



CHRISTIE'S

New York

Important Chinese Furniture
from Private Collections

TUESDAY 21 SEPTEMBER 2004



Important Chinese Furniture from Private Collections

(Lots 1 - 43)

Detail. *Evaluating Antiques in the Bamboo Courtyard*, Qui Ying (c. 1494 - c. 1552).
One of 10 leaves in *A Painted Album of Figures and Stories*.
Palace Museum, Beijing.

THREE REMARKABLE BEDS

Beds have an important place in the realm of Chinese furniture. As derivative architectural forms, beds are intermediate elements between the grand timber constructions that housed them and the smaller portable tables, chairs and cabinets placed by their sides. Beds generally occupied a central position in any room and provided a focus for social and private life. According to inventory records, beds were the most expensive item of furniture. The following is a discussion of three beds—including the late Ming *huanghuali* daybed (lot 8), the mid-Qing Dynasty *zitan luohan* bed (lot 24) and the mid-Qing Dynasty *huanghuali* canopy bed (lot 16). Besides being representative of the main forms of the Chinese bed, these remarkable examples exhibit a broad range of styles, unique individual characteristics, and exquisite workmanship.

The platform-style daybed is an elementary form that appears throughout the history of Chinese furniture. Early illustrations show the platform as an elevated seat for priests, noblemen or high officials; paintings from the Tang and Song periods also demonstrate similar forms in use as a low table. The platform eventually became associated with the literati gentleman and his leisurely pastimes. Wen Zhenheng, late Ming heir to the Jiangnan literati traditions, praised the versatile ancient model in his writings:

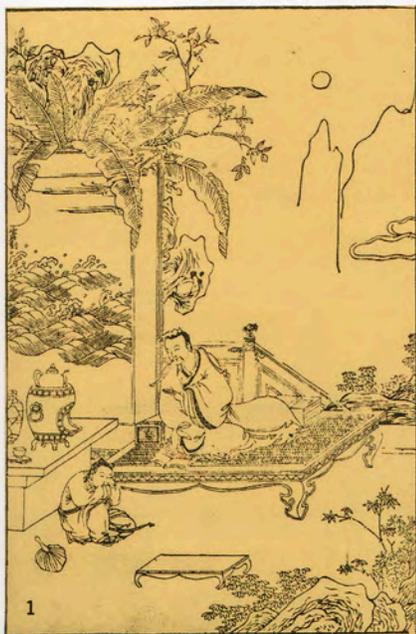
When the men of old made platform-tables, although the length and width were not standardized, when placed in a studio or room they were invariably antique, elegant and delightful. Whether for sitting, sleeping or relaxed reclining, there was no way in which it was not convenient. In moments of pleasant relaxation they would spread out classic or historical texts, examine works of calligraphy or painting, display ancient bronze vessels, arrange sacrificial meats and fruit, or set out a pillow and mat—to what use was it not well suited?

Zhangwuzhi c. 1619

The uses of the daybed were manifold: During the day, it served as a sitting platform; at night, a bed. When furnished with a small portable armrest, it was convenient for reading. Relatively lightweight, it was also easily carried into the garden (fig. 1) where, enclosed within an awning of mosquito netting, it provided a cool place to rest. Playing chess, plucking the strings of the *qin*, amorous love—all were appropriate on the stage-like platform.

The early style of the Christie's late 16th century *huanghuali* daybed (lot 8) may well have reflected the antiquarianism of Wen Zhenheng, who advocated the reproduction of old styles made in precious woods. Unlike the plain linear style that is normally associated with classical Ming-style furniture, early features are evident here in the elaborate architectural high-waisted construction, robustly styled aprons and cabriole legs, as well as in the carved and sculpted decoration.

Such characteristics are evident in furniture from the north-central region of China, where form, style and decoration frequently embody the traditions carried over from the Tang, Song and Yuan periods. Chinese characters marked with burning tools on the daybed frame (fig. 2) may also indicate an origin from Yanjin, a county in northern Henan province north of the Yellow River, where eastern Shandong, southern Hebei and Shanxi, and western Jiangsu all converge.



Woodcut illustration to a set of Tang dynasty poems. Late Ming period



Lot 8
A *Huanghuali* Daybed
Late 16th Century



Detail of *Huanghuali* Daybed Leg,
Late 16th Century, lot 8.



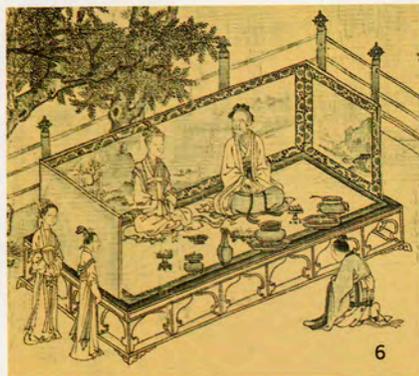
Detail of Lacquer and Wood Canopy Bed Leg, Anhui, Late Ming Dynasty.



Detail of Lacquer and Wood Canopy Bed Leg, Shanxi, Late Ming Dynasty. C. L. Ma Collection, Beijing.



Detail of slide-lock tenon joint from *Jichimu* Daybed. Formerly in the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture.



Early *Luohan* Bed. Detail from a Ming copy of a Song album leaf, *Illustrations to the Book of Filial Piety*, by Ma Hezhi. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

It is not surprising then, that the daybed in the sale can also be compared with early-style beds from both the Anhui (fig. 3) and Shanxi (fig. 4) regions. All three beds have a frame that is nearly 20 cm. in depth and carved in low relief with long, narrow, horizontal *taohuan* panels with ruyi shapes at each end. The Christie's bed additionally features a high-waisted section of architectural style with pillar-shaped struts and *taohuan* panels that sit upon a base-like molding. The line of the apron below is expressively shaped to a classical arch-and-cusped profile.

The cabriole legs are masterfully sculpted in a robust and sinuous early style. The knees are capped with lappets carved in relief that extend downward to the feet and reach horizontally around the entire perimeter of the bed; the back of the leg is muscular in profile and articulated with supple cloud-shaped cutouts to ease the apron joint; the foot terminates with a scrolled ball that is firmly embraced by a vigorous tendril that wraps around into a tightly charged scroll; the foot sits comfortably on a small cushion-shaped pad. The total effect is both animated and natural, and exudes confidence and strength.

An inevitable fact of antique furniture, veterans to centuries of daily wear and tear, are losses and damage. Filled grooves on the interior of each end frame member suggest that the original seat surface was fitted with tray-like end panels—a variation that is occasionally found on softwood lacquer works. An independent seat frame now fills the entire surface. On the underside, the original open mortises adjacent to slide-lock transverse braces are attached to the frame by slide-lock joinery to facilitate assembly and disassembly of the platform. These are now filled in with a hard putty. Similar construction is also evident on the *jichimu* daybed formerly in the Museum of Chinese Classical Furniture (fig. 5) and sold at Christie's New York, 19 September 1996, lot 13.

The alignment of patches in the top surface of the frame near each corner corresponds to the originally exposed leg tenons that appear to have been cut back and patched during recent restoration—a technique that is evident on other earlier examples (cf. Handler, p. 15).

These points add to our knowledge of the item's history and do not affect our opinion of the daybed as a magnificent work. Unquestionably, this daybed stands unique amongst hardwood examples as a powerful example of the grand early style of Ming dynasty furniture.

Similar in use to the daybed, the three-railed couch bed is distinguished by back and side rails, which imbue it with throne-like formality. In ancient times, decorative screen panels were placed at the back and sides of the sitting area to give the occupant prominence as well to provide privacy and protection from drafts. Over time, these screens were integrated into the design, becoming panels attached to the seat frame of the platform (fig. 6). By the late Ming dynasty, the box-style couch had developed into the more sophisticated open-structured, corner-leg form. This fundamental pattern appears unchanged throughout the Qing dynasty, although new stylistic characteristics and decorative motifs did appear. The Chinese term '*luohanchuang*' (sage's bed) more accurately conveys the stature of this ancient form.

The Tsao collection *zitan luohanchuang* (lot 24) is a mid-Qing dynasty work of remarkable quality and historical interest. Fashioned from the finest grade *zitan*, this bed exhibits a traditional waisted, corner-leg form with railings that step down from a central crested panel at the back. Of particular note is the exquisitely carved decoration.

The railing frame and base unit are detailed with scrolling elements and acanthus leaf ornamentation in a quasi rococo style (fig. 7). Such Western-style fashion, which first appears in Chinese decorative art during the middle of the 18th century, is often associated with the *Yuanmingyuan* Palace. Established as an Imperial summer residence since the Jin dynasty (AD 1115–1234), the *Yuanmingyuan* was significantly reshaped in 1747 when the Qianlong emperor (1736–1795) expanded its grounds with Italian baroque style structures and gardens supervised with the aid of Jesuit priests. Renovations continued under the Jiaqing emperor (1796–1820), for which the Yangzhou Salt commissioner was requested to supply hundreds of *zitan* furnishings between the years 1814–1817. Little remained of the palace after it was razed by the French and British troops in 1860.

Lot 24
A *Zitan* Three-railed *Luohan* Bed
Qianlong Period (1736–1796)





Detail from the underside of *Zitan Luohan Bed*, Qianlong, lot 24



Detail of *Huanghuali Canopy Bed*, 17th Century. Grand Mosque, Xi'an.



Huanghuali Canopy Bed, 18th Century. Formerly in the Collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture.

While examples of extant Western-influenced zitan furniture recall the aesthetic of the *Yuanmingyuan*, examples found in the Palace Museum collection, Beijing (Zhu, pls. 15, 39) and in other Beijing private collections (Tian, pp. 78–79) suggest that this new Imperial fashion was disseminated beyond the confines of the *Yuanmingyuan*. Tian Jiaqing has also suggested that the Western architectural style was introduced by craftsmen from Guangdong who were recruited to work in the Palace workshops during the Qianlong period—Canton long having been the recipient of Western traders and their influence.

In contrast to the platform and the border of the railings, the inner surfaces of the railings are decorated in Chinese motif, with the 'hundred antiques' (*'bowugu'*), a subject unique to the Qing Dynasty. This decorative theme, which first appeared during the Kangxi period, was promoted by the foreign Manchu regime in an effort to acknowledge and reinforce Confucian values and to influence the dissident Han literati who aligned themselves with the Ming loyalists. The antiques symbolized the traditional ideologies and fundamental values of Chinese culture. Bronze vessels and ancient musical instruments alluded to the importance of Confucian ritual; various stationery implements, books and scrolls, *weiqi* and *qin* represented self-cultivation and the accomplishments of the Confucian gentleman; other precious treasures and auspicious motifs further embraced the breadth of traditional Chinese culture.

The 'hundred antiques' motif, whether appearing on porcelain, textile, carpets, or furniture, typically appears as a random scattering of precious treasures against a plain background. Here in the inner railing panels of the *chuang*, carved images of antiques in high relief are presented against a flat ground. This technique, which requires the virtuosity of a master, is achieved by the meticulous paring away of the background to a perfectly flat plane—a skill which, paradoxically, requires greater precision than the carving of the raised areas themselves.

Restoration and repair belong to the history of an art object and there is as usual restoration on the lot. The underside of the base of the bed (fig. 8) is interesting in the Western-style repair characterized by the use of wood blocks and iron plates attached with wood screws. This is unlike traditional Chinese restoration techniques, and the incongruity sets this work apart from the great wave of furniture that has flowed through the workshops of Hong Kong restorers in the last two decades. The bed's obvious recent provenance in the West and its palace-style decoration executed with the finest quality of *zitan* workmanship, make its association with the exquisite objects that once furnished the *Yuanmingyuan* a distinct possibility.

Amongst Chinese furniture, the canopy bed is the most architecturally impressive work. It is also the only furniture category in the 15th century carpenter's manual, *Lu Ban Jing* to include auspicious measurements such as those given for building structures. Beds of finely crafted and precious materials were prized possessions and symbols of status. Prominent in the dowry suite, beds were commonly decorated with imagery that symbolized wishes for the bride to give birth to sons, thereby leading to office, prosperity, and continuing lineage.

Amongst extant *huanghuali* examples, the early to mid-18th century six-poster canopy bed from the Tsao collection (lot 16) is remarkable in its distinguished array of carved decoration, which was suited to a nobleman or member of the Imperial family. The basic form of this canopy bed belongs to a related group which, when stripped of decorative elements, share a nearly identical structure comprising a basic platform, six posters supporting a canopy and joined by a railing and an upper frieze. Individuality was expressed by varying the decoration of the railings and frieze, and the relief carving that was added to other broad surfaces. Produced throughout the late Ming and Qing periods, the 17th century bed at the Grand Mosque in Xi'an (fig. 9) is an early example of this type; that formerly from the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture collection (fig. 10) dates to the 18th century.

This writer has speculated on the existence of a specialized canopy bed workshop in northern China (Evarts, pp. 58–61). Subsequent investigation has further revealed that many examples of the form were sourced in areas as far south as Yangzhou and along the upper stretches of the Grand Canal. The towns and cities along this vital inland waterway flourished with economic prosperity throughout the Ming and Qing periods. Perhaps not coincidentally, numerous 'southern tours' were made along this route by the Kangxi (1736–1795) and Qianlong emperors and we should probably not be surprised that significant amounts of fine hardwood furniture have been sourced along their paths. Although the finely decorated canopy bed now appears more widespread than previously suggested, it is rarely found south of the Yangzi River where the Jiangnan taste for elegance, refinement and understatement contrasts with the bold decorative style of the north.

The Tsao canopy bed is among the best examples of this Northern group. The high-waisted platform has a powerful silhouette which is further enhanced by its short cabriole legs carved with animal masks and clawed feet. The aprons joining the legs are carved with dragons and the high waist with auspicious bird-and-flower vignettes separated by bamboo-style struts.

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Detail of back railings of *Huanghuali* Canopy Bed, Early/Mid 18th Century.

The railings at the back and sides house open-carved panels with a series of medallions set against scrolling clouds and immature dragons. A spectacular adult dragon carved in high relief at the center of the back railing dominates the imagery (fig. 11). Its piercing eyes and lobed cranium pulse with supernatural virility. Most interestingly, its eagle-like legs have four talons, a detail which according to Qing Dynasty sumptuary regulations, was permitted for use only by princes and nobles of third and fourth rank. Such distinctive dragon insignia are exceptionally rare amongst canopy beds, and as if to emphasize its importance, the reverse of the dragon is also well-carved with a true rear view of the creature.

The medallions to the right and left repeat mythical *qilin*—harbinger of male offspring—prancing amongst rocky outcrops, auspicious flowers and *lingzhi* fungus. The front railing panels feature a painterly landscape composition with pine, rocks, deer and crane, all of which refer to longevity (fig.12).

The central panel in the frieze around the top is carved with phoenixes and peonies. Second only to the dragon among mythical creatures, the phoenix appears when peace pervades the country. It also has great influence on the begetting of progeny. According to tradition, 'two phoenixes piercing the blossom' denotes connubial intercourse. As 'King of the Flowers', the peony embodies the male *yang* principle. With other allusions extending to love, affection and feminine beauty, the composition is rich in visual and literary meaning.

The style of the dragon mask as well as the banded scrolled corners of the inner frames of the front panels (fig. 12) suggest an early to mid-18th century date. Whether or not there is any relation to the Imperial sojourns is a matter of speculation. Nonetheless, this bed is an exceptional work and the exquisite workmanship and distinguished decoration were undoubtedly appropriate for royalty.

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July 6, 2004



Detail of front panel of *Huanghuali* Canopy Bed, Early/Mid 18th Century, lot 16.

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Lot 16
An Imperial *Huanghuali* six-poster
Canopy Bed, Early/Mid 18th Century