

# 風華再現—明清家具特展

Splendor of Style: Classical Furniture from the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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# Literary Mind and Carving of Dragons: The Manifold Elegance of Classical Chinese Furniture

Curtis Evarts

Early 20th century connoisseurs prized Ming-style furniture for its refined elegance and unadorned simplicity, as well as for the substance and figure of its precious hardwoods. In such designs, foreigners found resonance with simultaneous trends in contemporary Western art and architecture, whose proponents were striking out against the traditional eclectic tastes of the Victorian Age. Similarly, Chinese connoisseurs were rediscovering aesthetics reflecting the classical Confucian ideals, which embraced simplicity and integrity, and rejected complexity and frivolity.

During China's closed-door period of cultural realignment, while interest in Ming-style furniture lingered outside, it continued to quietly gestate within. Objects assembled by mainland Chinese collectors during this time were featured in Wang Shixiang's monumental work *Classic Chinese Furniture* (pub. 1986). Here, Wang also demonstrated a range of Ming-style designs that expressed a more far-ranging scope of Chinese decorative aesthetics than the simple minimalistic styles of early Western preference. Furthermore, he tentatively proposed a classification system of aesthetic styles based on his own critical connoisseurship along with classification systems of literary styles from Tang and earlier periods.

In *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Wenxin diaolong), a monumental early text devoted to literary style and critique, Liu Xie (c. 465-522 AD) noted:

"For although the eccentric and the orthodox are opposed to each other, both should be mastered; and although the vigorous and the delicate are different, each should be used at the appropriate moment. If one loves the elegantly severe and dislikes the ornate, he will be one-sided when held up against the standard of comprehensive mastery. We are reminded of the two men of Xia, one boasting about his bow and another about his arrow, [not knowing that] with neither alone would it be possible to shoot."

Herein lies a tradition of high-minded culture, one that rises above subjective likes and dislikes, and one that relates to the aesthetic experience through relative understanding. As we penetrate into the deep and varied cultural history of China, so too can we deepen our appreciation for the rich variety of decorative style that was produced. The objects gathered for the exhibition *Splendor of Style* demonstrate a range of aesthetics, each of which can be appreciated on its own merit. In this essay, the appreciation of ranging decorative styles will be further developed.

Besides the inspiration that *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* gives rise to with regard to the study of aesthetics, the borrowed title also reflects upon the wide range of minimalistic to ornate furniture styles. Herein, we can also further develop an approach to critical and appreciative study of furniture through related ideas in the connoisseurship of literature and the early classification systems of literary styles. As in literature, specific furniture styles were adapted and applied to particular situations. Memorials were drafted in a profound, disciplined tone, and poetry was written in lyrical, ornamented styles; moreover, the poetry of the ancient Chu Kingdom was known for its alluring charm, while the poetic prose of the Han Kingdom was considered extravagant. In furniture, styles can also be found that can reflect status, degree of formality, gender use, as well as region tendencies that reflect the local customs and the character of the people.

Whether the seat of the Son of Heaven or a regional magnate, the throne chair (cf. Page95) was a profound piece of

furniture, whose extravagant use of precious material reflected exalted status. Such status markers were also used by other figures of authority and power. Local magistrates were often surrounded within an intimidating environment. They sat in a large imposing chair at a massive desk, and usually in front of a status-enhancing screen of magnificent proportions. The large horseshoe armchair with fierce dragons carved on the handgrips (Page90) emanates such authority, and the dragons may well have emboldened the power of the sitter.

On the other hand, the furniture of a study traditionally reflected the casual restraint and informal elegance of a *literati* gentleman. The recessed-leg painting table (Page143), yokeback armchair reflect (Page82), and the bookcase (Page164) all reflect such an understated, minimalistic style.

The decorative style of furnishings within a single household also varied from room to room. Large spaces also required furniture of appropriate scale. Massive altar tables (cf.Page150) were generally set against that back wall, and tall screens and cabinets (cf. Page170) reached to the ceiling. The sobering style of such pieces often reflected the nobility and grandeur of the family.

In small private quarters, it was important not to place too many objects, and relative size of object was to be suitably proportioned. The furniture of a ladies apartment was usually more charmingly decorative, with auspicious motifs, typical of dowry furniture, sending wishes for male progeny in its multitude of imagery. In describing the refined and elegantly simple" style of a gentleman's quarters, Wen Zhenheng juxtaposes that of the lady's quarters, "... As soon as a touch of stylish adornment is added, it begins to look like the women's quarters, and is unsuitable for a hermit sleeping in the cloud and dreaming of the moon." Here, furniture of minimalistic style continued to reflect the restrained elegance of a Confucian gentleman.

While traditional styles were spread throughout the empire, region variations of style also reflect the ethnic diversity of the Chinese culture. Furniture from the north central regions tends to be more robustly styled, bearing influence from the foreign cultures to the north and west and savoring conservative traditions from the Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties (Page108,138). Furniture from Beijing also reflects northern conservative traditions, but was strongly influenced by Imperial fashion. Furniture from the Jiangnan region tends towards elegance and refinement, and reflects the more liberal *literati* traditions for which the region has long been known (Page106,142,160). Furniture from Fujian can even be more refined, constructed with delicately proportioned members and finely shaped moldings. Furniture from Guangdong region tends to be thick in proportion, reflecting its proximity to abundant resources (Page89).

Outlined below is a range of decorative styles and artistic characteristics with a discussion of representative objects from the exhibition. As Wang Shixiang also noted, it is difficult to be precise when discussing decorative aesthetics, and disagreement is inevitable as each person has own subjective sensitivities. The reader will also find that these categories are not exclusive, but frequently overlap into one another.

## **Robust Majesty and Grandeur**

Majesty (*ningzhong*) and grandeur (*xiongwei*) are formal characteristics that reflect ritual, ceremony, and nobility. Whether it be ancestral worship or offerings to religious deities, massive altar tables were typically situated at the heart of such activity. The long altar table of *huanghuali* (Page 150) has a stately air, and its thick, solid timber top was a subtle expression of abundance.

The large *zitan* cabinets (Page 169) also have a majestic stance, and the abundant use of such precious material was a luxury that few could afford. The frame members are decorated in relief with fluttering ribbons interspersed with various precious treasures; lower front panel and apron, with lions confronting an embroidered ball amid fluttering ribbons and scattered treasures. A balanced *ying/yang* tension is here achieved between vibrantly decorated frame members and the broad plain surfaces.

Furniture from northern China is often robustly styled, such as the *huanghuali chuang* (Page 108). High waisted forms with pillared-struts shaped like bamboo are characteristic of northern central China. Lacquered *chuangs* with similarly styled railings have been discovered in the Shanxi region, and the fish-dragon (*mojie*) motif was popular amongst the northern Liao dynasty (916-1125 AD) culture, whose influence spread throughout Shanxi region. Although this *chuang* is relatively small, the deep aprons and high waist impart an impression of mass. Furthermore, the flourishing style of relief carving is full and rounded.

## **Vigorous and Beautiful**

In furniture, vigor is expressed through the dynamic of line, as well as the composition of line. Here is also a correlation to the esteemed art of calligraphy. The yokeback armchair (Page 82, 84) is one of the most sculptural forms, and when successfully executed, manifests a vigorous and beautiful (*zhuangli*) stance. The horsehoof also adds an element of vigor such as found at the completion of a brushstroke, and when combined with a slight bulging of the legs as with the *huanghuali* stools (Page 66), produces an animated effect that is universally appealing.

## **Minimalism**

Decorative styles associated with the *literati* can also be traced to simple unadorned style of the Classics wherein the choice of language emphasized the essential and avoided indulgence in the extraordinary. "Simple unadorned" (*jianlian*) design, as well as that which is lucid and logical (*xianfu*) was deeply rooted in ancient Confucian values. Such was often the style associated with the studio or private quarters of a *literati* gentleman.

The pure *simianping* form exemplifies austerity of form. More pleasing to the eye is when the severe *simianping* style is

tastefully softened with subtle detail. This can be seen in the embellished line of the giant's arm braces and the eye-catching use of *tieli* wood for the central panel on the painting table (Page145). The raised ends of the wall table impart a noble bearing, and the solid timber top is rich with patterned figure (Page144). With regard to the *qin* table (Page133), the rounded corners of the tabletop continue down the legs to the feet, which turn inwardly and terminate with variant pointed tips. Elongated C-curved spandrels and square hooves embellish the austere low profile of the daybed (Page106). While appearing subtle to the untrained eye, these variations reflect ranging artistic expression constrained by traditional forms.

### Transparency

With regard to classical literature, "lucid and logical" (*xianfu*) expression was characterized by straight-forward language and clear-cut reasoning, whose transparent organization of structure was a guarantee satisfying results. Transparency of structure is also basic tenet of classical architecture, which also produces a satisfying impression to the tactile senses. These principles carry over to furniture design, and are especially noteworthy in the style of furniture that is patterned with recessed-and-splayed leg construction (Page135,143). The simple recessed-leg stools are sturdy constructions, whose four legs are splayed outward (*situi baxiang*) and reinforced with stretchers (Page64), recall the ancient proverb, "when the root is firm, the branches will flourish" (*bengu zhirong*).

Other examples that exhibit eye-satisfying architectural structure include the square table with corner spandrels (*yitui sanya*) and humpback stretchers (Page128). Here the corner spandrel imitates the dougong bracket configuration on the corner of a building that supports the overhanging eave, and the humpback stretcher imparts the impression of lift as do the arched beams of a timber frame structure. These rising elements counter our innate sensitivity to the downward pull of gravity, and thus, contribute to balance the overall impression.

### Classical Elegance

"Beauty unmarred by excess," "unmixed purity of form," and "refined and graceful" can all be attributed to "classical elegance" (*dianya*). The *huanghuali* incense stand (Page152) is such an example. The traditional highwaisted form is drawn from antiquity, and was fashioned with refined elongated lines, and its gracefully contoured openings resemble the elegance of elongated lotus petals. The meditation stool (Page69) also exhibits similar characteristics of traditional style and pure form, which is realized with perfected proportions and refined workmanship. The black lacquer wine table (Page136) exhibits yet another traditional style. Here the perfected art of multifoiled line is combined with exquisite proportions; moreover, the excellent condition of the smooth, deep-lustered lacquer is rarely seen.

### Sumptuous Decoration

"Profuse and flowery" (*fanru, nonghua*) decoration is rich with beautiful patterns, and is characteristic of the northern

China where the dense, multi-layered styles are frequently found. The components of such decoration often provided a secondary layer of auspicious interpretation for those familiar with its language. Dowry furniture--canopy beds, clothes racks, and basin stands, and mirror stands (Page185,186)--were frequently richly decorated with longevity, happiness, and good luck characters, or carved with other auspicious motifs such as birds and flowers; decoration with *qilin* and seed bearing fruits sent forth wishes for male children. Beds were often fit with lattice railings styled like richly patterned brocades.

### Elegant Decoration

Elegant decoration (*yanxiu*) reflects southern decorative traditions, whereby ornamentation tended towards refinement and less dense painterly styles. The *huanghuali* mirror stand illustrated in Page186 typifies such a style; the panels are covered with branches of plum blossoms, which emblematic of springtime rejuvenation and feminine beauty.

### Roundness

Roundness and wholeness (*yuanhun*), as a stylistic concept, suggests an organic unity. It is often associated with Ming-style furniture. Roundness as an entity can be expressed through rounded forms such as a drum stool (Page78). Round-member forms such as the bamboo-style stools (Page74) express roundness through redundancy. The expression is also found in the round-back chair, whose circular armrest can at times appear to embrace a spherical void. Wholeness is also realized by the use of round and square members; with rounded members above and square members below, the low back design of a chair can reflect the universal embracing concept of *tianyuan difang* (Page85).

### Art of line

Art of line (*xiantiao*) and lyrical quality are essential characteristics of Chinese art and literature. Art of line is rooted in the expressive arts of the brush and lyrical quality has foundations in melodies of ancient music. Both come together in traditional dance and calligraphy; the former with the supple extension of the body and resounding rhythmic patterns; the latter in dance of the brush, whose linear choreography is time captured by ink and paper. These two characteristics--art of line and lyrical quality--are also important to the successful design of furniture, and are expressed through the shaping of fluid supple lines, and the curvilinear and multi-foiled openings.

### Fluidity

The low *qin* table (Page132) also exhibits fluidity (*rouwan*), with side panels shaped like the rippling of water. Fluid styles suggest patterns of movement or circulation. This can be seen the dynamic curvilinear profiles of aprons , whose terminology from the Ming carpenter's manual *Lu Ban jing* suggests "carved like water" (*leishui huaya*). The success of the

southern official's armchair (Page86) is realized through the supple shaping of the crestrail into the back posts, and likewise the armrests in to the front posts; when artistically executed, the resulting impression pulses with rhythmic circulation.

### Linearity

Linearity (*jingting*), which expresses rectilinear space division, geometric patterning, and angular rhythm, is generally associated with Qing-style furniture. Such pieces also generally have a crisply molded style without carving, and successful designs are well balanced with broad flat open spaces. Such are the large *huanghuali stools* (Page68), the *zitan* painting table (Page146), and the *huanghuali* game table (Page127).

### Emptiness

The spirit of emptiness (*kongling*) reflects the ethereal and transient nature of things and is expressed through the light open forms in which negative space is both contrasted and highlighted by minimal structure. One cannot deny the presence of the empty space framed by the *huanghuali* daybed (Page106), to which attention is further drawn by the elongated C-shaped spandrels that bridge the corners of the opening. The contrast between emptiness and form is particularly evident in the low *qin* table (Page132), where the ribbon-like structure of solid *zitan* timber bridges any empty void.

### Stillness

Stillness (*chenmu*), reflecting a fundamental qualities of balance and proportion, is best exemplified by the masterfully proportioned tapered cabinet ( cf. Page160). Its exposed framework tapers inward from a centered base with a pronounced upward verticality, imparting lightness to an otherwise bulky mass. The carefully positioned *baitong* hardware creates an impression of a calm focus in perfect balance.

### Decorative Lacquer

Most traditional Chinese furniture was finished with lacquer coatings to provide durable surfaces and decorative effect--a practice evident since ancient times. Numerous lacquer techniques were used on furniture, ranging from thin transparent coatings that enhanced the natural beauty of figured hardwoods, to thick lacquer finishes inlaid with decorative design.

The deep luster and crackled surfaces of lacquer objects with were highly prized since the Song dynasty. During the Ming dynasty, newly made lacquered furniture--monochrome lacquers, incised and filled lacquer, miaojin decorated lacquer, lacquer inlaid with mother of pearl or other semiprecious stones, decoration, carved lacquer, etc.--was more highly valued than hardwood furniture.

Although durable, the lacquer surfaces on daily-use furniture does not survive if not properly maintained. With the exception of some pieces from dry and geographically isolated Shanxi region that have recently come to light, few well-preserved objects have survived the neglect of the last two centuries. Today these pieces are appreciated much in the same as late Ming connoisseurs appreciated the rusticated antiquity of old lacquer furniture. Wen Zhenheng noted that Song and Yuan dynasty *chuangs* with crackled lacquer finishes were first rate and that old lacquered square tables with thick legs of a simple natural style were most beautiful and also well suited for spreading out antiques, books and paintings for enjoyment.

### Conclusion

Collectors generally tend toward certain styles that reflect their innate preferences, and thus, tastes differ from collector to collector, and from region to region. In an exhibition where objects are gathered from multiple sources and varying regions, the manifold artistic style of Chinese furniture becomes more apparent. Thus, while three *luohan* beds and two game tables demonstrate similar categories, they are sharply contrasted in style. One bed manifests robust northern traditions (Page108), another exhibits the minimally styled southern *literati* traditions (Page107), and a Qing palace style reflecting exquisite workmanship is evident in the massive *zitan* bed with elaborate carving (Page110). One game table is sumptuously decorated (Page130), the other is fashioned in a crisp linear style (Page127). Each is worthy of merit. Attempting to understand the broad range of artistic style brings one closer to comprehensive connoisseurship of Chinese furniture.