

A Pair of Zitan Southern Official's Hat Armchairs

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In 1987 the Fellowship of Friends, Inc., purchased a pair of *zitan* southern official's hat armchairs to add to its collection of fine arts (fig. 2). No one suspected then that this acquisition was the beginning of a museum devoted entirely to such furniture—the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in Renaissance, California. Although the chairs are approximately three hundred years old, their timeless design seems appropriate for any setting. The beauty

of these chairs is reflected in the strong and boldly conceived proportions, the masterly craftsmanship, and the softly sculpted design balancing the extreme, jade-like hardness of the precious material from which they are made, *zitan*.

The name, “southern official's hat” armchair, a twentieth-century term, has almost no literal meaning. It seems to have been derived from the term “official's hat” chair, which is applied to chairs with yoke-shaped crest rails whose teardrop ends extend beyond the rear posts, resembling the winged hats that officials wore. On a “southern official's hat” armchair, neither the top rail nor the armrests extend beyond the posts, but instead are continuous with the rear and front posts. Thus, this chair seems more similar to the “rose chairs” with low backs that were used during the Song dynasty. Numerous examples can be found in Song paintings that depict scholarly gatherings (*National Palace Museum Painting Catalogue* I.273, III.85). Later, in an anonymous Yuan dynasty painting of a small group of people listening to the *qin*, two gentlemen sit on chairs with high backs, which are closer in form to the southern official's armchair of the Ming dynasty (fig. 1). (It is interesting to note the metal reinforcements on all the joins of these chairs, a subject worthy of further research.) Further evidence of the development of this form may be found in a group of miniature

Fig. 1, left. Anonymous, “Listening to a Qin Player.” Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Fig. 2, facing page. One of a pair of southern official's hat armchairs, transitional period (second half of the seventeenth century). Zitan, height 94 cm, width 60.5 cm, depth 56.6 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.



wooden furniture excavated from the Pan Hui tomb, dated to 1587, where a pair of southern official's hat armchairs (fig. 4) reflects the classical Ming style (Ellsworth 294). In the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, a pair of tomb pottery chairs draped with chair covers are from the same period or perhaps earlier and also display the fluid movement that was achieved in this form (fig. 3). In our *zitan* chairs, the deeply curved top rail turns neatly into the hind posts and the bulging armrests sweep into the front posts, producing an effect of sculptural fluidity. This is further enhanced by a strong splay in the legs, as well as by a slightly exaggerated tapering of the vertical members, giving a strong downward pull and sense of stability.

We can understand how some of these satisfying effects were achieved by examining the carefully calculated splay and tapering of the members. The width of the chair at its base is 65.4 centimeters. Because the seat frame is also the same width, the legs must cant inward 2.5 centimeters to pass through it. By the time they reach the top rail, the rear legs have canted inward 5 centimeters. The same amount of

splay occurs in the profile of the chair. Here, however, the rear posts begin to sweep back just before the intersection with the armrest, and return to a point along the perpendicular line from which they started. The legs taper from their base diameter of 3.8 centimeters to 3.3 centimeters at the seat frame, and to 3 centimeters at the top rail. The S-shaped sideposts are also boldly tapered, diminishing from 2.5 centimeters at their base to 1.1 centimeters where they meet the armrest. In relation to the proportions and sizing of members, Luo Wuyi noted that "the size and thickness of wood used for the various parts are determined by the degree of their importance to the whole piece of furniture," and he aptly reminds us of an old Chinese proverb: "Add one-tenth of an inch and it will be too long; take away one-tenth and it will be too short" (Luo 40-41).

The convex front seat-frame member and footrest/stretcher are unique to these chairs, and can perhaps be considered a "tasteful innovation" according to Wang Shixiang's "Merits and Defects of Ming and Early Qing Furniture" (Wang 1986, 41). This subtly radiused line has the effect of opening the chair, visu-





ally increasing its already spacious area. Large chairs with a seat width of 1 *chi* 9 *cun* 5 *fen* (58.5 centimeters) were also known as “meditation chairs,” because they were suitable for sitting with the legs crossed (Ruitenbeek 257). From the Song dynasty onwards there are many paintings of enlightened Buddhist lohans and monks seated in large, low-back chairs with their legs tucked under themselves (*National Palace Museum Catalogue* III.181, 271).

The restrained ornamentation is unified throughout with cloud designs. The *ruyi*-head medallion (the stylized head of the magic scepter, whose name means “as you wish,” or “in accordance with your heart’s desire”), is masterfully carved in relief with beaded cloud designs (fig. 7). In the right light the medallion appears to be tucked into the *zitan* splat as though it were padded upholstery. The *ruyi*-head shape is also said to be derived from the sacred *lingzhi* fungus or “plant of long life,” and therefore is regarded as an emblem of longevity. The curved front apron is atypically shaped in an undulating, wave-like line terminating in scrolling cloud-heads, straying from the more traditional, yet perhaps wearisome, *kunmen*-shaped openings. Below the footrest at the center of the humpbacked stretcher/apron, a dropped cloud form is softly carved in low relief. This design eventually deteriorated to the stiffer, angular scrolls prevalent during the Qianlong reign. Although the decoration of these chairs is quite austere, it nevertheless foreshadows the degeneration of the classical Ming style. The chairs can probably be dated to the second half of the seventeenth century.

Zitan is a purplish-black, fine-grained wood with golden brownish-orange undertones, resembling ebony both in color and in extreme density. From ancient times, the Chinese have considered *zitan* a precious wood, commanding the highest price and subject to the heaviest tax of all imported hardwoods (Wang 1990, 148–49). Its rarity and value dictated that only the finest craftsmen be allowed to work it. The earliest known reference to *zitan* appears in A.D. 300 in Cui Bao’s *Explorations of Ancient and Modern Matters*, which states that *zitan* comes from Funan, an ancient kingdom on the Gulf of Siam and Champa. It was more widely used during the Tang dynasty and a number of the artifacts in the Shōsōin are made from it. Marco Polo named Indonesia as the source of *zitan* in the thirteenth century. In Ming

times there are references to its being found in southwest China and in the mountainous regions of Guizhou and Yunnan (Handler 23). Other sources indicate that *zitan* came from Guangxi province and from southern India, Annam (now North Vietnam), and the Philippines (Kates 21). Although several species of wood were probably called *zitan*, it is generally considered to belong to the *Pterocarpus* genus. Further wood analysis studies may give us more information on the sources of specific varieties of *zitan* and on their subtle distinguishing characteristics.

Zitan has been a source of red dye since the Middle Ages, and thus a common test for it is mixing the sawdust with alcohol, which will turn red. Even this test, however, can prove to be unreliable, as forgers have been known to impregnate *hongmu* with alcohol-soluble red dyes to simulate *zitan*. When *zitan* is sanded, orange sawdust fills its pores. When lacquer is applied to the sanded wood, an effect called *jinsi zitan* or “golden-threaded *zitan*” is produced, which is characterized by gold flecks that catch the light under its polished surface, as can be seen in a detail from the richly figured splat (fig. 7). The smooth, jade-like surface of *zitan* is achieved by first applying thin coats of clear lacquer to fill the pores in the grain. Then successive coats of beeswax are applied to reach the desired luster. The open-grained surface of *zitan* is not always sealed and filled with lacquer before the application of wax, and its appearance with a more open grain finished only with wax can be strikingly different.

Because of the precious nature of *zitan*, the unsparing use of wood in the Renaissance armchairs is unusual. The deeply curved crest rail required a piece almost 10 centimeters wide. The rear posts also required extra material to sweep back to

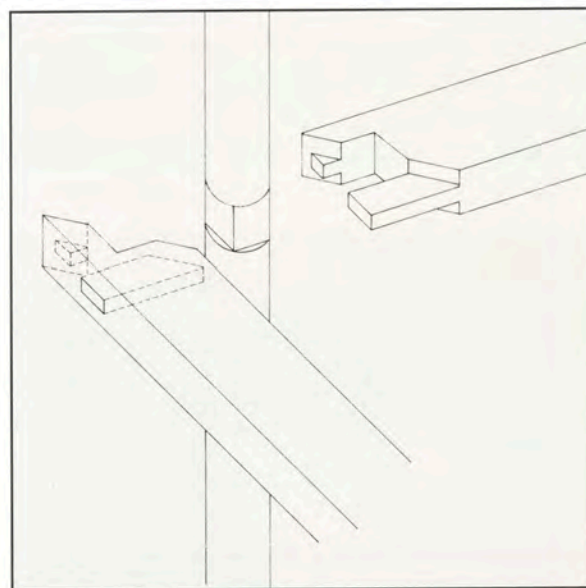
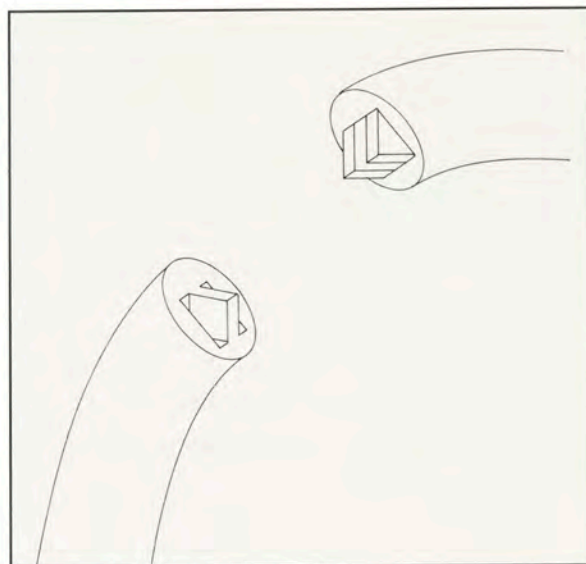


Fig. 3, facing page, above. Miniature tomb model of southern official's hat armchair, from a Ming dynasty tomb. Pottery with green and yellow glaze, height 19.2 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.

Fig. 4, facing page, below. Wooden model of a southern official's hat armchair, one of a pair, Ming dynasty, 1587. From the tomb of Pan Hui, Shanghai. Height 20 cm. After Shanghai bowuguan.

Fig. 5, above. Drawing of a mitered dovetail join connecting the side and crest rails of a chair.

Fig. 6, center. Drawing of join connecting a round leg to a seat frame.

Fig. 7, right. Detail of splat of figure 2.

the crest rail. And the convex seat required an additional fifty percent more material for the front seat frame member, front apron, and foot stretcher. The beautifully figured and matched splats, which taper in width from 17.8 centimeters to 16.5 centimeters, are even wider than those on the set of four larger *zitan* southern official's armchairs in Wang Shixiang's collection (fig. 8). This generous use of material probably reflects the high status of the person for whom the chairs were commissioned; for, by the Qianlong period, the scarcity of *zitan* had already placed constraints on the imperial workshops, as evidenced by the number of *zitan* veneered pieces from this period.

The joinery and construction reflects the work of a master craftsman. The mitered joins where the armrests and top rail meet the front and rear posts are connected with hidden interlocking dovetails (fig. 5). In the process of construction, slightly over-size members were utilized so that in their final shaping the inside corners could be radiused. This has a great effect on the fluidity of the design, yet also requires additional material. Another interesting join

appears where the round legs pass through the seat frame. Normally the inside corner of the leg is squared-off to provide a shelf for the seat frame to sit on. Occasionally, loose tenons are inserted into a round leg, providing an architectural-like bracket support for the seat frame. In our chairs the round legs appear to penetrate the seat frame without support. X-rays, however, reveal that a square hole in the seat frame joins tightly around the leg, which is notched square in section to fit its counterpart (fig. 6).

Wang Shixiang's set of four fan-shaped *zitan* armchairs (fig. 8) and the set of four calligraphy-inscribed *zitan* armchairs in the Astor Court at

Fig. 8, left. One of four fan-shaped southern official's hat armchairs, early Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Zitan, height 108.5 cm; seat: width of front 75.8 cm, width of back 61 cm, depth 60.5 cm. Wang Shixiang collection, Beijing. After Wang, Connoisseurship 1, 48.

Fig. 9, right. High-backed armchair, Ming dynasty, sixteenth century. Zitan, height 102 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Vincent Astor Foundation Gift, 1976 (1976.193.2).



the Metropolitan (fig. 9) can be compared with the pair in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture. In all three sets the construction and joinery is remarkably similar. All have mitered dovetail joints where the front and rear posts meet the armrests and top rails (see figure 5). All have bulging armrests supported by tapered, S-shaped sideposts. All have round legs that pass through the seat frame without shoulders on their inside corners, and are most likely notched as in figure 6. And, as in the Renaissance chairs, precious wood was used unsparingly to produce beautifully fluid lines. Wang Shixiang's chairs are also unusually large. Their fan-shaped seats would certainly accommodate someone sitting cross-legged.

Luo Wuyi observed five characteristics that describe masterpieces of classical Chinese furniture: "beauty of structure and form, pleasing proportions, supple and restrained linear rhythm, ingenious ornamentation, and flawless polishing" (Luo 39-40). This description can be aptly applied to the exceptional pair of chairs at Renaissance, which marked an auspicious beginning for the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture.

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