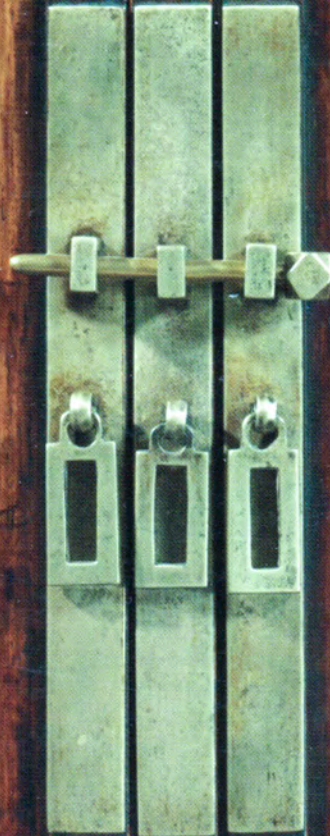


NEW YORK

FINE HUANGHUALI FURNITURE
FROM AN IMPORTANT
PRIVATE AMERICAN COLLECTION

Thursday 21 March 2013



CHRISTIE'S



25

REMARKABLE YEARS

with

CHINESE
FURNITURE

by Curtis Everts

Lot 923

The year 2013 marks some twenty-five years of this author's involvement with Chinese furniture. It was in 1988 that the seed for the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture collection was sown, when by seeming chance, a pair of Ming-style *zitan* southern officials chairs were acquired as beautiful decorative objects. Only later was the good fortune realized; we had stumbled into the golden era for collecting Chinese furniture. Reflecting now upon the last twenty-five years, the developments and permutations seem relatively remarkable.

From a Western perspective, the history of Chinese furniture appreciation and collection has been divided into three phases. The earliest, stretching from the late 17th century through the 19th century, marks a lengthy period of export trade that brought numerous intricate works of lacquer, bamboo and blackwood (*hongmu*) furniture to the West. The middle period, extending throughout the first half of the 20th century, may be defined as the emergence of "Ming-style" furniture connoisseurship, when westerners living in China found affinity with the natural modernity of traditional Chinese furniture forms; following the turmoil of

World War II a number of early collections were assembled in the West. The latest period began during the 80's when Chinese markets were reopened under Deng Xiaoping's reforms; this led to Hong Kong becoming a bustling trade-hub and a "golden era" for the collection of classical style furniture from the Ming and Qing dynasties. And now in addition to these three periods, a new era must now be acknowledged, which is characterized by the emergence of China as an economic power, the well-financed Chinese collector, and the flow of Chinese objects back to their native land.

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Collections formed during early part of the 20th century provided a base of interest for the fervent epoch that started in the 80's. By that time, Ming-style hardwood furniture was already displayed in many Western museums, including the Metropolitan, Nelson-Atkins, Philadelphia, Sackler Collection, Cleveland, Victoria and Albert, Musee Guimet, and others. These collections were also supported by numerous publications such as Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture* (pub. 1944), Kate's *Chinese Household Furniture* (pub. 1948), Ellsworth's *Chinese Furniture, Hardwood Examples of the Ming and Early Ch'ing Dynasties* (pub. 1970) and Beurdeley's *Chinese Furniture* (pub. 1979). Notwithstanding these sources of inspiration, the amount of material available to collectors was relatively limited.

Wang Shixiang's *Mingshi jiaju zhenshang* 明式家具珍赏 (pub. 1985 and translated as *Classic Chinese Furniture* in 1986) provided

a catalyst for an eager market, revealing a more extensive range of Ming-style hardwood furniture that had been gathered by a handful of mainland collectors throughout the second half of the 20th century. Concurrent to the impetus of modernization and urban renewal in China, old furniture was being cast out in favor of new, and the tenants of fresh modern dwellings were quite happy to decorate with contemporary Western-style furnishings.

The antique hardwood furniture market flourished within these conditions of transformation, and numerous important collections were formed over the following decade. Such were the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, the Minneapolis Museum of Art, the Dr. S.Y. Yip collection, the Robert and Alice Piccus collection, the Mimi and Raymond Hung Collection, the Vok collection—to name a few of prominence. Collectors were

far and wide, America, Europe, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Australia. Within a few years after establishing the Classical Chinese Furniture Society in 1990, membership represented some thirty countries worldwide—factually revealing the universal appeal of classical Chinese furniture.

All good things eventually come to pass. The quantity and quality of hardwood furniture available on the market gradually diminished; thus, throughout the latter half of the 90's, the fervent collecting activity also subsided. Over the following years, many dealers in the field came to crossroads. Some entered into the reproduction furniture trade; others entered into the minor-level market exploring the broader range of traditional furniture made from indigenous materials; others staunchly continued to focus on hardwood furniture, relying on occasional discoveries and secondary markets, where more goods began to



Lot 927



circulate between collectors, dealers, and the auction houses. The following decade was also a period for absorption and digestion. The wealth of new material also stimulated a considerable amount of fresh research and study. Wang Shixiang's monumental *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu (Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture)* (pub. 1989) led the way. Not only was it the first major work by a contemporary Chinese scholar, but it also provided a solid framework of categorization and construction techniques that has largely held its place to present times. Having "cast a brick in order to attract jade", in 1990 Wang became an

editorial advisor for the *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture*, a quarterly published for four years that provided the opportunity for scholars, collectors and dealers from around the world to share understanding and penetrate more deeply into specialized subjects with research articles and essays. *Orientalism* magazine also published numerous articles on the subject throughout this period, which were later compiled as *Chinese Furniture: Selected articles from Orientalism 1984-1994*; its popularity led to reprinted editions in 1999 and 2003, each edition expanded with more recent articles.

A profusion of collection catalogues was published, including *Masterpieces from the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture* (pub. 1995), *Chinese Furniture: One Hundred Examples from the Mimi and Raymond Hung Collection* (pub. 1996), *Chan Chair and Qin Bench: The Dr. S. Y. Yip Collection of Classic Chinese Furniture II* (pub. 1998), *Classical Chinese Furniture in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (pub. 1999), *A Leisurely Pursuit: Splendid Hardwood Antiquities from the Liang Yi Collection* (pub. 2000), *Living with Ming: The Lu Ming Shi Collection* (pub. 2000), and the *Vok Collection - PURE FORM - Classical Chinese Furniture* (pub. 2004).



Lot 924

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Several important Chinese furniture exhibitions were also staged, including *The Dr. S.Y. Yip Collection of Classic Chinese Furniture, Hong Kong* (1991), *Masterpieces from the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture* at the Pacific Heritage Museum, San Francisco (1995–1996), *Splendor of Style: Classical Furniture from the Ming and Qing Dynasties* at the National Museum of History, Taipei (1999), opening of the new Chinese furniture galleries at the Minneapolis Museum of Art (1999), *Ming: The Golden Age of Chinese Furniture, Lu Ming Shi Collection* at the Reunion des Musees Nationaux, Paris (2003), and the *Vok Collection* at the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne (2005). Indeed, the level of activity within this relatively infant field was unprecedented.

The hints of diminishing sources in the mid 90's also coincided with

a period of divestment. In 1996 Christie's New York staged the first of several important Chinese furniture sales, beginning with the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture collection; the Robert and Alice Piccus collection was auctioned in 1997; selections from the Yip collection, in 2002; and the Geis collection, in 2003. The Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture sale was a benchmark sale—the first major sale of its type, yielding unprecedented results with 106 lots selling for a combined total of US 11M, and an affirmation that classical style hardwood furniture had come of age. The immediate effect on the international market was “buy *huanghuali*”, and undoubtedly, many dealers benefited from the market stimulus. Nonetheless, hardwood furniture sales at public auction remained relatively flat during the following decade, although occasional spikes

of unprecedented results continued to hint of latent potential.

These intermediate years also witnessed increasing interest towards the broader range of traditional Chinese furniture produced in materials outside the narrow medium of imported hardwood. While the market for the latter had somewhat quieted, a wealth of both fine and rustic furniture was still being sourced throughout numerous regions in China. Both foreigners and domestic Chinese found the range of material both inspiring and interesting to collect; moreover, it was very affordable. In 1995, Sarah Handler and Nancy Berliner published *Friends of the House: Furniture from China's Towns and Villages*; in 1999, C. L. Ma *Collection: Traditional Furniture from the Greater Shanxi Region* was published; and in 2005, a museum

This fine group of classical-style furniture offered in the present Christie's sale exhibits traditional patterns and reflects upon the romanced lifestyle of the *literati* official.

dedicated to antique *jumu* furniture from the Jiangnan region was opened in Shanghai. And while such pieces have generally failed to attract much attention within the major auction markets, the prices of high quality pieces have risen multifold over recent years.

As Chinese buyers began penetrating the marketplace throughout the last decade, more significant change in the hardwood furniture market began to be seen. A notable event occurred in 2008, when a local Beijing auction house offered a fine group of *zitan* furniture, the thirteen lots selling for combined total of RMB 88.7M (US 13M). Two years later, the auction house again offered a group of 60 "Ming-style" *huanghuali* works, the total sale netting RMB 219M (US 35M). Such elevated prices for quality works of hardwood furniture have largely

been supported throughout the international markets over the last few years. This in turn continued to attract interesting pieces to the marketplace. Many of these have not previously been seen in public, and many are destined to go to Chinese buyers.

The fine group of classical-style furniture offered in the present Christie's sale exhibits traditional patterns and reflect upon the romanced lifestyle of the *literati* official. The high-back southern official's chair (lot 923) and horseshoe armchairs (lot 927) remain timeless favorites amongst collectors; the former with its elegant, vertical stance, the latter with expansive spherical breadth. The painting table (lot 924) was central to the scholar's study, and tapered cabinets (lots 926, 930, 933) of various sizes were essential for storing books, hand scrolls,

and curiosities. Most rare is the incense stand (lot 929), which transcends mundane utility to serve up mystical fragrance into metaphysical realms. These were the quintessential forms that captivated the West and idealized the East.

With China's economic strength seeding a cultural renaissance, a new era in the field of Chinese furniture has unmistakably arrived. Collections, exhibitions, and publications related to the broad range traditional furniture are now clearly on the rise. And like sundry China, the realm also has many faces, with interest ranging from entrepreneurial investment to grass-root resonance with the beauty of indigenous antiquity. Now, after 25 years of immersion and enrichment, we yield to new waters and serve to bridge the flow.



Lot 926

中國傢具傳奇二十五年

柯惕思





