



# Bonhams

## The Mary and Cheney Cowles Collection of Classical Chinese Furniture

New York | March 20, 2023

## Separated Singles: Three Remarkable Standalone Chairs



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Chairs were often made as pairs or as larger sets. Inscriptions found on chairs provide evidence of sets that included as many as ten, twenty and thirty chairs. Throughout their history, however, sets often became separated due to numerous reasons. Amongst the broad category traditional Chinese chairs, extant sets of more than four are relatively rare. Three huanghuali chairs from the Cowles Collection, which survive as remarkable single chairs, originally may have had pair mates or even belonged to larger groups. This brief essay will look at their individual qualities as well as their extended families.

The large yoke back chair (lot 81) exhibits a dignified stance and refined workmanship. The upper half of the chair is active with curvilinear frame members and vivid openwork decorating the back splat; the cubical base is firmly rooted. The square-membered frames are softened with indented corner moldings, and each of the full aprons on all four sides are enlivened with beading and *ruyi*-shaped corners. The refined detailing as well as the low placement of the stretcher at the back of the chair are characteristics of chairs produced in the Jiangnan region.

The framed backrest features a *wan* character above and *taiping* 太平 (太·古文泰) characters below—all rendered in ancient seal script forms (fig. 1). Paired lines from the *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* state “The entire world is at peace, and all things are in calm repose.” (*tianxia taiping, wanwu anning* 天下太平·萬物安寧). The three characters—*wan taiping*—draw from this ancient concept, and with condensed phrasing may also be read as ‘eternal peace’ (*wan[nian] taiping* 万年泰平) or ‘endless generations of peace’ (*wan[shij] taiping* 万世泰平).

Auspicious characters and decorative rebuses were traditionally used as chair backrest decoration. The most common characters are stylized forms of the longevity (*shou*) and luck (*fu*) characters. And although the *wan* character appears somewhat less frequently, *taiping* characters are quite rare. However, the image of a vase (*ping* 瓶) as a decorative and homophonic rebus for peace (*ping* 平) occasionally appears as backrest and side post decoration (cf. lot 98).

Magnificent on its own, this single chair likely belonged to a larger set including a pair recently collected by the National Museum in Beijing (fig. 2). The three chairs suggest an original group of four or more.

The yoke back chair with a *fu* character in the back rest (lot 98) also exhibits an exuberant stance and richly decorated style. The backrest is enlivened with undulating flanges as well as a richly figured panel *nanmu* burl.

This chair belongs to a relatively large group of chairs that were produced by a common workshop. After recognizing distinctive characteristics shared by a number of yoke back armchairs (fig. 3), I published the article “From Ornate to Unadorned, A Study of a Group of Yoke-back Chairs” in the Spring 1993 issue of the *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*. This chair was one of the examples illustrated at that time.

Over the years, more chairs from the same workshop came to light, and in 2019, a revised article was published in Chinese by Poly Auction, Beijing. To date, there are twenty-two chairs in the group, including four yoke back side chairs. However, they were not produced as one large set, but rather predominantly as pairs with minor stylistic and dimensional differences. Half of the chairs are stylistically identical with *fu* characters and burl wood panels decorating the backs plates (fig. 4); some have marble panels in the backrest, and others have plain backrests without decoration (fig. 5). Many, but not all, have bamboo and vase shaped side posts—yet another auspicious decorative blessing for extended ‘peace’ (*zhu bao ping’an*). Differences aside, the shared pattern of construction as well as distinct detailing of frame members, secondary aprons, and spandrels is indicative of production from a singular workshop (fig. 3).

Many examples in this group have survived as pairs, and the Cowles chair may have also originally been one of a pair. Sharing both style and dimension, a possible candidate for a mate may be a single chair sold by Sotheby’s NY in 2007. Regardless, the single chair a magnificent example that also stands on its own. When first encountered many years ago, I was deeply impressed by its dignified stance, rich patination, and overall condition. I still regard it as one of the finest examples of the group as well as a remarkable chair on its own.



Fig. 4



Fig. 3



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Bamboo may have been one of the earliest furniture making materials. Stools and chairs are illustrated in Song period paintings, and an early depiction of a bamboo horseshoe armchair appears in Du Jin's (1465-1528) *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove* (fig. 6). Laden with virtuous characteristics, bamboo has also long been imitated in more precious materials. In furniture making, both naturalistic imitation and abstract simulation were widely popularized throughout the Qing dynasty.

The horseshoe chair (lot 88) is a wonderful example of faux-bamboo style workmanship. The imitated style is natural with nodes that incrementally increase in length and the members that gradually tapering upward. The shaping of the secondary supports also conforms to techniques evident in genuine bamboo-furniture construction (cf. figs. 7, 8). The chair's spacious, airy form is delightful to behold.

This chair belongs to a group of six identical chairs and possibly more. Four chairs are housed in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and another single chair formerly in the Richard Fabian collection was sold by Sotheby's New York in 2016. A pair fashioned from *tielei* wood that were offered at a recent sale at Christie's NY also appear to have been produced by the same workshop.

Beyond what has already been noted, evidence for large sets of chairs also appears in literary works. The description of the interior of a hall from the Qing dynasty novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 红楼梦) includes a group of sixteen *nanmu* folding chairs that were placed along the back wall—eight on each side of a large *zitan* table placed at the center. Several sets are also cited in the novel *Scholars* (*Ruilin waishi* 儒林外史) (pub. 1750), including twelve *huanghuali* chairs, eight *nanmu* chairs, six bamboo chairs, and ten horseshoe armchairs. Two other mid-Qing period works, *Zaishengyuan quanzhuan* 《再生缘全传》 and *Baixue yiyin* 《白雪遗音》, both describe large sets of rose chairs. Through the trials and tribulations of time, groups were often separated or lost. Nevertheless, we are fortunate for the fine examples—including these three remarkable standalone chairs—that have survived and continue to showcase the grand tradition of Chinese furniture.

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**Illustrations**

- Fig. 1 Seal script *ping* 平 and *tai* 太 characters
- Fig. 2 One of a pair of *huanghuali* armchairs, the National Museum, Beijing.
- Fig. 3 Drawing of prototype chair
- Fig. 4 Ornate *huanghuali* yoke back armchair, lot 98
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- Fig. 6 Bamboo horseshoe armchair, detail from *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove* by Du Jin, mid-Ming period
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