

# Orientations

Chinese Furniture 1984-2003



Detail of *huanghuali* canopy bed with railings, p. 103

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'Special Exhibition of Furniture in Paintings'  
National Palace Museum, Taipei  
5 October 1996 - 31 January 1997

Thirty-one paintings from the Tang to Qing dynasties featuring representations of traditional Chinese furniture were on display in this special exhibition, which formed part of a new approach at the National Palace Museum to draw the general public into the esoteric world of Chinese painting through appeal to the objects and manners of life portrayed within them. According to Lina Lin, Exhibition Curator and Assistant Researcher in the Department of Painting and Calligraphy, the general public has a greater interest in jade and porcelain exhibitions than in the traditional academic-oriented presentations of paintings; thus, the department is trying to show the paintings in a new light by focusing on the antique material culture they record.

Paintings attributed to the Song dynasty suggest the existence of a rich furniture culture well developed by the 11th and 12th centuries; as actual examples of pre-16th century furniture are exceptionally few, it is from such painted depictions and the rare excavated material that reference points to the history and development of Chinese furniture are generally established. Two major problems in the use of Chinese paintings for dating furniture, however, are that the dating of the paintings themselves is sometimes questionable, and that they often display archaistic tendencies, namely, the representation of older forms of furniture out of a customary reverence for the past. While the National Palace Museum has been notorious for keeping to traditional datings, works in this exhibition were qualified as 'Traditionally Attributed...', and further clues to modern dating attributions were occasionally provided within the accompanying captions. Hopefully, this approach will continue to develop. When the major caption of a painting clearly states, for example, that it is a 'Ming copy of a Song work', a great service will have been done to the general public as well as to scholars and historians.

The painting selections generally portrayed landscapes with bird's eye views into the interiors of pavilions or studios, seated religious figures, or gatherings of scholars or the élite. The gatherings commonly take place in gardens or on terraces, and are rich with renderings of tables, incense stands, small cabinets, food boxes, stools, benches,

chairs, screens, platforms for dining and sitting, and gameboards. The furniture depictions suggest the use of a wide range of materials, including bamboo, rattan, lacquer, decorative stone and woven cane, as well as natural wood. One of the works, an anonymous painting attributed to the Song dynasty, portrayed a *luohan* seated in a low-back armchair, the frame members of which are clearly delineated as a finely figured wood (see illustration). To complement the painting, a replica of the chair was reproduced in new *jichi* wood, the resemblant form and matching figure of grain providing a tactile link to the past.

This was one of two full-sized chairs reproduced from paintings for the exhibition.

Individual pieces of furniture were highlighted with numerous enlarged and back-lit transparencies, revealing their fine details. The intricate surface designs on the lacquer table in Liu Songnian's *Five Scholars of the Tang Dynasty* became legible, as did the fine panels of woven cane on the small bookcase. The latter was reproduced in detail by modern architect Sergio C. Young in one of four perspective drawings of various pieces, also included in the exhibition. These technical renderings developed with plan and elevation views further encouraged viewers to look at the furnishings depicted in the paintings as real objects.

Chinese furniture connoisseurs may have come away disappointed at not finding details to substantiate the late Ming attributions of 'classical' Chinese furniture. Aside from the copy of Qiu Ying's *Reading Quietly in the Shade of Pawlonia Trees*, with renderings of a typical waisted table with giant's arm braces and horsehoof feet, and a more rarely found 'drunken lord's chair', most of the furnishings depicted in Ming paintings are more elaborate than extant 'Ming-style' examples. Appearing closer in form, however, are the tables and chairs depicted in Qing dynasty court paintings: perhaps this again relates to archaistic techniques unique to literati painting traditions, for evidence of examples resembling extant pieces can be drawn from late Ming woodcuts as well as from miniature models of furniture excavated from late Ming tombs.

The involvement of painting scholars is an exciting new development for the development of Chinese furniture scholarship. Looking beyond traditional painting attributions is a major step in reconstructing the history of Chinese furniture. Although many problems

remain, it is likely that further clues will be revealed with the involvement of other disciplines.

A catalogue of the works featured in this exhibition is available.

Curtis Everts



*Luohan*  
Song period (960-1279)  
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk  
Height 105.5 cm, width 53.6 cm  
'Special Exhibition of Furniture in Paintings'  
National Palace Museum, Taipei, cat. no. 25

