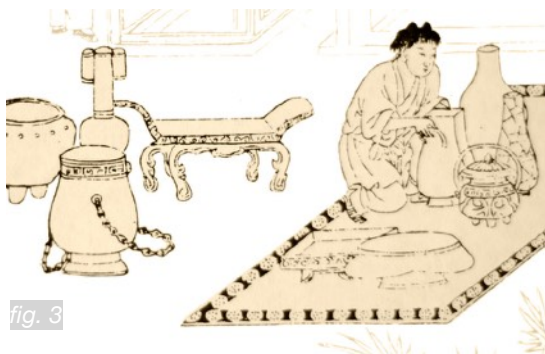


Small, Intermediate and Beautiful: The Chinese Table Stand

Curtis Evarts

The Chinese table stand arose from rituals and traditions of great antiquity; its miniaturized form, modeled upon ancient furniture and architectural structures. The widespread use of the stand is somewhat unique to the Chinese culture, reflecting ancient ideology with hierarchical order descending from Heaven through Man to Earth. As above, so below, the intermediate and unassuming stand distanced precious offerings, objects, and impressions from the mundane world. While essentially of subservient nature, Chinese table stands—*ennobled through graceful service*—have become to be viewed as small, intermediate, and beautiful works of art. To further explore its essential nature, this article will review the long history and conventional use of the table stand, and touch upon its ten thousand variations.



Ancient Ritual Use

Many of the Ming and Qing period table stands that collectors prize today bear striking resemblance to the small offering tables from the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Ancient texts describe the *zu* (俎) as a stand associated with the sacrifice of meats as well as for the *ding* censer (fig. 1a). *Yu* (欂) and *jin* (禁) stands were associated with the placement of ritual foods and wine vessels; the former, of box construction (fig. 1b); the latter with four legs (fig. 1c). Ministering to ancient tradition, these early forms continued to be reproduced throughout later periods as book illustrations and paintings. A Song dynasty painting depicts an offering of sacrificial meat and food upon a small (*zu*) stand of contemporary style with raised flanges (fig. 2); and a late Ming period woodblock print illustration of an antique market depicts a contemporary stand with raised flanges amongst a group of ancient bronzes (fig. 3). While millenniums apart, the stance and purpose of these descendants are not so distant from the ancient *zu*; nor are examples derived from the ancestral *yu* and *jin* forms difficult to find.



fig. 4

Xumi Pedestal

When Buddhism spread into China during 2nd century AD, architectural and sculptural elements from central Asia were also conveyed. Such is the *xumi* platform. This essential building block is generally considered to have origins with architectural pedestal of classical Greece, which had migrated to Gandhara through the eastern conquests of Alexander the Great; the pedestal style was carried onwards to China along the routes and pathways of trade merchants and Buddhist pilgrims.

Literally speaking, the *xumizuo* indicates the throne of Buddha—named after his legendary sanctuary, Xumi Mountain in the grand Himalayans. The assimilated form retains characteristics of the Greek pedestal, with a ‘waisted’ mid-section (*suoyao*) set back from the front and a *cyma-reversa* moulding (*tuosai*) easing its connection to the base (cf. fig. 4). Whether richly ornamented with lotus petals and jewels or of more streamlined form, the essential style of this platform remained associated with stands and platforms for religious sculpture throughout East Asia (cf. fig. 5).



fig. 5

Although the religious significance of the *xumi* platform eventually mixed in with the mundane world, the assimilated form continued as a classical convention that lent dignity to objects or buildings above it. Such is the six-leg stand depicted in a Song dynasty illustration of a ritual *qiqi* (欹器) vessel (fig. 6) as well as the inkstone stands depicted below (figs. 13-14).



fig. 6

Censer stands

The offering of fragrant incense also stems from ancient rites—a sacrificial release of the finest perfumed material into the invisible world of the Gods. Bodhidharma, the patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism (c. 5th century AD) commented upon the inner meaning of the practice, "... burning incense doesn't mean ordinary material incense, but the incense of the intangible Dharma, which drives away filth, ignorance, and evil deeds with its perfume....When the Buddha was in the world, he told his disciples to light such precious incense with the fire of awareness as an offering to the buddhas of the ten directions. But people today don't understand the Tathagata's real meaning. They use an ordinary flame to light material sandalwood and pray for some future blessing that never comes." Resolving mystic with mundane, real inner meaning may also be realized through outer practice; notwithstanding, the external convention of lighting incense has been widely practiced for centuries, and the intermediate censer and stand were essential accessories.



In Tang dynasty China, both sacred and profane use of incense and aromatics had become enormous, and sophisticated utensils for diffusing the essential fragrance were many. A number of relics related to the Tang incense culture were unearthed at the Buddhist Famen temple in Shaanxi province. A gold-gilt silver censer with stand may be considered to be stylistically typical of the period (fig. 7a); the round censer and matching low stand both have *taotie*-masked cabriole legs, in between which ribbon-shaped pendants hang. A more simply fashioned incense stand, with raised ends and curvilinear leg panels (fig. 7b), also represents an abstracted traditional form that has timelessly survived for centuries.



As time progressed, the incense culture continued to waft amongst the ranks of aristocratic and literati classes. By the late Ming period, Wen Zhenheng wrote, "The bronze censers of the ancients all had stands and covers; nowadays, people make them of wood; those of ebony are best; those of *zitan* wood and *huali* wood are also acceptable. However, one should avoid those mundanely styled as 'water-caltrop' or 'mallow-flower' shapes." Wen's preference was inclined towards elegant simplicity.

By this time, the accouterments of incense had also become a threesome—censer, box, and vase—which were commonly grouped upon a small incense table or stand. The corresponding term 'censer-vase threesome' (*luping sanshi*) makes an early appearance in the mid-Qing dynasty novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng*); terms aside, Wen provides a straight forward explanation: "Upon the table for daily use, set out a large, square Japanese stand; there upon, arrange a censer, a large incense box for fresh (*sheng*) and aged (*shou*) incense, *chenxiang* and incense cakes, and an incense tool vase." The censer was typically placed at the center, with incense box and tool vase set to either side (figs. 8-9). The tool vase held a spatula and pincers for handling incense, embers and its ash; the stand served as a miniature altar platform.





fig. 10

Japanese lacquer stands were repeatedly praised by Wen Zhenheng and Gao Lian. Gao wrote, “The style [of Japanese stands] is made with a single panel; the top, 2 *chi* in length, 1.2 *chi* in width, and 3 *cun* or more in height. The top is inlaid with small strips of gold and silver depicting imagery of flowers and birds, budding trees and garden rocks; it is fit with small raised flanges at each end; it is finished with gold lacquer on a lacquer-paste base. Below, there are four aprons. The four legs and end panels are finely beaded and finished with golden-bronze-flecked lacquer. It is extremely lightweight. In the study it is used for arranging censer, incense tool vase, and incense box. At times, scrolls or books can be placed upon it, or perhaps a precious scholar's object. It is truly marvelous!” While their extolment might suggest the existence of many such lacquer examples, corresponding pieces are rare with only a few in Japanese and overseas collections. Such is a gold lacquer stand in the V&A collection (fig. 10).

Gao and Wen also noted a variety of stands being produced by Suzhou artisans, including imitations of Japanese stands with inferior red lacquer, which readers were cautioned to avoid. However, the reproductions made from hardwoods like *wumu*, *zitan*, *huali* as well as those with decorative stone-panel tops were all considered acceptable; the latter, also provided a practical non-burnable surface for the incense table stand.

Amongst Ming dynasty paintings and woodcuts, depictions of the ‘incense threesome’ accompanied with a small table stand are quite rare; however, their arrangement upon a small table or an incense stand is not uncommon. Table stand arrangements appear more frequently throughout the Qing period (figs. 8-9), supporting the premise that the sophisticated fashion born from the late Ming *literati* circles within the Jiangnan region spread extensively throughout the Qing dynasty.



figs. 11ab



fig. 12



fig. 13



fig. 14



fig. 15

Stands for Wine and Tea Utensils

Stemming from the use of ancient ritual wine vessels was the ongoing use of stands to elevate wine jars, ewers, and cups when the popular wine culture flourished during the Tang dynasty. Such custom continued through the Ming dynasty, and considerable archaeological evidence and visual reference material survives reveals high footed stands and basin-like stands commonly accompanied wine cups and ewers of lacquer, silver, and porcelain (cf. figs. 11ab).

Such conventions were also shared with the tea culture. A Tang dynasty granite-carved tea ware set includes stands for cups and brazier, as well as a footed serving stand (fig. 12). Here the development of stand to tea tray is also clearly visible.

Stands for Stationery Items

Stationery items associated with the *literati* tradition were also placed upon stands since ancient times. A Liao dynasty tomb mural depicts a writing desk arranged with ink stone, brush rack, and a wine cup with stand (fig. 13); the ink stone rests upon a high-waisted platform-style base. An early Ming period tomb (d. 1389) also yielded an ink stone with a finely worked *xumi*-style stand with highly sophisticated workmanship and styling that retains Song and Yuan dynasty characteristics (fig. 14).

Many brush washers are depicted in Qing dynasty paintings with stands. A detail from the 18th century album leaf set *Yanqin yiqing* illustrates a scene with a gentleman brushing a fan painting; on the stand behind and painting table are a brush washer and a water coupe on low hexagonal and round stands (fig. 15).



fig. 16

fig. 17

Vase Stands

Amongst the ranging categories of small stands, the vase stand may well be most numerous. Depictions in Liao and Jin dynasty tomb art suggest a tradition passing from the Tang dynasty or earlier. A Liao wall painting detail reveals a small drum-shaped stand constructed of bamboo supporting a vase filled with peonies (fig. 16); and brick carvings in a sumptuously decorated Jin tomb depict a hexagonal stand with cabriole legs supporting a vase with lotus flowers (fig. 17).

The art of flowering arranging reached new heights during the Song dynasty. The collared vase stand, which provides cradle-like support for elegant, tall vases with flowers and blossoming branches frequently appear in Song dynasty paintings (fig. 18); numerous porcelain vase stands of this style have also survived from the Song and Yuan periods (cf. fig. 19). These stands ensured a stable, grounded base, especially for those arrangements with asymmetrical lateral branches or otherwise of precarious balance. Depictions of such stands in later period paintings as well as extant examples are evidence of its continued use well into the Qing dynasty (figs. 20, 30).



fig. 18

fig. 19

During the late Ming dynasty, Gao Lian and Wen Zhenheng also commented upon the connoisseurship of flower arranging, including the selection and use of vases and vase stands. According to Wen, the size and height of the stand was to be suitably matched to the vase, and by no means were flower vases to be placed upon a painting table. Amongst Gao Lian's listing of 'flower vase taboos' were explicit instructions to "avoid putting a common vase on an elaborately carved stand; nor should a stand be used with an empty vase."



fig. 20

Qing dynasty court paintings are also revealing in their portrayal of the art of the vase. A portrait depicts the Yongzheng emperor as artist and connoisseur, holding a brush in hand at a painting table and gazing upon flowering plum blossoms (fig. 21). The flowering sprig is arranged in a beautiful tall-neck and lobed vase; the vase rests upon a low square stand and together, they stand upon a larger scroll-shaped table stand. On the table behind, a bronze vase with a flowering orchid rests upon a low round stand. And a still life painting by Castiglione also realistically reveals a celadon vase placed upon a finely worked hardwood stand (fig. 22). Such stands are frequently found in *huanghuali* and *zitan*.



fig. 21

fig. 22



fig. 23b



fig. 24



fig. 25



fig. 26

Stand for Fruit Dishes

Stands were also customarily used for display and offerings of fruit dishes. An early depiction appears in a Tang dynasty wall painting detail wherein an aristocratic lady offers persimmons and buddha's hand fruit on oval tray mounted with five cabriole legs (fig. 23a), the style of which corresponds to a silver stand excavated from a Tang tomb (fig. 23b) as well as the group of Tang period stands in the Shosoin collection. Nearly a millennium later, Gao Lian commented upon the traditional fruit offering arranged upon stands. "On a small stand in front of a Buddha, arrange a cluster of fragrant citrus. There are numerous old *qingdong* (blue and white) and *longquan* (celadon) stands with which can one can amuse oneself and provide a genuine pure offering! " Here the reference is presumably to the aforementioned collared stands of porcelain, of which many celadon as well as blue-and-white pieces have indeed survived until this day (fig. 19). Painted depictions of fruit dishes on wood stands also suggest a tradition extending well into the Qing dynasty (figs. 24-25). A late 19th century photo of Cixi seated in a throne also shows fruit plates on stands to either side (fig. 26).



fig. 27

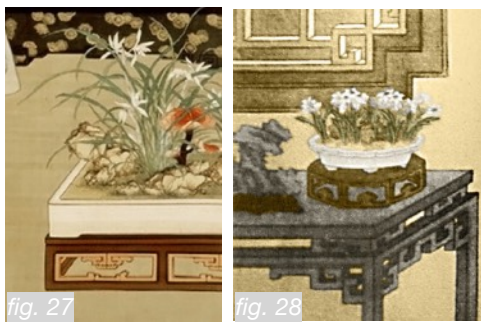


fig. 27

fig. 28

Penjing Stands

Potted landscapes and potted plants were also placed upon stands, especially when brought inside for the pleasure of viewing (fig. 27). And although vases with cut flowers were deemed inappropriate for the painting table, Wen acquiesced when it came to rock sculpture, blooming potted flowers or potted landscapes—so long as they were not placed on red lacquer stands! A detail from a Qing palace painting depicts table set out with marble basin filled with blooming narcissus, which is set upon a hexagonal box-style stand fashioned with ruyi-shapes in the openings; adjacently placed is a lingbi rock on a low stand (fig. 27). A fine potted landscape with orchids, *lingzhi*, and rocks was placed at the feet of Prince Yinli when his portrait was painted in 1731 (fig. 28). The marble basin rests upon a finely worked box-style stand with contrasting light colored material used for the carved aprons. The styling of both is typical of the early Qing dynasty.



fig. 29

Rock Stands

Here a brief word about stands for the small landscape rocks, which are essentially associated with the potted landscape (rock+plant) tradition. Most Ming dynasty illustrations depict landscape rocks set within a basin, and moreover, generally tastefully arranged with a potted plant (cf. fig. 29). However, during the late Ming period, the use of low wood stands began to be popular amongst the Jiangnan *literati*, a few of the many rocks illustrated in *Suyuan shipu* (d. 1613) are illustrated with low stands of inconspicuous style that were typical of the period (fig. 30). By the mid-to-late Qing period, the style of rock stands became increasingly elaborate.



fig. 30

青蓮舫研



Stands for Antiquities

The appreciation and enjoyment of antiquities is apparent from ancient times, and complementary stands served to bring esteemed objects into more prominent light. A Western Zhou *cong* that was fit with a square, gilt bronze stand and round cover during the Warring States period is any early example of such connoisseurship (fig. 31).

Although the appreciation of ancient jades and bronzes is well documented through the Song and Ming periods, early antiquities catalogues such as *Kaogutu* and *Xuanhe bogutu* rarely depict stands with objects. By the late Ming period, however, the pairing of objects to stands of suitable style and size had become an important aesthetic concern. Wen Zhenheng wrote, “Amongst the modern reproductions made according the old styles are some that are quite beautiful. When paired with ancient bronzes, the impression is ‘most antique’”. Wen’s words resonate with the antique market scene illustrated in figure 3, wherein the figure appears to be matching an antique bronze with a stand.



While the use of table stand was clearly a long established tradition, an unparalleled fetish arose during the Qing period. Yongzheng and Qianlong were avid collectors, and workshop records indicate their involvement with design and production of thousands of stands for their collected objects. Accordingly, most were made within the Imperial workshops by Cantonese artisans. Two long Yongzheng period hand scrolls *Pictures of Ancient Playthings* (*Guwan tu*) in the British Museum and V&A collections depict more than five hundred such objects; most are shown on hardwood, silk-covered or ivory stands—each clearly tailor made for its respective object (fig. 32). Amongst the many appear an ancient *cong* on a square stand with a round, open-work cover, reminiscent of the above Western Zhou period *cong* enhanced during the Warring States period with stand cover. Records also indicate that many old stands mated to objects were also upgraded with more refined works in *zitan* and *nanmu* during the Qianlong period. While carved wood gradually began to dominate the medium, many lacquer stands were also produced at the Palace Workshops during this period.



fig. 33

The unprecedented decorative pattern “imagery of antiquities” (*bogu tu*) that made its initial appearance during the Kangxi period and remained popular throughout the Qing dynasty also added to the stand’s rising fashion. This motif is depicted as a varied array of antique objects, which are often placed upon stands (cf. fig. 33). The foreign Manchu rulers “*bogu* antiquities” campaign celebrated objects associated with traditional rites, literature, and learning, and it was a demonstration of their acceptance of Chinese culture and Confucian principles. And, in particular, it was a boon to the culture of stands.



fig. 34

The workmanship of stands for the Imperial collection became increasingly intricate under the supervision of the early Qing emperors. A painting illustrating a the interior of palace chambers depicts cabinets filled with antiquities on stands (fig. 34). Qianlong particularly pushed the limits of artisan technique with the development of imitated materials. Such demanding skill is displayed in a finely carved hardwood stand made for a cloisonné vase (fig. 35)—the balustrade-like panels of which imitate basket weaving. The high level of artistry produced for the Qianlong court also had a rippling effect that influenced the stand-making tradition well into the late Qing period.



fig. 35

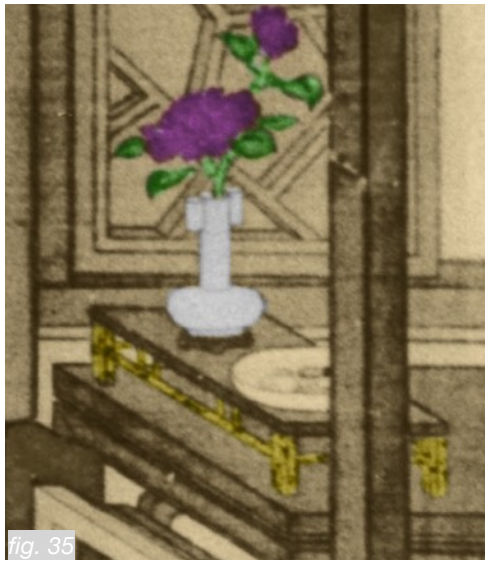


fig. 35



fig. 35



fig. 38

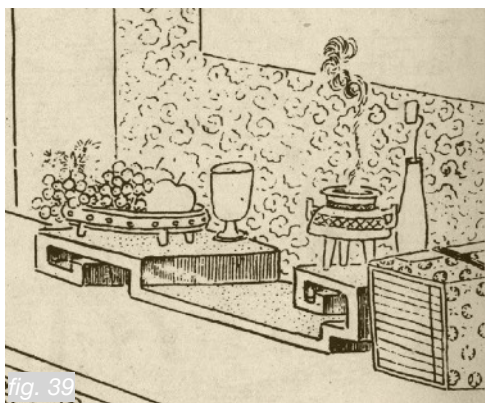


fig. 39

Materials and Workmanship

This brief survey of the table stand, which crosses dynastic ages and ranging use, also reveals forms made from a wide variety of materials, including metals, ceramics, lacquer, wood, bamboo, root and stone. Prior to the late Ming period, stands of metalwork, ceramic, and lacquer were most common. Lacquer stands, whether of Chinese or Japanese make, were especially prized throughout the Ming period. By the late Ming period, however, fine hardwoods such as *huanghuali* and *zitan* also began to be popularly substituted for the reproduction of the older classical patterns—both for large furniture as well as miniaturized stands.

The Jiangnan decorative style was widely adopted by the Qing rulers, the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors together making twelve grand excursions to the region. Such influence is evident in the elegant air of 18th century court paintings, many which also depict hardwood stands of classical style. Imperial workshop records from the first half of the 18th century indicate the most common materials of production were *zitan*, *huanghuali*, *nanmu* and ivory. Extant stands at the Palace number in the thousands, and most are of classical style. The master artisan You Bohuan, from Putian in Fujian province was active during the Yongzheng period and was renown for producing small works in *zitan*—including vase stands. His works were also said to be of meticulous, classical style.

An album leaf painting illustrating early Qing court life also depicts a small stand of speckled bamboo set at the end of a painting table (fig. 36). Evidence of similar technique is found in Palace tribute records from the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods; the Palace collection also has similarly styled tables with black lacquer tabletops of corresponding date.

The scroll-shaped stand was popular throughout the Qing dynasty. A lacquer stand with Kangxi period inscription is a rare and early example of the tradition form (fig. 37). Many hardwood examples of this pattern have survived, which were skillfully hewn from a single block of wood. The variant example—with angular scrolling legs—surged with popularity during the later half of the Qing period (cf. figs. 38-39).



fig. 40



fig. 41



fig. 42

Stands shaped from natural root also have ancient history. Their earliest appearance is associated with Buddhist and Daoist traditions, which rejected contrived materialism and sought after natural simplicity. By the late Ming and Qing periods, fashionable objects of natural root had become mingled with affluent and leisurely lifestyles (figs. 36, 37). During the Qing dynasty its popularity grew, and contrived root-style forms also appeared. The root of boxwood was a favorite material for such stands—its silky smooth texture and richly toned surface pleasing both the touch and eye.

Throughout the mid-to-late Qing period, stand production integrated with the art of carving, giving birth to novel works of intricate style. Such are the delicately worked tall stands (cf. fig. 37) or those with virtuoso openwork carving imitating twisted rope (cf fig. 38). And with influence derived from the popular curio cabinets with display space of various sizes, multiple level stands were also popularized (cf. fig. 35). By the late Qing period, the use of *hongmu* was widely adopted.

Conclusion

From ancient past to near present, the intermediary stand served to lift more rarified objects from the mundane world into prominent place. The medium was fashioned in ranging styles and materials to suitably transmit its message. Being grounded as well as indicative of higher order, it too, steps beyond the ordinary.

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