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**VIRATA COLLECTION**

OF ASIAN ART: A FAMILY LEGACY

家族遺珍：瑪麗·泰瑞莎·L·維勒泰亞洲藝術珍藏



CHRISTIE'S

## RARE “MING-STYLE” ZITAN FURNITURE FROM THE VIRATA COLLECTION

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The mystique of *zitan* has captivated the Chinese for centuries. With origins from faraway foreign lands, *zitan* has historically been associated with the exotic. With quintessential qualities of perfumed fragrance, massive weight, deep-red pigmentation, and a surface that polishes to a rich, jade-like luster, it reflects the virtuous characteristics associated with those of nobility and rank. As a material for furniture-making, it was highly esteemed at the Qing Imperial Court, and indeed, the majority of surviving examples of *zitan* furniture reflect “Qing-style” forms and decoration. But even more unique is the rarified genre of “Ming-style” *zitan* furniture, of which several examples appear in the Virata Collection sale.

Early texts note that *zitan* was imported from south Asia. During the Tang dynasty, when Chinese trade flourished freely across foreign borders, exotic goods of *zitan* were highly popular amongst the aristocracy; however, most early references—even throughout most of the Ming period—relate to relatively small objects such as game boards, *weiqi* counters, scroll ends, boxes, musical instruments, etc. During the late Ming, the popularity of plain-styled hardwood furniture swelled in the Suzhou region. In the year 1597 Wang Shixing wrote of the sophistication in Suzhou and noted, “... objects for the studio, including stands, tables, couches and beds, of recent are all made of *zitan* or *huali*. Plain styles are valued over those with carved decoration.” While examples of *huanghuali* furniture have survived that can be securely dated to the late Ming period, not one of *zitan* has yet been discovered; and that extant examples of minimalistic, “Ming-style” *zitan* furniture are considerably fewer than those of *huanghuali* marks its unique rarity.

The early Qing emperors were highly influenced by the southern Jiangnan culture, where Suzhou was centrally located. In the early 18th century, they revitalized the Imperial furniture-making workshops with highly skilled craftsman recruited from Guangzhou and Suzhou. Records from the Yongzheng and Qianlong period Imperial archives reveal that *zitan*, *huali*, *nanmu*, and decorative lacquer were commonly used to produce furnishings for the Court Palaces. That *zitan* was sometimes used to reproduce designs from older pieces is a practice that appears recurrently in the Imperial workshop archives. For example, during the 6th year of the Yongzheng reign (1728), a new table of *zitan* was ordered to be made according to the size of an old red lacquer table and the style of another old black lacquer table; and *zitan* chairs were also reproduced after an old, red-lacquer lamphanger chair. Thus, new and old were melded at the Palace, and subsequently, a refreshed Imperial fashion also trickled out throughout the kingdom.

Six examples of “Ming-style” *zitan* furniture from Virata collection reflect the rise of popularity of hardwood furniture in Suzhou during the late Ming period and its popularization throughout the Qing dynasty. The yoke back armchairs are of classic pattern and reveal a perfected and pure expression of the type (lot 640). The *luohan chuang* is a massive work in *zitan* as rarely seen; yet with exquisite proportions and detailing, it is a masterwork without excess (lot 643). The small *zitan* table reflects Imperial taste during the early Qing period (lot 642); a matching piece in the Summer Palace collection was catalogued by Wang Shixiang, and tables of similar style are found in the Palace collection at the Forbidden City. The flush-sided *zitan* stands exhibit an extreme in minimalistic style that is rarely seen in works of *zitan*; the form epitomizes the concept of “Ming style” (lot 641). The pair of smaller *zitan* stools reflect the refinement of Suzhou craftsmanship exemplified by the use of finely woven cane mat on the underside to conceal the structure of the seat frame (lot 644). The *zitan* balance stand also typifies a Ming-style pattern from the Jiangnan region, and its simple detailing echoes Wang Shixing’s comments of the late Ming period preference in Suzhou for plain styling over carved decoration (lot 645). These “Ming-style” objects are truly a rare offering.

















