

THE LAI FAMILY COLLECTION
OF FINE CHINESE FURNITURE AND WORKS OF ART

New York 17 September 2015



CHRISTIE'S

PETER AND SANDEE LAI: EARLY FRIENDS OF CLASSICAL CHINESE FURNITURE



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1
A huanghuali altar table, Ming Dynasty

Fig. 2
A large ceremonial huanghuali horseshoeback armchair, quanyi, 17th century, sold at Christie's New York, Park Avenue, 20 March 1997, lot 10.

Fig. 3
A huanghuali side table, tiaozhuo, 17th century, sold at Christie's New York, Park Avenue, 19 September 1996, lot 94.

Fig. 4
A huanghuali incense stand, xiangqi, 17th century, sold at Christie's New York, Park Avenue, 19 September 1996, lot 48.

It was during those frequent trips to Hong Kong during the early 90's in search of classical Chinese furniture that I became acquainted with Peter and Sandee Lai. Their antique gallery, Peter Lai Antiques, handled high-quality hardwood furniture. Peter and Sandee were both charming and amiable, and through our mutual interest, we quickly formed a friendship. During those years, they were also guests of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture on several occasions.

In 1997, I praised the Lai's outstanding reputation in an essay regarding furniture from the T. T. Tsui Collection that was being offered at Christies in New York. The furniture collection was primarily formed under the guidance of Peter and Sandee Lai during the late eighties and early nineties when source materials were more abundant in supply. Although having stepped back from the world of antiques, the Lai's hold the distinction as being one of



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Peter and Sandee Lai, c. 1989.
黎志江與黎仙蒂，1989年前後。

the most reputable furniture dealers in all of Hong Kong. Their uncompromising standards are also reflected in the greater part of the T. T. Tsui Collection of Chinese hardwood furniture.

Curiously, at that time, as I was just embarking on a new career in Asia following the deaccession of the furniture collection in Northern California, they, too, were just beginning a new phase of life in the western United States, having retired after a successful decade as antique dealers in Hong Kong. Although we have had little contact since our paths crossed to opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean, fond memories linger from the moments we shared during the heyday of hardwood furniture collecting.

Peter Lai, a native of Hong Kong, came from a family immersed in the antique trade. Peter's father Lai Loy and uncle Lai Tuk of Tai Sing were both well-known dealers



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

in Hong Kong who concentrated mainly in ceramics and jades. Peter had studied abroad, and after returning to Hong Kong, he and his American wife Sandee decided to follow family tradition and set up their own antiques gallery. In 1988, Peter Lai Antiques was opened in the prestigious Prince's Building. As antique dealers in Hong Kong, the Lai's were somewhat pioneers in establishing an elegantly designed gallery and publishing beautifully illustrated catalogues. Bob and Alice Piccus, who acquired several pieces from them while living in Hong Kong, recall that "their offerings and presentation were equal to the best established galleries in London, New York or Paris." They specialized in antique hardwood furniture, ceramics, as well as ancient works of art, and their clientele included international dealers, renowned collectors and museum curators.

Sandee was particularly enthusiastic about Chinese furniture, and was also gifted with a very discerning eye for truly unique and unusual pieces; moreover, quality was the canon. In those early years, two remarkable pieces that went to the former T. T. Tsui Museum of Art included the massive *huanghuali* altar table with cabriole legs (fig. 1) as well as the majestic *huanghuali* horseshoe back armchair with dragon head hand grips (fig. 2). In 1989, the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture (MCCF) acquired a *huanghuali* cabriole leg formal side table (fig. 3) and a *huanghuali* five-leg incense stand with long slender cabriole-legs (fig. 4). These rare forms have remained matchless over the passing years.

Amongst the numerous examples of classical-style hardwood furniture that Peter Lai Antiques handled, it is interesting to note the relatively high percentage with cabriole legs—a form which has a place in both eastern

and western decorative aesthetics, and clearly one that appealed to the Lais. While in Chinese furniture this element is often misunderstood as a Western convention, in fact, it has existed in Chinese decorative art since great antiquity as evidenced on ancient bronzes. Furniture with cabriole legs was already highly developed by the Song dynasty, and traditional terms for the shape that have been in use for centuries include 'leopard leg' (*baojiao*), 'praying mantis leg' (*tanglang tui*), or 'curling [elephant] trunk grasping leaf' (*zhuanbi daiye*)—terms that describe various curvilinear styles with expressive line drawn from nature. In Western furniture, however, the elegantly drawn cabriole leg does not appear until the late 17th/18 century—a time when Chinese fashion was prevalent in Europe, and Chinese elements were broadly assimilated into furniture design.

In 1991-92, Peter Lai Antiques provided the MCCF with two additional masterpieces: the *huanghuali* brazier stand (fig. 5) and a *huanghuali* side table (fig. 6). The brazier stand remains one of a kind as well as a rare example of early-period *huanghuali* furniture. And the table is a remarkable piece with a tabletop that was constructed to appear as a solid panel (fig. 6). An article in the *Journal of the Classical Furniture Society (JCCFS)* was specially dedicated to this masterpiece, (*Simplicity and Integrity: The Anatomy of a Masterpiece*, JCCFS Summer 1992). Sandee, who had supervised its restoration, provided invaluable notes and photographs of its disassembly to illustrate the uniquely intricate and otherwise invisible mortise-and-tenon joinery. Further inspiration arose from the animated conversations we shared about the dichotomy of its complex inner construction and minimalistic outer style, as well as the inconspicuous nature of its unknown maker.

During those years of dealing in hardwood furniture, Sandee had also developed a passion for collecting Ming dynasty pottery furniture, a medium which provided a valuable historical reference for the study of Chinese furniture. She assembled a selective and comprehensive group with some two-hundred examples ranging in forms and styles. The MCCF, which had also been collecting tomb



The display window for Peter Lai Antiques Ltd., Hong Kong, c. 1988.
 黎氏古玩有限公司展示窗，香港，1988年前後。

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 5
 A *huanghuali* brazier stand, *huopenjia*,
 16th century, sold at Christie's New York, Park
 Avenue, 19 September 1996, lot 46.

Fig. 6
 A *huanghuali* narrow table, *tiaoji*, 17th century,
 sold at Christie's New York, Park Avenue,
 19 September 1996, lot 22.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

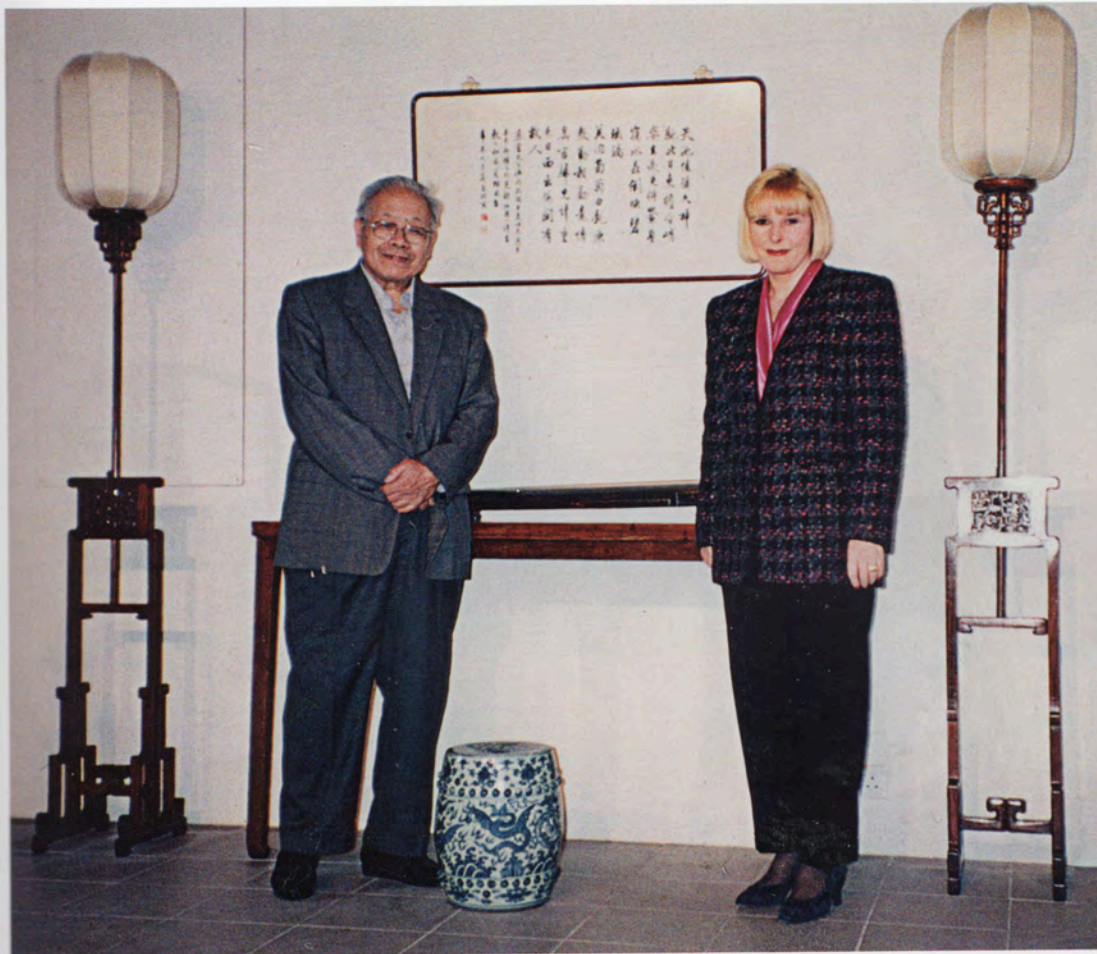
ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 7
A sancai-glazed miniature southern official's hat armchair, former Sandee Lai Collection.

Fig. 8
A huanghuali waisted daybed, ca. late 16th-early 17th century, sold at Christie's New York, Park Avenue, 19 September 1996, lot 54.

pottery furniture as reference objects, eventually persuaded her to let the museum acquire it. The sancai-glazed example illustrated (fig. 7) exemplifies the quality of her collection. The combined collection may well have been the largest assembly of such material ever formed. Although never published in its entirety, it provided impetus for a series of articles on the subject published in the *JCCFS* by Sheila Keppel.

The Lai's were enthusiastic supporters of the *Journal of the Classical Furniture Society* and generously assisted with its publication. While the *MCCF* was not sufficiently capitalized to acquire all the masterpieces that they offered, they also graciously provided images of important works from their collection for several articles. Examples include the magnificent pair of *huanghuali* square tables with serpentine marble tops (Evarts, 'Ornamental Stone Panels and Chinese Furniture', *JCCFS* Spring 1994), a very early



Wang Shixiang (1914–2009) and Sandee Lai at the opening of the T.T. Tsui Museum of Art, 1992.
 王世襄與黎仙蒂於徐式藝術館開幕儀式，1992年。

huanghuali daybed with cabriole legs (fig. 8) (Handler, *Life on a Platform*, JCCFS Autumn 1993), as well as the large *huanghuali* and *nanmu* burl painting table offered in this sale (lot 919) (Handler, 'A Clean Table by a Bright Window', JCCFS Spring 1994). Amongst the dealers in the field, their generous support was unparalleled.

The furniture offered in this sale are works that remained in the Lai's personal collection after their retirement; I can still recall several of the pieces from visits to their home in Hong Kong more than twenty years ago. It was good fate and fortune to have shared their friendship at that time, and now in reviewing those years, sharing this tribute to the standard of excellence they upheld within the field comes with great ease.



From left to right: Peter Lai, C.K. Fok, Lai Loy, T.T. Tsui, Lee Manshing, 2000.
 由左至右：黎志江，霍宗傑，黎來，徐展堂，李文成，2000年。

Curtis Evarts
 Shanghai, Summer 2015