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The Gangolf Geis Collection
of Fine Classical Chinese Furniture

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Splendor of Chinese Classical Furniture:

Highlights from the Gangolf Geis Collection

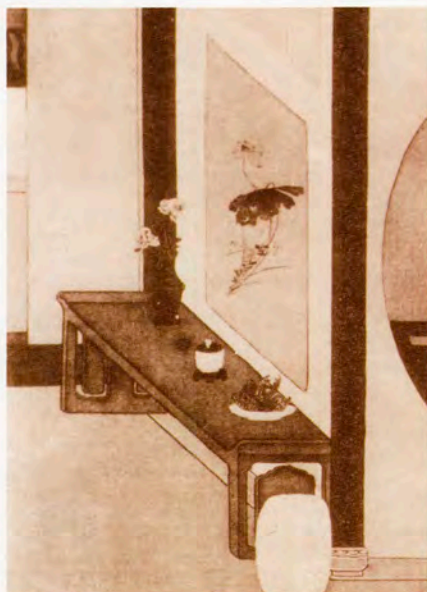


Figure 1
Side Table. Detail from album leaf painting illustrating the novel *Jin Ping Mei*, 18th century.



Figure 2
Extended-Leg Table with 'giant's arm' brace. Detail from album leaf painting *Whiling Away the Summer*, Song dynasty (960-1279), Suzhou Museum.

Opposite Page
Lot 28
A Tiger-Maple (*Longyan*) Four-poster Canopy Bed, 18th century

The Geis Collection was formed predominantly in the 1980's and 1990's. This was a period when Mimi and Raymond Hung, The Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Robert Piccus, Dr. S.Y. Yip and others were also discovering the collectibility of Chinese classical furniture, concentrating their activities in Hong Kong where goods were abundant. One result of this phenomenon has been unprecedented advances in scholarship in the field of Chinese furniture, and the exposure of the previously unpublished Geis Collection provides fresh material that should nurture the growing field.

Gangolf Geis has resided in Hong Kong since the late 1970's when he and his wife Ann moved from his home in Stuttgart, Germany. Success in the fashion industry provided the means to start collecting Asian art, for which Geis discovered a latent affinity. With increasing discernment and a wary skepticism of the local aficionados, Geis gradually learned to trust his own eye and aesthetic instincts. Like many collectors, he also found that mistakes were often the greatest teachers. Geis's other interests, which reach beyond Chinese furniture to Buddhist and Tibetan art, also broadened his approach towards furniture.

Geis's early interest in Chinese furniture stemmed from his fascination with the *hongmu* workshops that he encountered while strolling along Hollywood Road. They evoked the pleasant, tactile memories of an uncle's carpentry workshop in Germany. Like most Western collectors of Chinese furniture, Geis was initially drawn to the minimalistic Ming-style forms; however, over time he became more receptive to works of a more ornate style. Geis's interest was not just confined to *huanghuali* wood; amongst his collected works, those fashioned from other fine timbers such as *zitan*, *longyanmu* and *jichimu* help confirm an untethered appreciation of all categories of traditional Chinese furniture.

The Geis Collection is small and personal. The more than thirty five items of furniture and as many smaller table top objects cannot be said to reflect any comprehensive scheme, but rather may be seen as an anthology of works accrued along an exploratory journey of knowledge and connoisseurship. Four works are discussed here as they reflect the quality and diversity of the collection.

The *huanghuali simianping* corner-leg side table with solid-plank top and everted ends (lot 44) is an outstanding example of the classical hardwood tradition that emerged as early as the late 16th century. The table's austere style is ennobled by everted ends on top while the stout and slightly splayed legs are bolstered with 'giant's arm braces' below. Historical evidence suggests that tables of such form had multiple uses. Formally, they served as altar platforms; informally, they were placed along a wall and set out with decorative objects (fig. 1), and, at times, they also served as desks for painting or writing.





Lot 44
A Rare Huanghuali Waistless Corner-leg Table,
16th / 17th century



Figure 3
Extended-Leg Table. Detail from painting *Five Scholars in a Bamboo Grove*, attributed to Yan Liben (active 7th century), Tang dynasty, mid-Ming copy, National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Figure 4
Extended-Leg Table. Detail from woodcut illustration to *Jiao hong ji*, Ming Xuande period (d. 1435).

Tables with solid-plank tops are characteristic of many works of the Ming period (1368-1644), when supplies of material were in abundance, and sophisticated tooling and techniques that were more common during the Qing period (1644-1912) were not used widely. Furthermore, when constructed with noble materials and restrained proportions they exemplified a literati aesthetic. In the early 17th century Wen Zhenheng wrote about plank-top tables with everted ends.

The 'natural table' (*tianranji*) should be made 'of figured woods such as *huali*, *tieli*, or *xiangnan*. The wider, the better; however, the length should not exceed eight *chi* (feet) nor the thickness of the top five *cun* (inches). The end flanges must not be too sharp, but smooth and rounded, then it is according to the antique pattern.

Of several similarly styled tables that have come to light over the last few years only one other table uses the 'giant's arm brace', an S-shaped bracket fitted between the back of the upper leg and the underside of the table top. The brace performs practical as well as visual functions. According to Wang Shixiang, the term 'giant's arm brace' alludes to the famous 3rd century B.C. hero Xiang Yu, who is said to have used his arm to support heaven. A relationship can be seen in the S-shaped roof-beam corbels that begin to appear in Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 200) architecture as well as in the Hercules-like figures carved as corner plinths on stone platforms. Early evidence of the use of a 'giant's arm brace' on furniture appears in a Song dynasty (960-1279) album leaf painting wherein a table is clearly delineated with a decorative brace reaching up from the back of the leg (fig. 2). Such S-shaped braces are also common to tables illustrated in Ming period woodcuts. However, while this construction technique is often cited as characteristic of the Ming period, numerous examples with inscriptions datable to the 18th/19th centuries demonstrate an unbroken tradition that continued throughout the Qing period.

Without dateable inscription or provenance, 'Ming-style' *huanghuali* furniture is frequently the recipient of fanciful attribution without regard to the century-to-century repetition of traditional patterns. Nonetheless, the Geis table has several early characteristics that point towards a late Ming attribution: 1) the style is strong yet well-proportioned, the legs are slightly splayed, and the horse-hoof feet are of low profile; 2) the material is of uniform quality and generously employed without concern for frugality; 3) early construction techniques includes the 'giant's arm brace' and the solid tabletop; and 4) the patina exhibits a mature level of age-generated depth. When these and other qualities, such as region of origin, decoration, quality of lacquer, etc., are considered, they allow relatively more specific dating.

Another interesting piece is the late Ming *huanghuali* extended-leg table (lot 23) with lotus-leaf molding, a fine example of the more ornamented of the two traditions of Ming design. The type of minimally styled furniture with simple silhouettes and simple lines reflects but a narrow facet of Ming dynasty classical styles. Decorative art of the period reveals a rich variety of expression ranging from complex 'baroque-like' forms to those with delicate line and simple grace. The

richly decorated table with extended legs can be considered to represent the former, and the previously discussed, *simianping* table (lot 44) is a good example of the later.

The bronze tripod vessel (*ding*), of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, frequently appears with round legs extending from the mouth of a decorative *taotie* animal mask and provides evidence of an ancient extended-leg form. Transformed and adapted to furniture, the form is depicted in Tang (618-907) and Song Dynasty (960 - 1279) paintings as low cabriole legs fitted with leg extensions (figs. 2, 3). Similar designs are also found in many Ming period woodcuts (fig. 4), and a miniature pewter model of similar style dated to the Ming Jiajing period (1522-66) was excavated near Fuzhou (fig. 5). These and other numerous examples, which span historical era and geographical location, are clear evidence of an enduring traditional pattern.

The Geis table is one of a group of three identical tables; the other two are exhibited in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Berliner, pl. 22) and the Shanghai Museum (Wang, pl. 84). Of the other extant tables of related style, most are of half-table or square-table form. Regarding their use, evidence from paintings and models reveals similar tables set with dishes of food and wine. The not infrequent appearance of extant examples in sets of two or more also suggests use as modular banquet tables - an early tradition recorded in *Yanji Tu*, a Song dynasty handbook illustrating banquet table arrangements. Scenes of formal banquets are common amongst Ming period woodcuts, where individual wine tables are set out for distinguished guests. The possibility that this particular group of tables can be associated with an Imperial household is also suggested by the carved phoenix decoration, an official insignia of the empress.

The removable legs of many extended-leg tables facilitated their efficient storage. Such is the square table preserved in the A Ma temple, which was established in Macao during the Ming dynasty (fig. 6). The term 'summer/winter table' has been suggested for this style of table following the rationale that it was reduced to low table height for use on the heated *kang* during the cold seasons. However, in the southern region, such as Macao, where the seasons are less distinct, the traditional term 'knockdown table' (*zhezhuo*) should be applied. As a category included in the Ming dynasty carpenter's classic, *Lu ban jing*, the 'knockdown table' is described with legs that slot into short cabriole legs (*baojiao*), the latter being carved with a 'pair of strings caught up with double hooks' (*shuangxian gan shuanggou*). That such decoration appears on many of the extant examples of the extended-leg form, with or without removable legs, demonstrates the traditions reverently upheld by woodworkers of the Lu Ban cult.

The Geis table (lot 23) belongs to the enigmatic group of extended-leg tables with the fixed-position legs that are not removable at all. Moreover, the entire leg-upper short cabriole leg, the round leg middle section, and the vase-shaped foot are all shaped from a single piece. Furniture comprised of sculpted elements was characteristic of the Ming period and earlier. Curvaceous forms and/or sculpted



Lot 23
An Important *Huanghuali* Extended Leg Table,
16th / 17th century



Figure 5
Miniature pewter model from the Jiajing period
(1533-66) tomb of Chang Hai, excavated
outside Fuzhou City, Fujian.



Figure 6
Square table with demountable legs. Ming
dynasty. A Ma Temple, Macao.



Fig 10a
Carved lion from one backspat of lot 38



Fig 10b
Carved deer from one backspat of lot 38



Fig 11a
Carved qilin from the backspat of one of a pair of chairs in a Hong Kong private collection.

elements can also be seen as a reflection of wood-working techniques that existed prior to the late Ming period – specifically before the widespread use of the plane. Without the plane, the difference in the amount of work expended to produce a straight edge or a sculpted curvilinear edge was of negligible difference. The influence of this efficient straight-edge-producing technology can be seen in the subtle shift towards angularity and straight-line molded profiles that became characteristic of 18th century works. The complexity of the extended-leg table undoubtedly led to its gradual disappearance throughout the Qing period, when the occasional attempt appears as a stiff and clumsy reproduction.

Also departing from the plain, unadorned style is the exquisite pair of yokeback armchairs with open relief-carved decoration (lot 38). On top of their fundamental classical pattern, these examples exhibit 'elegant stance' and 'archaistic flair' – two tendencies that emerged from the transitional Kangxi period (1662–1722) and became typical characteristics of the 18th century. Finely finished detail on all four sides (*simian gong*), including carved decoration on the reverse side of the back rests, as well as the lower aprons, further testifies to their exceptional quality.

Among several distinguishing characteristics are the finely carved back splat medallions. Each appears as a rank-badge-like composition; one a mythical lion (fig. 10a) emblematic of valor and energy; the other (fig. 10b), a spotted deer (*lu*) – symbolic of official emolument (*lu*) and longevity. The back splats of another pair of matching chairs in a private Hong Kong collection, which feature a *qilin* (fig. 11a) and a pair of spotted deers (fig. 11b), suggests a once larger group. As otherwise unrelated active (lion, *qilin*) and passive (spotted deer) elements, these auspicious creatures may also symbolize hierarchical seating traditions between man and wife, host and guest, etc. These medallions also include motifs that were employed throughout the late Ming and early Qing periods – a random scattering of precious treasures promising good fortune.

The carved decoration of these chairs exhibits a distinctive mix of archaic and traditional styles. Such are the *chi* dragons of stylized archaic pattern that appear in delicate openwork as hanging spandrels at the top of the backrest (see front cover of this catalogue). Their overall style may be compared to that of many flange-shaped handles of 18th century ceramic, cloisonné, and jade vases. Carved in relief on the front aprons are cock-crested *gui* dragons with amorously truncated bodies of hybridized pattern, as well as *lingzhi*, blossoming flowers, and fragrant grasses of more traditional style. The combination of all these varied stylistic elements corresponds with the newly fashioned tastes of the first half of the 18th century.

The four-post canopy of *longyan* wood (lot 28) is an example of a classical pattern with refined style and workmanship more usually associated with *huanghuali* furniture (cf. Ecke, pl. 23). Characteristics of the Fujian region are evident in the use of this local timber as well as in the subtle stylistic detailing, which includes the slight inward cant of the canopy frame and the beaded *ruyi*-shaped cut out in the aprons of the base.



Many fine examples of *huanghuali* and *zitan* furniture have origins in the north-central coastal regions of Fujian province. Fine furniture made of *longyan* timber was characteristic of the region surrounding Putian, a prosperous city located between Fuzhou and Quanzhou in Fujian province. Formerly known as Xinghua prefecture, this cultured region has produced talented literati and officials throughout its long history. The sophistication of the region is also reflected in exceptionally refined decorative art traditions.

Longyan is native to the coastal regions of Fujian in elevations below 300 meters; it is also spread throughout southern China, including Taiwan and Hainan Island. The *longyan* tree (fig. 9) has long held pride of place for its clustered 'dragon-eye' (*longyan*) fruit, a delicacy that attracted versified praise from Su Shi during the Song dynasty. Overshadowed in the historical record is its beautifully figured timber. Nevertheless, the survival of numerous small works and carvings are a testimony to its traditional use; larger works of furniture occasionally appear, but are more rare.

The polished beauty of *longyan* wood is not easily revealed. The timber is difficult to season without splitting, furthermore, its microstructure, with interlocked and curly grain, provides a demanding challenge for the most highly skilled craftsman (see lot 24). However, when a smooth unblemished surface is finally realized, the finely textured timber reveals a lustrous golden tone and shimmering wave-like patterns that rival the finest hardwoods.

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Fig 11b
Carved pair of spotted deer from the backslat of one of a pair of chairs in a Hong Kong private collection.



Figure 9
Longyan tree. Woodcut from *Gujin tushu jicheng*, Qing dynasty.