged with large decorative screens, banquet tables draped with embroidered frontals, chairs dressed with brocade covers, and woven carpets (Lot 42).² Seating arrangements at banquets were typically U-shaped, with musicians and other entertainers performing in the center. Honored guests were seated at the head, with others seated along the sides and distanced from the head in hierarchical order. Modular square tables were often placed side by side to make up such arrangements. Those such as the *huanghuali* square table with demountable legs (Lot 13) were conveniently stowed away when not in use.

Episodes from *Jin Ping Mei*,³ as well as *Dream of the Red Mansion*, describe funerary occasions in the main hall. The latter details preparations which occur after Jia Lian's concubine Er'xie passes away, and servants are ordered to clear the furniture from the front reception hall and transform the space into a shrine for the coffin with screens and hangings.⁴

Traditional Confucian households usually placed an ancestral shrine along the back wall in one of the main halls. An ancestral portrait hung on the wall with rows of ancestral tablets standing below it. A long table was arranged in front with an altar setting - censer at the center flanked by candlesticks and vases; sacrificial offerings - flowers, fruits, and meats - were periodically set out on a smaller table in front of that one.

The Scholar's Studio

In *Eight Discourses on the Art of Living*, Gao Lian noted, "The study should be bright yet peaceful, and not too expansive. Brightness and cleanliness will nourish the mind and spirit, but a room too spacious can bewilder the eyes." Practically speaking, the studio was a space where the scholar lived out his life, "spending long days on the mat and late evenings under the wicker lamp" indulging in the four arts – calligraphy, painting, poetry and music – and the private examination of books, paintings, and artifacts without distraction. Gao suggested setting out potted junipers, pines, and orchids around the outside of the studio, a basin near the window with five to seven goldfish where the recluse could observe the "phenomena of natural life," and a washbasin outside to rinse inkstones.⁵

A large painting table (Lot 125) was central to the studio and was to be set with the requisite writing implements. These objects were all to be worthy of connoisseurship, and their placement on the table was carefully considered. A large, single chair (Lot 123) was typically paired with the painting table. According to Gao, this seat was to be "...half again as big as an ordinary chair. Only the 'water polished' ones are beautiful, although those of speckled bamboo can be used. And regarding selection, consider first the comfort of the thickened headrest (like those in Lot 105)." ⁶

Massaging footstools were also commonly placed in front of the chair under the painting table. There the sitter, moving his feet back and forth over the rollers, would stimulate the pressure points to enliven his creative energies⁷; the increased blood circulation also brought warmth to the extremities. The *huanghuali* desk/table with foot rollers integrated into the base (Lot 55) is a rare adaptation reflecting the customary use.

A daybed (Lot 116) placed along a wall provided a place for quiet relaxation, as well as a platform to entertain a friend while playing enchanting music on the *qin* (Lot 70). Gao recommended placing the daybed on the left side of the study, and further elaborated:

A small table set at the end of the bed can be arranged with either a bronze wine vessel or *geyao* porcelain vase. When flowers are in season, overfill the vase with cuttings so the fragrance enriches the room.... A censer can also be placed upon the table to burn "seal-script" incense.⁸

Bookcases and cabinets were of primary importance for storing texts associated with scholarly pursuits. In his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, Wen Zhenheng recommended large red-lacquer tapered cabinets for storing classic texts.⁹ Ink rubbings were also rolled up and placed in the bookcase. Small cabinets and chests (Lot 83) made of precious woods, speckled bamboo, or inlaid lacquer provided elegant storage spaces for stationary implements and treasured antiquities.

Private Apartments

Private apartments ranged from grand courtyard accommodations to single rooms. The former, with private halls for visitation and dining, were sufficient to house guests as well as a permanent staff of maids. Such was Grandmother Jia's private hall as described in The 18th century novel, *Story of the Stone*, where she comfortably enjoyed hours of leisure. It was furnished with a *chuang* (bed). Wen describes the private hall as a space where, with windows removed during the heat of the summer months, one could enjoy the cool shade of *wutong* trees in front and the gentle impression of bamboo outside the back wall. He further noted that curtains of speckled bamboo added a cool, refreshing atmosphere, making the speckled bamboo daybed placed in front of the north window an excellent place to rest.¹⁰

One of Grandma Jia's teenage granddaughters resided in an undivided three-bay apartment. A large *huali* table with a *Dali* marble panel in the center of the room served as a desk. On the west wall hung a landscape painting by Mi Fei flanked by scrolls of calligraphy. Below, a side table was set out with a large censer; to its left a large *guanyao* dish filled with "Buddha's hand" fruit rested on a *zitan*

stand; to its right, a white jade chime was suspended in a polished wood frame. On the opposite side of the room was a large poster bed draped with silk gauze hangings patterned with bright green plants and insects in reversible embroidery.¹¹ When such three bay structures were divided, one side chamber invariably functioned as a sleeping quarters while the other may have variously served as a small study, work room, or tea room.

Although there were general similarities in the types of furnishings found in the quarters of both sexes, the decorative style of the gentleman's quarters tended to be more simple. Such decor was elaborated by Wen:

Of primary importance is to avoid garish painted decoration. Place the bed facing south. Keep the back half of the room behind the bed inaccessible to others and use for storing such items as a perfumer, chests, a garment rack, a chamber pot, a washbasin, a cosmetic box, and a reading lantern. In front of the bed, place a small table with nothing on it, two small square stools, and a small cabinet for keeping incense, medicinals and curiosities for amusement. The room should be pleasantly refined and elegantly simple. As soon as a touch of stylish adornment is added, it begins to look like the woman's quarters, and is unsuitable for a hermit sleeping in the clouds and dreaming of the moon.¹²

Contemporary illustrations frequently depict a clothes rack placed to the end of the bed and/or a long footrest in front of the bed. Canopy beds (Lot 81) or beds screened with awning-like enclosures were also used. Draped with thin gauze netting in the summer, they provided relief from annoying insects; with pongee silk or thick cotton during freezing winter, they served as an insulated den.

Wen's passage above, "As soon as a touch of stylistic adornment is added, it begins to look like a woman's apartment", provides an interesting juxtaposition with the furniture arranged in the quarters of the opposite sex. As part of the dowry trousseau, such furniture rich with decorative symbols sent wishes for the newlywed bride to bear children.

The canopy bed (Lot 54) was central to the woman's quarters where it functioned as a room within a room. Bed curtains decorated with mandarin ducks, of silk with gold brocade or of silk lace, were all commonly associated with the woman's quarters. Larger alcove beds also contained a small sitting area in front of the bed platform where a small table, stool, and/or cabinet might be placed.

As in the man's quarters, footstools, and garment racks were similarly positioned, and washbasin stands and a large wicker basket for the night bedding found their appropriate place. The woman's quarters were typically characterized by a dressing table where a mirror stand (Lot 67), cosmetic cases, and jewelry were set out. In the evenings, a candle lamp was placed on a small table or stand that was drawn up close to the bed.

Gardens, Changing Seasons, and Portable Furnishings

In the summer months, and throughout the temperate regions, garden and courtyard spaces became part of the living environment. Decorative screens, tables and chairs, were commonly arranged in the garden for entertainment, leisure, rest, as well as work. Sites of these garden occasions were selected to embrace the fresh and ever-changing seasonal impressions. In open pavilions next to a pond or atop a small hill, leisure time was enjoyed by playing chess or *weiqi*, or drinking wine under the moonlight while sitting on the stools around a centrally placed table.

The effect of the seasons on the pre-modern household required continual adaptations. To defend against the chill of winter, drafty windows were heavily draped, and bed frames were insulated with thick curtains. Braziers glowing with charcoal provided a localized source of heat. Thick mattresses were brought out, animal furs and tiger skins were used on the chairs and couches, and censers and vases of bronze were used on the tables. During the heat of the summer months, windows were opened or removed, curtains of bamboo were hung to provide the necessary privacy and a light, refreshing impression, and thin gauze curtains were hung in the beds. Sometimes, rooms were reoriented toward the cooler northern exposures, and sleeping quarters, tented with "sky-covering curtains," were moved into the garden. Woven bamboo provided cool seat and bed matting, and censers and vases of porcelain were considered to be appropriate seasonal tableware.

Vibrant households had dynamic living spaces that were in regular flux between such seasonal adaptations and regular occasions. In an episode from the 18th century novel *Dream of the Red Mansion*, when preparations are being readied for a small home-coming celebration, one of the lesser matriarchs of the family organizes servants to bring additional tables out of an upstairs stateroom which was "stacked high with folding screens, tables, chairs, lanterns and furniture of every kind."¹³

Stowed away, too, were those portable furnishings which were required for excursions, be it travel for social, business, or leisure. With nomadic origins, the folding stool (Lot 14) had long provided a step stool for mounting and dismounting horses; for the late Ming *literati*, they were also well suited for roaming about or using on a boat.¹⁴ Such journeys were not without conveniences. Wen Zhenheng noted their folding beds (Lot 18), such as those produced in Guangdong and Yongjia (a county in Zhejiang province) as being easy to carry and set up, and well-suited for travel on boats.¹⁵ Food boxes (Lots 2, 85, 86), clothing chests, and a fly-whisk were all common traveling gear. Gao Lian further suggested bringing along a low folding-leg table which could be set out on a mat for the enjoyment of wine or simply arranged with a censer and a vase to provide a fresh impression.¹⁶ Small portable cabinets (Lot 83) also permitted the traveler to bring along stationary utensils and books.

Of course, this brief introduction to furnishings and their arrangements can only superficially touch on a much more complex subject. Notwithstanding, these final words of advice to the householder advanced by Wen Zhenheng during the late Ming period reveal that pursuit of excellence is a time-honored phenomenon:

To each there is that which is appropriate.
Tranquil antiquity is timeless.
Tranquil simplicity is not clever.
Tranquil restraint is not vulgar.
Strive for majesty and pure elegance.¹⁷

¹ *Jujia biyong shilei juan* 4, 6b, This household encyclopedia published during the Yuan Dynasty notes that cupboards should never be placed against the back wall of a room. Also, The Dominican Gaspar Da Cruz also noted massive carved cabinets were noted in the front hall of a Canton residence where he was received in 1556.

² *Jin Ping Mei* (ca.1618) Taipei: Sanmin, 1997, Chapter 20.

³ *Jin Ping Mei*, Chapter 66.

⁴ Cao Xueqin. *The Story of the Stone*. 5 vols. Translation by David Hawkes. London: Penguin Books, 1980, Chapter 63, 244.

⁵ Gao Lian. *Zunsheng bajian* (Eight Discourses on the Art of Living) (ca 1591). Wenyuange Sike quanshu, vol. 871. Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 7:29b-32a.

⁶ Gao Lian, 8:16ab.

⁷ Wen Zhenheng. *Zhangwuzhi* (Treatise on Superfluous Things). 12 juan. Compiled in ca. 1618. Annotated edition by Chen Zhi. Nanjing: Jiansu kexue jishu chubanshe, 1984, juan 6, 244. Footstools (Jiaodeng) Also see Gao Lian, 8:15ab.

⁸ Gao Lian, 7:30a.

⁹ Wen Zhenheng, *juan* 6, 238 Cabinets (Chu).

¹⁰ Wen Zhenheng, *juan* 10, 356 Spacious Room (Changshi)

¹¹ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, chapter 40, 292-293, modified with author's translation of Chinese text in *Honglou Meng* (Dream of the Red Mansion). 3 vols. Taipei: Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo xinkan, 1996, chapter 40, 540.

¹² Wen Zhenheng, *juan* 10, 354, Bedroom (Woshi).

¹³ Cao Xueqin. *The Story of the Stone*, Chapter 40, 278.

¹⁴ Wen Zhenheng, *juan* 6, 237. Folding Stool (Jiaochuang).

¹⁵ Wen Zhenheng, *juan* 6, 241. Beds (Chuang).

¹⁶ Gao Lian, 8:37b.

¹⁷ Wen Zhenheng, *juan* 1, 37. Summary (*Hailuan*).