

The Mr. and Mrs. Robert P. Piccus
Collection of
Fine Classical Chinese Furniture

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CLASSICAL CHINESE FURNITURE FROM THE PICCUS COLLECTION

by Curtis Evarts

The Collection

The Piccus collection of Chinese furniture and scholar's objects was formed over a period of twenty some odd years, and in the midst of the most important trading crossroads for Chinese antiquities – Hong Kong. Soon after the publication of Wang Shixiang's *Classic Chinese Furniture* in 1985, Ming-style *huanghuali* furniture became readily available in the antique market in Hong Kong. The decade that followed was a special opportunity for those who seized upon the new discoveries which were made daily in one of the last frontiers of Chinese art. A similarly fruitful collection period had occurred in Beijing in the early part of the twentieth century and the Piccus collection *generally continues the taste of Westerners in the early "golden age" of Chinese furniture collecting.* It also reflects the time-honored Chinese fascination with the beauty of hardwoods and ideal of integrated structure.

Numerous pieces in the collection may be considered classical examples of traditional design, combining precious materials and exquisite workmanship. For example, the pair of high yokeback *huanghuali* armchairs (lot 18) reveal a master's hand in the shaping of the natural sinuous lines of the arms and front and rear posts. Not only are the s-shaped backsplats more comfortable than c-curved ones, but the grain patterns revealed are more abstract and interesting, maximized by the s-shape cut through the concentric growth rings of the timber. Full aprons frame the front and sides with lively *kunmen*-shaped openings and are joined with sophisticated sliding dovetailed half-lapped miters. With the parts assembled into a unified whole, these chairs reflect a high standard of integrity of design.

The quiet *huanghuali* lute table (lot 80) is a supreme example of the basic recessed-leg form and is distinguished by its unpretentious simplicity and excellent quality. One interesting characteristic is the luxurious use of material; the cloud-shaped apron heads and the aprons are generously cut from the same piece of wood.

The *huanghuali* tapered cabinet (lot 16), standing poised and tall with an appearance that is both elegant and stable, exhibits matched door panels vibrant with lively figuration. Even more commanding in presence, the large *huanghuali* compound wardrobe (lot 56) is of generous proportions with thick frame members and austere form balanced by a strongly curved apron and ornately patterned *baotong* hardware. The overall impression conveyed is one of solidity and purpose contrasting with a tasteful amount of embellishment.

Wang Shixiang's monumental work revealed new categories of furniture as well as a broader range of decorative styles than were previously represented in Western collections. Afterwards, many related examples began to appear on the Hong Kong antique furniture market. A case in point is the fine and important pair of up-folding stools (fig. 1, lot 29) discovered by the Piccuses in 1988 and which match the single stool at the Tianjin Museum of Art illustrated in Wang's book (Wang 72). The unique construction of these folding stools allows the hinged seat frames to fold upward. Although such stools do not fold as compactly as those with woven seats, they nevertheless fold compactly enough to be easily stored or carried over the shoulder. The slatted-wood seat is comfortable, and is undoubtedly more durable than the normal woven seat.

The *huanghuali* "folding" wine table with demountable legs and hinged aprons that can be tucked under the top is an example of another recent discovery (lot 74, cf. Wang and Evarts 94). Such

easily disassembled tables were practical because they could be compactly stored and readily set up as required; small versions may have been taken on excursions to the mountains; active temples are also known to have hundreds of small knock-down softwood tables that are set out for special occasions and, are otherwise compactly stored in large wooden chests.

The rare *huanghuali* two-drawer table with everted ends (lot 54) bears no evidence of reused woods or alterations and is considered to be an early precedent to the enigmatic "altar coffer", now thought to be of later date (Evarts Aut 94 29-44). A late Ming illustration from the novel *Jin Ping Mei* depicts a table similar to the Piccus table, arranged like a domestic shrine with a wood tablet, candle and incense burner (fig. 2). The carpenter's manual *Lu Ban jing* also depicts a scene in which a maid attends her mistress within her quarters at an almost identical table with drawers.

The *huanghuali* yokeback armchair with protruding crestrail and continuous arms (lot 40) is another rare example of an old category. Rectangular back armchairs generally have either crests and arms that are projecting or crests and arms that are continuous and non-projecting. The Piccus chair belongs to an exceptional group of a few extant examples (cf. Ellsworth 115, Grindley 56, Pu 28). Depictions in a Ming dynasty encyclopedia (fig. 3), and elsewhere in book illustrations (Fu 346) suggest that this was a once typical form.

Because of its relatively low seat height and wide seat frame, the *huanghuali* yokeback armchair (lot 72) is thought to be a sedan chair that was carried on a litter-like framework. Book illustrations as well as records from the early Qing Imperial Workshops (Zhu I 110) also indicate that low chairs were sometimes used for seating in small boats. In either case, this design would have provided a more steady ride than one of standard height with a higher center of gravity.

The *huanghuali* throne-like chair with ornately carved panels (lot 99) could well be the prototype of similar litter-like platforms used in modern times to parade figures of Buddhist and Daoist deities through the streets during various religious ceremonies. A similar chair of narrow width, with high seat, carved panels and terminals is illustrated in a series of 18th century paintings, "Eighteen Luohan" (Ge 124). Interestingly, the crest rail on the Piccus chair is flanked by spirited dragon heads confronting a flaming pearl. In addition, two dragons step down and around each side, as if to empower the occupant of the seat with authority. This motif is reminiscent of the design of imperial throne chairs. The iconography of the carved decoration - including mandarin ducks, lotus, and the *qilin*, a mythical beast with respective symbolic associations to newlyweds, harmony and the bearing of male children - may also suggest a litter chair used during wedding ceremonies.

Although the throne chair is ornate, the majority of pieces in the Piccus collection are minimally decorated, if at all. Good examples of this more austere preference is furniture that is waistless and with corner legs. This modular form has been termed "*simianping*" (lit., "four sides flat") since at least the late Ming period (Wenjuan 6/3a). Depictions in numerous Song dynasty paintings with delicate cloud-shaped feet may be indicative of an even earlier style. Piccus examples of this basic production form include two *huanghuali* tables (lots 41 and 17) and a *huanghuali* three-railing (or *luohan*) bed (lot 94).

The *huanghuali* side table with flush-mitered construction (fig. 4, lot 41) has a wide single panel top, substantial frame members and thick legs which turn into the flat aprons at generously radiused corners. The effect is simple, but not severe, since the curves of the leg and apron intersections and the bulging hoof feet offset the rectangular form. The generous use of wood suggests a late Ming date for the construction when an abundant supply of *huanghuali* was at hand.

Although its frequent depiction in Ming woodblock prints suggests that this was a once common type, such *simianping*, are now relatively rare. While the stretcherless design is the epitome of elegance, the strength of the joint where the leg is attached to the frame invariably weakens over time without the benefit of additional reinforcing devices, such as spandrels, stretchers, or curved corner braces to buffer the forces multiplied by the leverage of a long leg. The condition of the Piccus table prior to restoration also reaffirms this – elm stretchers had been added to all four sides just below the aprons to stabilize wobbly legs, a condition that probably developed after years of lateral pressure on its critical corner-leg joints. These have since been refitted, the stretchers removed and the mortises from the old repair filled – the table is now restored to its original minimalist form.

The *huanghuali* three-railing (or *luohan*) *chuang* (lot 94) is distinguished by its notched legs with the inside of each leg cut in an L-shaped section. The three panels of the sides and back are solid and "bread-boarded", in contrast to another notched leg bed with paneled sides and back formerly in the Boney Collection and now in the Hung Collection (Hung, cat. 27). A third bed of similar *simianping* design is illustrated by Ecke (Ecke, pl. 27, no. 21) and has solid panels.

Many of the so-called "Ming-style" designs were actually already established by the Song dynasty, and these traditional styles continued well into the Qing period. However, with the prosperity of the early years of the Qing dynasty, subtle stylistic developments can be seen. There is an overall refinement and a tendency towards embellishment with archaistic decoration, tendencies repeated in most other areas of the decorative arts of the period. The *huanghuali* recessed-leg table with a *single nanmu* panel (lot 15) is a superb example. Refined moldings along its aprons, legs and stretchers, impart a crisp linear style, and the carved spandrels, shaped like phoenixes, imitate a motif often found in archaic jades (fig. 5). Subtle elements of the refined *zitan* stools (lot 76) may also have been inspired by archaic *fangding* ritual bronzes. These elements are the high placement of the stretcher, the double-mitered vertical strut, and the pair of long, narrow openings which create an abstraction reminiscent of an archaic *taotie* mask.

During the 5th year of the Yongzheng reign (1728), the official Hai Wang ordered the Imperial Workshops to make a large "bamboo-style" (*zhushi*) stool of either *nanmu* or lacquered wood (Zhu I 110). Numerous hardwood examples of bamboo prototypes in the Piccus collection are the *tielimu* table with round legs and wrap-around stretchers (lot 71), the *tielimu* footstool with rollers (lot 12), and the *huanghuali* meditation platform (fig. 6, lot 57). Although bamboo was used to make some of the earliest furniture, no significant evidence of these simplified bamboo forms in hardwood or softwood appears until the Yongzheng period, when the above-mentioned textual references, as well as accurately detailed representation within porcelain and court paintings, first emerge. The imitation of common bamboo in precious woods may be interpreted as a reflection of the opulence of the time.

The Woods

The Piccus Collection is unique in the wide range of materials it represents. Today, antique Chinese furniture made from *huanghuali* and *zitan* commands the greatest attention, yet, since ancient times, many other hardwoods have been prized. Connoisseurs from the Ming period have noted ebony (*wumu*), *tielimu*, *nanmu*, and boxwood (*huangyang*) as appropriate for furniture (Wenjuan 6/2a). The late 17th century scholar Qu Dajun records over twenty precious figured

hardwoods (*wenmu*) from Hainan Island, many noted as furniture-making woods (Qu 654-656). Archives from the Yongzheng imperial workshops also reveal that the palace furnishings were generally made from a more-or-less equal distribution of materials including *huali*, *zitan*, *jichimu*, *nanmu*, and painted or lacquered softwoods, as well as their various combinations (Zhu I 105).

Nevertheless, by simple percentages of extant examples, *huanghuali* appears to have been the most popular tropical hardwood for fine furniture production. The best *huanghuali* has a translucent shimmering surface and lively figuration. The rich color ranges from reddish-brown to golden-yellow. The *huanghuali* album box (lot 14) is made with choice material. The top is formed from a wide single panel with a glimmering surface and rippling grain pattern, while the sides of the lid and box were not only selected from single pieces but also cut to retain the unified imagery of the dense figuration. Qu Dajun notes that the *huali* sourced from Hainan Island was commonly used to make couches, screens and tables; nevertheless, variations in the color, figure, and density of this fragrant wood suggest several species from differing locations throughout Indochina. Large *huanghuali* timbers are presently being harvested in Vietnam for reproduction furniture.

More highly prized than *huanghuali* was *zitan* - an extremely dense wood which sinks in water. Since ancient times, its deep red pigments have been used for dye. Early records indicate that the sources of *zitan* were mainly in Indochina, with some found in tropical forests of southern China. During the late 17th century, Qu Dajun noted that *zitan* was sold by weight on Hainan Island, and that small *zitan* objects made in Guangdong were sold throughout China. A few years later, the Jesuit priest Juan Jose Delgado, having arrived in Manila in 1711, also noted a similar Philippine hardwood called *tindalo* which was highly prized by the Chinese:

"... in China, they say *tindalo* sells for its weight in silver and is valued as such; they make from it many curious desks, chairs and stools. They also know how to preserve in the wood a blood red color, washing it frequently in salt water. In time, if care is not taken, it changes to a dark color, but it is very lustrous; it can be polished to such a degree that one's face can be seen in it..."

This could very well have been called *zitan* by the Chinese. Others suggest that this Philippine wood could only be *hongmu* (blackwood). The folding reading stand (lot 82) is a good example of *hongmu*. Interestingly, no references to *hongmu* have yet been found which date earlier than the middle Qing period when the equivalent southern Chinese term "*suanzhi*" appears. Its literal meaning, "sourwood", refers to the sour odor which arises when it is freshly worked, and by which characteristic it is also distinguished from the more fragrant *huali* and *zitan*. Connoisseurs somewhat more subjectively qualify *zitan* by its deeper lustrous surface and the distinctive "crab-claw markings" which perhaps refer to the interlocked grain structure most apparent in the plane of the tangential cut. A light-colored variety of *hongmu* termed "*baisuanzhi*" can also be difficult to distinguish from *huanghuali*.

Qu Dajun also notes that *jichimu* was indigenous to Hainan Island and had been used as a tribute since the Tang dynasty; furthermore, he links the term *hongdou* or red bean - a furniture-making wood repeatedly found in the Yongzheng Imperial workshop records - to *xiangsi* as well as *jichimu* (Qu 655). Relatively large quantities of *jichimu* furniture are found in Fujian province where seven

different species are reportedly in existence today. The wood itself is virtually undifferentiated - and a good example is the set of four *Piccus* side chairs formerly in the Frederic Mueller collection (lot 26) - yet each species bears a different leaf pattern. The number of terms we encounter for this wood should therefore not be surprising.

Dark grayish-brown *tielimu* is often confused with *jichimu*, yet lacks the latter's strongly contrasting colors apparent in the layered tissue; the fibrous texture of its open grain is also somewhat coarser. *Tielimu* once grew abundantly in Guangdong where, in large timber form, it was commonly used for bridge and house construction; on Hainan Island its growth was so prolific that natives were said to burn it for firewood (Qu 655). Its frequent use as a secondary material for shelves, drawer sides and bottoms, etc. in objects primarily of *huanghuali* or *zitan* supports its status as a secondary material. Nevertheless, in regions north of Guangdong it was regarded as a precious hardwood and was popularly used to fashion finely crafted furniture, such as the footstool with rollers (lot 12), the table with wrapped-around stretchers (lot 71) and scholar's objects such as brushpots (lot 35).

Nanmu comes from a large deciduous tree which grows with a long straight trunk; it once grew abundantly in Sichuan, Yunnan, and on Hainan Island. The wood polishes to a shimmering surface, has fine smooth texture with a warm olive-brown color, and emits a pungent fragrance when freshly worked. It was frequently used for architectural woodwork and was also prized in the northern regions and in the Imperial Workshops for furniture-making. Although extant pieces of *nanmu* furniture are relatively rare, panels of *nanmu* and *nanmu* burl were more commonly featured in tables and cabinets, and an excellent example is the *huanghuali* and *nanmu* side table with phoenix spandrels (lot 15).

Wumu, or ebony, is harvested from small-diameter trees which seldom exceed 30 cm., even after generations of slow growth. The material is extremely brittle, the texture is fine, and the color ranges amongst several species from jet black to those with black, brown and gray streaks. Its small dimension and fragility generally precludes its usage for furniture construction, but it is rather more suited for the fashioning of small precious objects. The tapered cabinet with *wumu* frame members and *zitan* panels (lot 25) is thus a rare exception; the slender frame-members are typical of the type of *wumu* that is jet black and finely textured.

Imperial Workshop records from the Yongzheng period also note the practice of mixing precious hardwoods; various tables of *zitan* with *nanmu* panels, (*huang*)*huali* with *nanmu* panels, (*huang*)*huali* with *zitan* panels and aprons, and *hongdou* (*jichimu*) with *zitan* aprons were constructed to suit the needs of the Imperial court (Zhu I 106 109). Several mandates specifying the frugal use of *nanmu* and *zitan* also hint at dwindling supplies within the palace storehouses - thus, the practice of mixing woods was not only a decorative technique, but likely had also developed as a resourceful alternative to material shortages. By the end of the Qianlong period, inventories of *zitan* in the palace storehouses were nearly exhausted (Tian 45); many examples of 18th century palace style *zitan* furniture were constructed with laminated and/or reused material.

The blending of precious materials used for the recessed-leg painting table (lot 47) is, however, not indicative of frugality; in some cases, these materials have been extravagantly used to their full potential. The light- to coffee-brown color striated with dark-brown to black veining used to frame the leg members is similar to Madagascar ebony, and may also correlate to the rarefied "tiger-striped" woods (*huban mu*) (David 153), *huchi* (Qu 655) noted during Ming and early Qing periods. The material appears to be from a tree of small-diameter growth; not one member, including the

frame, legs or aprons, is wider than 8 cm. and several have cream-colored sapwood remaining on one edge. The exceptionally wide one-piece *huanghuali* panel (width 63.5 cm.) is cradled with a central longitudinal brace as well as closely spaced transverse braces to provide a stable and solid working surface. The entire underside is completely coated with an undisturbed thick lacquer. The overall quality of construction, and the use of rare materials in this table mark it as a special piece which perhaps once served a diligent and discriminating scholar.

Joinery

The ancient art of the joiner has always been a fascinating aspect of Chinese furniture, and its well-conceived application has produced legendary structures of integrated form. Chinese craftsmen have ingeniously derived countless variations of the basic mortise and tenon joint. Modern restorers marvel at the new joints they continue to discover, as this aspect of Chinese furniture is studied more closely.

Bridle Joints

The bridle joint is actually a series of joints which unite the leg, apron and spandrel heads on recessed-leg tables. On rare occasions, the spandrel head and apron were extravagantly shaped from one piece of wood (cf. detail lot 74). Although this technique is generally flawed because the spandrel head can be easily fractured when subjected to lateral pressure, resilient hardwoods such as *huanghuali* were mildly tolerant of such design.

More resourceful craftsmen used various techniques to join the spandrel heads separately: the pair of cloud-shaped spandrel heads and the long apron on the long narrow side table (lot 95) are joined. Each spandrel is butted to the apron and secured with inserted or "loose" tenons (fig. 7a).

The open-carved phoenix spandrels on the *huanghuali* table (lot 91) are also butt-joined to the apron and, in a refinement, the heads of the phoenix lap over the long apron so as to maintain the integrity of design in a single piece of wood and to avoid unsightly joints on the figures of the bird. Standard variations were fashioned with half-lapped miter joints (figs. 7b-c). Those more thoroughly calculated to withstand the rigors of use were variously integrated with dovetail keys (fig. 7d).

A bridle joint discovered during restoration of the table has a hidden dovetail key to lock the full spandrel head while half-lapped to the apron, and a shallow groove cut into the back side provides housing to secure the leg (fig. 7e).

Because of the insufficient amount of ebony, which comes in small quantities, the *huanghuali* and ebony table (lot 47) has two-piece ebony spandrels joined as one with dovetail keys. The keys are not visible, as they are hidden in the housing cut into the leg. Two dovetail tenons secure the top of each spandrel head to the back side of the apron (fig. 7f).

Chair aprons

Similar techniques were also implemented on chair aprons. The half-lap miter joint (fig. 8a), relying on glue and beveled keying along one edge, is commonly found, but lacks the sophistication of more secure variations. Figure 8b represents the apron joints found on the *huanghuali* yokeback armchairs (lot 18). A wedge-shaped dovetail tenon on each side spandrel fits flush to the back side of the upper apron within a shallow dovetail mortise; as the two pieces are slid together, the tenon's

wedge shape also locks in the miter. Another remarkable variation was found on a chair formerly in the Piccus collection; standard tenons belonging to the side aprons fit through the center of the upper apron and extend into shallow mortises in the bottom of the seat frame (fig. 8c) (Evarts Aut 92 12).

Slidelock mortise and tenons

The *huanghuali* meditation platform (lot 21) incorporates the "slide-lock" mortise and tenon technique to join the aprons with the round legs. The end of each apron is shaped with two dovetail tenons; the lower tenon is first inserted into a receiving mortise, after which both tenons slide downward into locked positions (fig. 9). Similar slidelock joints also secure the railings on the *huanghuali chuang*.

Dovetail wedge apron supports

The *zitan* stools (lot 76) incorporate a sophisticated variation of the common wedge-shaped tenon which is usually dovetailed into the back side of an apron for attachment to the frame and stabilizing support. The double-mitered vertical strut, which neatly fits between each stretcher and apron, extends behind the apron within a dovetail groove and fits in the bottom of the seat frame (fig. 10). Such integration of decoration with function is an ideal rarely so successfully achieved.

Half-lap pressure-peg joint

The half-lap pressure-peg joint is commonly used to join the curved armrest segments of the horseshoe armchair as well as the radiused frame segments of round tables (cf. lot 33) and stools; it is also used as a scarf joint to create long segmented stretchers, or to add length to rotted legs. Several variations are known: the standard half-lap and tenon joint utilizes a wedge-shaped peg to lock the two mated surfaces together (fig. 11a). A less common variation with blind tenons demands a higher level of precision from the joiner, but provides a more rigid joint and neater visual impression (fig. 11b). A rare variation, with tenons blind on one side and exposed on the other, has little apparent advantage, but demonstrates the Chinese genius for subtle variation (fig. 11c). Another subtle variation of the half-lap joint with blind tenons appears on the *jichimu* chair offered in this sale (lot 49); here the intelligent use of pressure pegs uniquely set at an angle impart direct bilateral compression to tightly draw the mated surfaces together (fig. 11d).

Much has transpired in the field of Chinese furniture during the period in which the Piccuses formed their collection. Its brief history corresponds to China's opening towards the West and comes to a conclusion with Hong Kong's repatriation. The extraordinary period will likely be long remembered as the "golden moment" for the collection of Chinese furniture. The Piccus collection benefited from such a moment as well as the good fortune and discriminating taste of the owners.

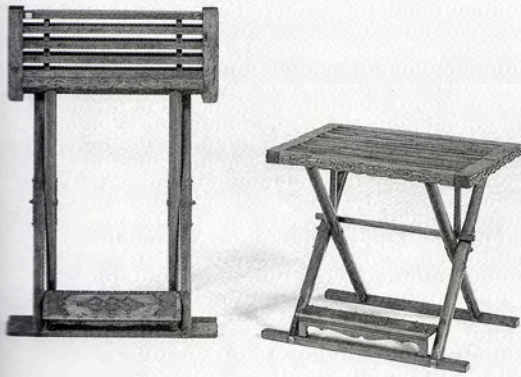


fig. 1



fig. 2

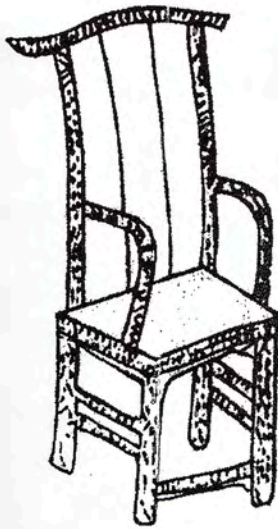


fig. 3



fig. 4

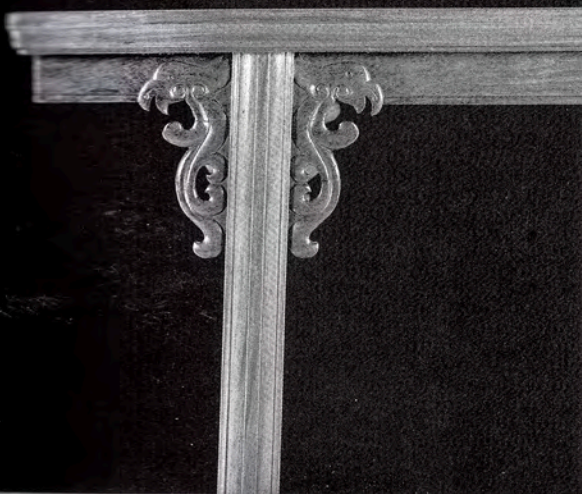


fig. 5



fig. 6