

HONG KONG

FINE CHINESE
FURNITURE FROM
PRIVATE AMERICAN
COLLECTIONS

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美國私人收藏家珍藏
中國傢具

• *28 November 2012*

CHRISTIE'S

CHINESE FURNITURE AMONGST THE SHIFTING SANDS OF TRANSIENT HISTORY

by Curtis Evarts

Fondness for things Chinese has existed in the West for hundreds of years. Chinoiserie taste was the rage amongst Europeans during the 17th and 18th centuries. In that era of Chinese prowess and might, relations with the Western world were fluid, and many Chinese lacquer wares, textiles, and porcelains were eagerly exported from trading ports in the Far East. Collecting opportunities also flourished throughout the 20th century, when China was endeavoring to reshape itself to the modern-day world. Now, with China's re-emergent dynamism and cultural renaissance, winds have reversed and Asian dominance in the art market is drawing many of these indigenous works back to their native land. Following such conditions, it is not unexpected that Christie's now stages an important sale of Chinese furniture in Hong Kong; a venue traditionally held in New York, and now lying within closer proximity of Asian clientele. Throughout the shifting sands and transient cycles of history, communication and exchange between the East and West have been perpetually in flux. Several of the fine objects offered in the current sale, which also reflect the influence and assimilation of East-West cultural diffusions, are reviewed here.

AN IMPORTANT DOCUMENTARY TWELVE-PANEL COROMANDEL LACQUER SCREEN (LOT 2037)

The earliest Western publications featuring Chinese furniture, Herbert Cesinsky's *Chinese Furniture* (pub. 1922) and Maurice Dupont's sequel *Les Meubles de la Chine* (pub. 1926), each illustrate fifty-some pieces of Ming and Qing dynasty lacquer furniture from various collections in France and Germany. By the early 17th century, the great art collection of Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), Louis XIII's chief minister, already included Chinese lacquers and porcelains that had been flowing into Europe through trade with the Dutch and Portuguese East Indian trading companies since the late Ming



Lot 2037

period. By the late 17th century, relations between Louis XIV and the Kangxi emperor were also engaged. The French monarch was anxious to establish scientific and cultural exchanges with China, and to extend his political and commercial interests in that region; the Chinese emperor was interested in developing skills in the European arts and sciences. In 1670, the *Trianon de Porcelain* was built at Versailles, which was the earliest attempt at a *chinoiserie* building; by 1695, the Jesuit missionaries had established a scientific academy within the Forbidden City. Gifts between the kingdoms were regularly exchanged.

In 1664, the French established *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* in Siam, where goods shipped from China were traded. In 1699 when direct trade was opened, the company was relocated to Canton. The Chinese were quite eager to meet the demand of the European market, and contemporary records of goods shipped to ports in France include a large volume of lacquer screens, cabinets and tables—this notwithstanding the trade with the Dutch and Portuguese who had even earlier begun



Fig. 1

to import Chinese lacquer wares from offshore trading ports along the Coromandel coast of southeast India and elsewhere. Thus, the numerous so-called 'Coromandel' lacquer screens from European and American collections; many, with inscriptions dateable to the Kangxi period (cf. lot 2037), are tangible evidence of this early trade. A painting by Albert von Keller with the subject set against a lacquer screen also reveals established *chinoiserie* taste in a 19th century European setting (fig. 1).

The screen stems from the ancient furniture tradition in China, serving variously as a status enhancing backdrop, a space enclosure, and a decorative space divider. In the modification of *fengshui* ambiance, the screen was also employed to disrupt harmful energies that travel along straight lines. Although adopted by the Japanese during Tang period, the category of screens amongst furniture types is generally unique to the Chinese culture. Visual reference material in paintings and woodcuts suggests that relatively small six- and eight-panel folding screens were of common use during the Ming period; an eight-panel screen pattern published in the Ming carpenters manual *Lu Ban jing* also indicates a standard for the time.

During the Qing dynasty, large twelve panel screen sets were popular. These screens served as decorative backdrops in the large formal rooms of wealthy households. Such screens, adorned with auspicious blessings, were also customarily presented as gifts to distinguished individuals on special celebrations such as promotion, retirement, or an important birthday. The birthday gift association is clearly revealed in an episode from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, when on her 80th birthday, Grandmother Jia enquires, "How many of the people who sent presents gave me folding screens?" Xifeng replied, "Sixteen, there were twelve big screens and four small *kang* screens. The best screen was from the Zhen family—a large twelve-panel screen



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

with a scene in silk tapestry on crimson satin from *A Bed-full of Tablets* (*Manchuanghu*) on one side, and symbols of longevity in powdered-gold on the other...”

The fine twelve-panel lacquer screen offered in the present sale also depicts the traditional scene from *A Bed-full of Tablets* — a Kangxi period dramatization of the Guo Ziyi legend. General Guo loyally served four emperors during the Tang dynasty and was instrumental in quelling the *An Shi* rebellion. On his 60th birthday, so many family members and officials came to offer their congratulations (fig. 2), that his bed was heaped with gifts of memorial tablets.



Fig. 4

Guo Ziyi became a model of the ideal Confucian official for the Manchu rulers. The convention of *bogu* antiquities (fig. 3), which commonly appear as decoration on Qing dynasty screens, was also promoted by the foreign Manchu court. Both were widely employed to demonstrate their acceptance and assimilation of the ancient Chinese culture and Confucian traditions. Interestingly, by the mid-18th century, traditional Chinese ideologies were also being entertained in the highest circles of European courts.

A SUPERB AND VERY RARE PAIR OF LARGE HUANGHUALI SQUARE-CORNER DISPLAY CABINETS, LIANG'GE GUI (LOT 2018)

The early Chinese furniture catalogues of Cesinsky and Dupont illustrate a number of late Ming and early Qing period lacquer cabinets in European collections, which may well be associated with the aforementioned trade in the 17th and 18th centuries. Two examples of the so-called “*Wanli*” display cabinets (figs. 4-5) compare closely to similar lacquer cabinets discovered in the northern regions of China over recent years—many from Shanxi province. However, it is extremely rare to find the lacquer surfaces in such excellent condition as those that survived in the West. Moreover, the deteriorated surfaces are also very difficult to restore. On the other hand, those with durable hardwood surfaces, such as the fine *huanghuali* pair offered in the present sale (lot 2018), were much less susceptible to the vicissitudes of age and neglect, and with minor cleaning and repolishing, the lovely, warmly-toned surface patterns were brought back to life. Materials aside, the display cabinet belongs to an exalted class outside of the more commonplace functional types of Chinese cabinetry.

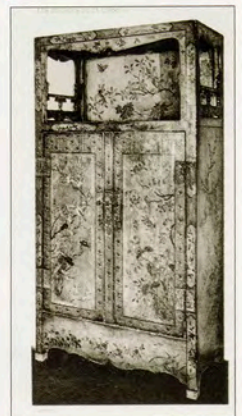


Fig. 5



Lot 2018

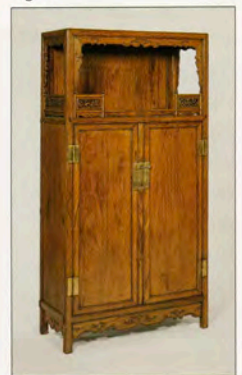


Fig. 6

The origin of the qualifying term “*Wanli*” is yet unclear. The more traditionally accepted term is *liang'ge gui*, which literally means ‘bright-shelf cabinet’. This cabinet type combines an open display shelf with concealed storage space below. The back of the display space is usually enclosed with a panel while the sides and front are open and typically fit with arch-shaped aprons. Low balustrade-like railings along the base of the openings may also provide a shrine-like ambiance to the enclosure that was well suited for the display of antiquities or precious porcelains. The interior of the lower half of the cabinet is typically fit with a shelf and drawers.



Lot 2041, Fig. 8

The pair of *huanghuali* cabinets offered in the present sale came to the West through a Hong Kong dealer in the 1990's—an era when Chinese were discarding the old in favor of modern furnishings. The former Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in California also acquired a similar pair in Hong Kong at this time (fig. 6), later sold at Christie's, New York, 19 September 1996, lot 76. Western collectors, already familiar with examples in Chinese lacquer, were naturally eager to acquire hardwood examples such as those which George Kates, Robert H. Ellsworth and Wang Shixiang had also illustrated in earlier publications. Twenty-some years later, this pair now returns to Asia.

A MAGNIFICENT AND VERY RARE PAIR OF LARGE IMPERIAL ZITAN LANTERN STANDS AND ZITAN AND SOFTWOOD LANTERNS, TIAO GAN DENG JIA (LOT 2041)

The pair of glass-paneled *zitan* and softwood lanterns with *zitan* stands are undoubtedly of the finest Qing imperial court quality (fig. 7). Exquisite workmanship and creative design is particularly evident in the lampstand base, which is carved with *ruyi*-scepter spandrels surrounding a vase with cracked-ice patterns—an auspicious wish for peace and contentment (*ping'an ruyi*) (fig. 8). The paramount condition, including original tassels and reverse-painted glass panels, also reveals some three-hundred years of highly appreciative care.

In more recent history, the present lanterns were received as gifts by the grandmother of the present owner in the 1950s from the Hungarian stage and screen actor Bela Lugosi (1882-1956), who also was an antique collector of sorts. However, when Bela acquired them is uncertain. Notwithstanding, it is the glass panels of the lanterns that reveal the influence and assimilation of Western science and technology during the Kangxi period.



Fig. 9



Fig. 7

Amongst the many collaborative exchanges between the French and Chinese was a factory for plate and mirror glass in Guangzhou. In 1699, trained Chinese craftsmen were recruited from this factory to help the Jesuits establish an Imperial glass workshop in Beijing. The Chinese artisans perfected the art and claimed to produce wares that were 'superior to the Western product'. In the last year of his reign (1721), Kangxi sent gifts of glassware to the Pope in Rome, the Czar of Russia and the King of Portugal—the latter of whom was also sent lanterns.

Novel application of glass and mirror panels continued throughout the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods, when records from imperial workshops document their use as tabletops, in book cabinets, screen panels, and as well as panels for *zitan* lanterns.

The glass panels of the present lanterns feature imagery of 'one-hundred boys'—a favorite decorative motif evidenced from the Song dynasty that conveys a wish for longevity of the ancestral line (fig. 9). The origin of the 'hundred boys' motif is traceable to the *Classic of Poetry*, wherein one verse alludes to the progeny of King Wen.

*Pure and reverent was Da'ren,
The mother of King Wen;
Loving was she to Zhou Jiang,
Wife of the Royal House.
Da'si inherited her excellent fame,
Through her a 'hundred sons' there came.*

One of the king's most prominent sons inherited the throne and founded the Zhou Dynasty as King Wu.

Reverse glass painting, which was a common technique for depicting European religious art, was most likely introduced by the Jesuits along with glass-making techniques. It became highly developed by the Chinese throughout the Qing dynasty in the medium of snuff bottles as well as glass paintings.

**A VERY RARE LARGE HUANGHUALI FOLDING STOOL, JIAOWU (LOT 2008)
A VERY RARE ZITAN FOLDING STOOL, JIAOWU (LOT 2039)**

The two fine folding stools (lots 2008 and 2039) in the present sale represent one of the earliest seat forms in China. Moreover, they also hint at osmotic transmission from the ancient Western world. The folding stool is generally thought to have migrated to China during the second century AD when Chinese customarily sat on ground-level mats or low platforms. At that time, the Han emperor Lingdi, who also seemed to be an early collector, was said to have had a passion for exotic curiosities, including the 'foreign seat' (*huchuang*)—a traditional Chinese term for the folding stool.



Fig. 10



Lot 2039



Fig. 11

More distant traces of this primal seat are found in the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, wherein the folding stool was a marker of status (fig. 10). One ancient folding stool dating to circa 1500-800 BC, discovered in the Nordic regions of Europe, demonstrates the breadth of its northward transmission (fig. 11). The earliest appearance in China is associated with the advent of the foreign Buddhist culture during and after the Han dynasty, as well as with the nomadic tribes of remote and 'barbarian' regions north and west of China. Its use spread throughout China over the following centuries, and became a popular seat for rulers and dignitaries when traveling or cruising on a boat, and its lightweight portability made it especially suitable for officers on military campaigns. These stools were also convenient for travelers to carry over the shoulder, and even today, men and women use them to relax by the street side or while fishing along a canal.



Lot 2008

The two folding stools in the present sale are also comparable to a rare pair of *huanghuali* stools at the Qingzhen temple in Xian (fig. 12). Decorated with relief carving and fitted with *paktong*-mounted footrests, they stand tall beyond the common stool.

CONCLUSION

The long history of Chinese furniture continues to reveal itself. While cross-cultural influences are superficially touched upon here, the depths and complexity of East-West exchange and assimilation largely await discovery.

Curtis Evarts

Shanghai

Late Summer, 2012



Fig. 12

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 Lacquer screen in European context. *Chopin*, Albert von Keller (1844-1920), d. 1873, oil on panel, Neue Pinakothek collection, Munich. (Inv. no. 8366). Copyright bpk. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen-Neue Pinakothek München.

Fig. 2 Guo Ziyi. Detail from lacquer screen (lot 2037).

Fig. 3 *Bogu* antiquities. Detail from lacquer screen (lot 2037).

Fig. 4 Lacquer display cabinet. After Maurice Dupont, *Les meubles de la Chine*, 1926, pl.11.

Fig. 5 Lacquer display cabinet. After Maurice Dupont, *Les meubles de la Chine*, 1926, pl.14.

Fig. 6 Huanghuali display cabinet, one of a pair. Former Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture Collection, Renaissance, California. Image courtesy of Christie's Images.

Fig. 7 Lampstands, detail from album leaf painting *Pleasures of the Months for Court Ladies*, 11th month. Chen Mei, 18th century, Palace Museum Collection, Beijing. *Zhongguo Lidai Huihua, Gugong Bowuyuan Canghai*. Beijing Renmin Chubanshe, 1991, vol. 7:100.

Fig. 8 Lampstand (Lot 2041).

Fig. 9 Detail of reverse glass painting from lantern (Lot 2041).

Fig. 10 Detail of relief carved folding stool from tomb of Khaemhet. Egyptian, ca. 1400 BC. Image courtesy of greatmirror.com.

Fig. 11 Nordic folding stool. Ash wood. Excavated at Guldhog, Denmark, ca. 1500-800 BC. Image courtesy of Roberto Fortuna and Kira Ursem/The National Museum of Denmark.

Fig. 12 One of a pair of *huanghuali* folding stools, 18th century, Qingzhen temple, Xian. Image courtesy of Curtis Evarts.