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“Best of the Best” An Exhibition of Ming Furniture from Private Collections

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Photographs courtesy of Grace Wu Bruce Co., Ltd



1 Side chairs. Huanghuali, 52 cms W × 42.5 cms
D × 116 cms H. Mrs Jeanette Lo Collection

THE MOST RECENT event in the world of Chinese furniture—the “Symposium on Classic Chinese Furniture” organised by the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong—was accompanied by a small but choice exhibition mounted by dealer Grace Wu Bruce in her Hong Kong gallery. The exhibition was opened on December 8th, 1994, by the noted collector, Anthony Hardy, graciously substituting for art historian Wang Shixiang, who had been inexplicably detained in Beijing by the local visa authorities. To select the eighteen pieces featured in the exhibition, Ms Wu formulated four major criteria: 1) successful design, 2) integrated construction, 3) fine condition, and 4) rarity of type.

Entering the Suzhou garden-style galleries of Grace Wu Bruce Co., Ltd, one was greeted by a remarkable pair of *huanghuali* (a tropical hardwood of fine grain and high density) side chairs (1). Immediately the eye was attracted to the unique variation of their crestrails—shaped in a curvilinear line reminiscent of rippling water. The chairs’ transparent structures are framed of square members with edges softly rounded over, and are neatly joined with double-mitre construction. The seat frames, with contrasting large rounded mouldings, had been converted to house hard-panel seats. Side chairs are considerably rarer than the more strongly constructed armchairs; thus, it is not surprising to find some minor replacements. The delicate crestrails have also suffered damage, and were at one point repaired with metal mounts. Now returned to their original condition, these chairs reflect an age of elegant living.

In another area of the exhibition, a scholar’s studio was suggested by a traditional grouping of a painting table and a large southern official’s chair, flanked by a pair of tapered cabinets. The elegant painting table (2) has been twice previously selected for exhibitions (Chapman 69, *The Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong* 219). Huanghuali of uniform grain and colour was generously used throughout, and the table top features two wide book-matched panels figured with ghost masks. The refined construction has no exposed joints. The four legs and corners of the frame are marked on the underside with the Chinese characters *tian-yi*, *-er*, *-san*, and *-si* to facilitate reassembly. Although attributed to the Ming dynasty, its sleek, hybrid corner-leg form with round legs should perhaps be considered in the broader sense “Ming-style (*Mingshi*)”.

The large southern official’s chair is a standard model of which ten to twenty extant pieces of various sizes are known (cf. Ecke 105). The prototype is characterised by a heavy crestrail with a thickened headrest, into which an extremely wide C-curved splat of solid *huanghuali* is fitted. Other distinguishing details are the straight sideposts of round section under the armrests, and the curvilinear flanges found inside the junctures of posts, crestrail, and



2 Painting table. Huanghuali. 164 cms W × 70 cms D × 85 cms H. Anonymous Private Collection

armrests. The seat frames have no moulding other than a gentle, convex profile, and straight, full aprons are found below on all four sides. The joints on this chair were pinned with wooden dowels, as are several of the other known examples, and the underside was once neatly coated with a thick lacquer base.

The overall form, and specifically the wide splats, heavy crestrails, straight aprons, and arrangement of stretchers of these chairs can be compared to a pair of finely modelled miniature chairs found in the late Ming tomb of Pan Hui (cf. Evarts 6). Wang Zhengshu (curator at the Shanghai Museum), in his symposium paper on dated Ming tomb furniture models, noted that a similar arrangement of stretchers—back stretcher at the same height as the front footrest stretcher, and the side stretchers somewhat higher—is common to a large group of miniature wood and pottery chairs. This evidence, as well as corresponding details in depictions of chairs in late Ming woodblock print illustrations, are strong indicators that the full-sized huanghuali chairs were also common to the late Ming period.

Of all forms of classical Chinese furniture, the calm, steadfast appearance of well-proportioned tapered cabinets evokes one of the most satisfying effects. The frames of this pair (3) were constructed with members of square section, and well figured, matched panels of huanghuali were utilised on the door panels. Inside, the

cabinet is fitted with shelves and drawers of oak and other miscellaneous woods, and the entire surface was coated with a thick, black lacquer with ramie undercoating. The cabinets are medium height (159 cms) and their unfinished softwood top panels are visible, prompting some speculation that these cabinets may originally have had stands to elevate them from damp floors. On the other hand, as Ms Wu has aptly pointed out, the traces of lacquer on these flush panels may indicate that the tops were originally finished with fine polished lacquer, and the otherwise high positioning of hardware mounts likely precludes the use of stands.

Moving from a group of relatively undecorated furniture, we arrive at a remarkably refined pair of high yokeback armchairs, exquisitely decorated with open and relief carving (5). These chairs, recently acquired by Hong Kong collector Robert Tang, were shown in the 1992 exhibition, "Circa 1492", at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., where they were rather generously attributed to the era in which Columbus discovered America (Levenson 485). Although they are more likely products of the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, they will nevertheless always remain exceptional examples of their type.

These chairs may have once belonged to a group of eight chairs; another matching pair is located in a private Hong Kong collection, and yet another pair is reported to exist in mainland China. Different auspi-

cious animals decorate each of the splats within a finely open carved *ruyi*-shaped medallion, which is scattered with miscellaneous treasure motifs. The two splats of this pair feature a *qilin* (mythical beast) and deer, and appear to have been sequentially cut from the same piece. Their integral flanges are open carved with archaic designs of long *chi* dragons with *lingzhi* (longevity fungus) curling off their backs. The theme continues below the seat frame with more elaborate decoration filling the surface of the apron's front, sides and back, featuring unusual, single-hoof *chi* dragons whose flaring nostrils confront budding and flowering sacred herbs.

A stately *chuang* (bed) was placed opposite the chairs (6). Its high-waisted form is better known among a family of high quality canopy beds, and all may have been produced by the same specialised workshop. The deep apron is carved with scrolling grass and *lingzhi*, and finned dragons swim above in the *taohuan* (non-weight bearing inset) panels. The powerful cabriolet legs terminate in scrolled feet, with leafy grass suggesting longevity. *Ruyi* lap-pets are carved on the shoulders.

The surrounding railings—fitted with a plinth-like base and terminating with carved designs of scrolled finned dragons, *ruyi*, and suns—are also somewhat unique. Although rarely seen in hardwood, plinth bases are commonly seen on the rails of Ming period lacquered *chuangs* (cf. Zhu 265, Handler 40). The long back railing is



3 Pair of tapered cabinets. Huanghuali. 82 cms W × 45.4 cms D × 159 cms H. Anonymous Private Collection

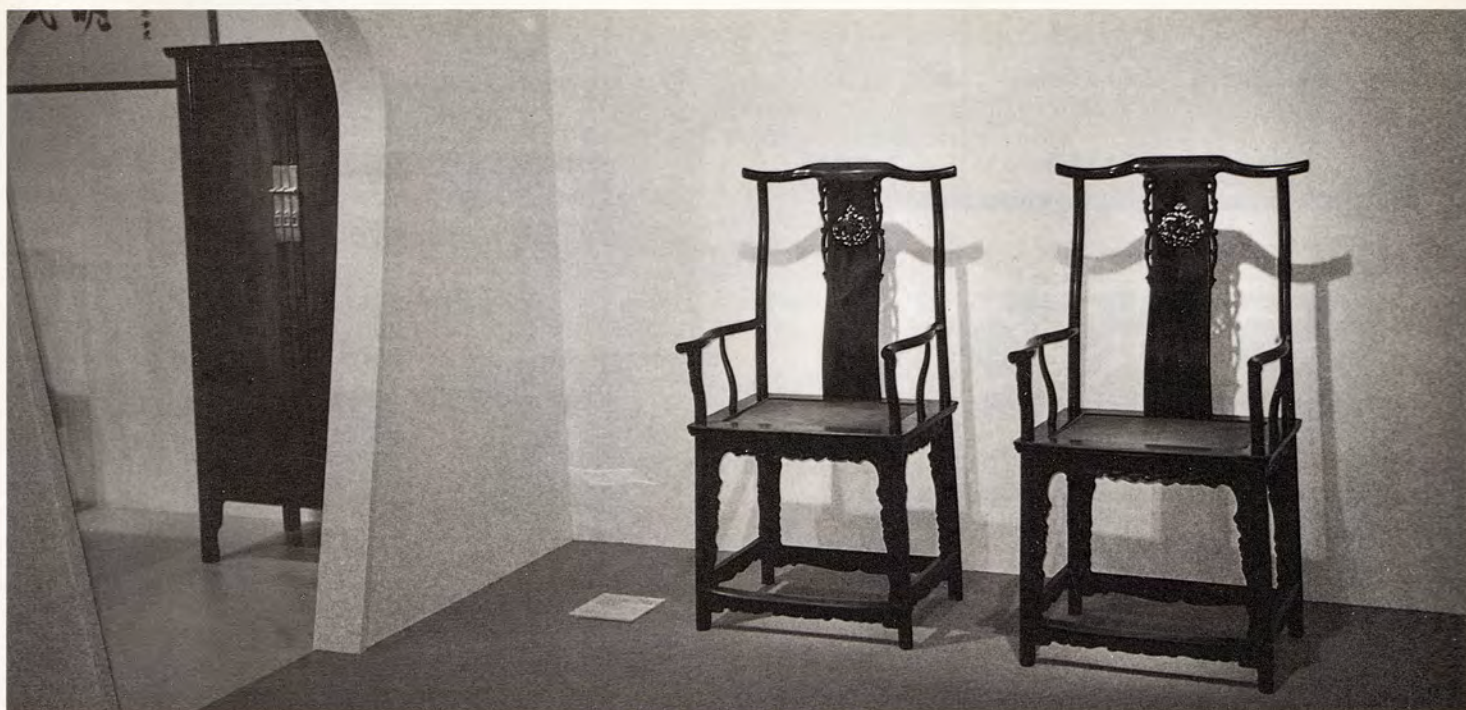
of hollow construction, but nevertheless appears to be original to the construction.

A small wine table was representative of mitred bridal joint construction, which was otherwise overshadowed by a smaller, yet remarkably elegant table of corner-leg construction placed against the opposite wall (4). Small tables of both types were often used like incense stands and also well suited for displaying antiques, fantastic rocks or potted landscapes.

The huanghuali frame of the corner-leg table is finely moulded, and houses a rare panel of striped, curly figured *nanmu* (cedar). Below, the high waist is pierced with long, narrow, beaded openings. Wide concave beading follows the outlines of the lower edge of the apron and, after turning down the leg, flourishes into a curling leaf motif, which when viewed from an angle resembles a *taotie* mask. The leg tapers somewhat and the beading continues down to a scrolled cloud-shaped foot. Although commonly depicted in paintings and book illustrations from the Song period onwards,



4 Small table. Huanghuali and nanmu. 78.7 cms W × 41.5 cms D × 82.2 cms H. Anonymous Private Collection



5 Yokeback armchairs. Huanghuali. 60 cms W × 74.3 cms D × 119 cms H. Mr Robert Tang Collection



6 Chuang. Huanghuali. 201.5 cms L × 95 cms D × 78.5 cms H. Mr Chen Chite Collection

cloud-shaped feet are rarely seen in extant examples. Particularly impressive was the lovely antique patina which regrettably, is more often than not stripped away by commercially minded restorers.

The most ornate piece in the exhibition was the huanghuali clothes rack (7) belonging to the Yip Shing Yiu Collection (Bruce 90). The elaborately carved decoration may indicate some level of Imperial or high official patronage, and the large dragon heads bursting from the top rail surely could have attended a hanging Imperial robe. It is perhaps the largest clothes rack known (185.5 cms W × 52.5 cms D × 185.5 cms H), although a similarly sized central panel of a possible feminine counterpart

(decorated with archaic phoenix designs) was previously in the Wang Shixiang Collection (Wang E 39). It can be concluded from the small number of extant clothes racks that have survived (often only in fragmented form), as well as deduced from one's own intuition, that this once common type of furniture is a relatively unstable, fragile form.

When Wang Shixiang arrived at last in Hong Kong, he was surprised to see a tall (103.5 cms H) four-leg huanghuali incense stand in the exhibition, which is identical to one previously in his collection and now in the Shanghai Museum (Wang B 31). While incense stands were commonly used as single pieces in the study, this newly

discovered second piece, belonging to W.P. Chung, Chairman of the Min Chiu Society, may have formed one of a pair displayed in the more formal setting of a large hall.

These unique stands have long, slender, "dragonfly legs" with the subtlest of beading along their outside edges. An unusual base stretcher with concave frame members is attached below. The tops of the legs disappear behind the undulating line of an elongated, octagonal, waisted platform, which somewhat resembles an elevated tortoiseshell. The single-piece aprons tongue and groove into the bottom of the octagonal frame; the central panel was carefully selected and neatly centred to display the whorling grain figure.

A similar discovery was recently made when Robert Tang acquired a bookcase (8) once probably paired to that in the Yip Shing Yiu Collection (Bruce 108). When the Yip piece was exhibited in 1991, I recall some debate among furniture pundits regarding its single band of unusual panels and the large amount of space relegated to the top shelf. As time passes and the study and collecting of Chinese furniture continues to develop, however, more and more become known, which help to authenticate unusual forms and teach us to be cautious in criticising forms never before seen.

The Tang piece has an exceptional patina, with minor repairs and replacements. The lacquer coating under the bottom shelf was doubtless a deterrent to ever-present dampness of Chinese floors. The large space on the upper shelf was probably intended as a display space. A pair of such bookcases in the studio would have been especially elegant.

The nicely tapered and S-shaped "rat



7 Clothes rack. Huanghuali. 185.5 cms W × 52.5 cms
D × 185.5 cms H. Dr Yip Shing Yiu Collection



8 Bookcase. Huanghuali. 103 cms W × 38.5 cms
D × 174.2 cms H. Mr Robert Tang Collection



9 Horseshoe armchairs. Huanghuali. 59 cms W × 45 cms
D × 97.2 cms H. Anonymous Private Collection



10 Lute table. Huanghuali. 114 cms L × 45 cms
D × 86 cms H. Anonymous Private Collection

tail" sideposts of the roundback armchairs seem to cradle an empty sphere and, paired with the rather cubical base below, transmit the traditional message, "Round Heaven above, square earth below" (*tianyuan difang*). Long, flowing spandrels are fitted below the hand grips and frontpost. These horseshoe chairs (9) would be considered rather traditional were it not for the interesting open carving on the front aprons, where embryonic scrolling buds forth from two pearl-like seeds. The three-piece aprons are joined by mitres locked together with blind dovetail joints.

A refined example of the standard recessed-leg side table was loaned from the Bob and Alice Piccus Collection (Evarts 20). The top panel features one of the largest pieces of nanmu burl known. As one quietly gazes through its leathery texture, the eye is entertained with clusters and grape-seed patterns that are transformed into grotesque figures, cave-like grottoes, and a myriad of kaleidoscopic images. The chaotic structure characteristic of burl is here stabilised on the underside with a coating of thickened lacquer over ramie fibre.

The spandrels are carved in an archaic style with bright-eyed phoenixes. The legs and double stretchers are crisply moulded with concave beadings. The overall success of this piece originates from its adherence to classical proportions. Subsequently refinements and use of precious materials has resulted in a crisp, elegant variation without straying from a long-established form.

Another exceptional piece in the exhibition was a small table of classic late Ming design (10). This minimalistic form appears repeatedly in late Ming book illustrations and gradually disappears in the Qing period. Two scenes from the novel *Pipa ji* depict tables of similar size and construction; one with a gentleman sitting playing the *qin* and the other in the women's quarters as a dressing table (Fu 280, 128).

Although the flat-sided, corner-leg table form is severely austere, subtle decoration—including the radius where the apron meets the leg, the slight splay of the leg, and the hoof—impart effective animation. The solid top panel of huanghuali is remarkably translucent, and its shimmering wave-like figure has perhaps moved *qin* players to perform at lofty heights of inspiration.

The unusual, low (67.5 cms H), corner-leg "lute table" with a sound chamber below the top (loaned from the Mengdie-xuan Collection) is remarkably similar to a nineteenth century illustration found in van Gulik's *The Lore of the Chinese Lute* (Gulik 5). Tables with sound chambers must have existed earlier, however, as the late Ming connoisseur Wen Zhenheng advises the use of a lute table (*qintai*) with a hollow space in order to amplify the sound. He also explains that utilising a low table, or sitting relatively high in relation to the table, enables the hands to move freely above the strings without expending unnecessary energy (Wen *juan* 7/11a). The empty sound cham-

ber of the huanghuali lute table is ported with six open-carved medallions in the panels around the four sides with scenes of birds and auspicious animals such as deer, qilin, spotted leopards, dragons, and phoenixes.

The pair of huanghuali yokeback armchairs with sinuously curved frame members and softly rounded terminals are classical types of late Ming period. With the exception of their beaded aprons and highly figured splats, they are devoid of any surface ornamentation.

Two interesting *kang* tables were selected for the exhibition, including a rare folding table from the Kai-Yin Lo Collection (Wang 1992 43). Its small size (72.5 cms L × 48 cms D × 28 cms H) would have been then well suited to placing on a *chuang* or daybed, while its compact portability would have been especially convenient for journeying to the mountains or cruising on a boat. A series of accompanying photos illustrated how the brass hinges, wood pivots, and iron fittings permit the table to fold into a compact unit approximately one-third its open size. The table top and panel were constructed of small-growth huanghuali, whose highly figured and striated graining produces imagery of fiery landscapes, ghost masks, and a particularly striking profile of a dog.

A second huanghuali *kang* table, of otherwise standard form and size (98 cms L × 70.5 cms D × 32.5 cms H), was finely carved with Ming Imperial-style decoration, suggesting an original use in a late Ming court (Bruce 223). Each apron was carved in low relief, with two finely carved five-clawed dragons writhing through clouds and confronting a flaming pearl. Their scaly and fully developed bodies are quite unlike the immature *chi* dragon motifs required by sumptuary regulations for the lower classes. More typical decoration includes the ruyi-shaped lappets on the shoulders of the legs that become taotie masks when viewed from an angle, and the leafy grass sprouting from the scrolled feet.

A group of miscellaneous huanghuali "table top" pieces—table chests, mirror stands, brush pot, shrine, etc.—from the Yip Shing Yiu Collection was also displayed, and supported the proposal developed in Dr Yip's presidential address at the symposium that this new category be added to the general classification of furniture types.

The scholarship of Chinese furniture is still a relatively new field, and collectors and dealers must continue to grapple with questions regarding dating, restoration, and alteration. A carefully selected exhibition such as this, which happily includes not only pieces owned or handled by the organiser, but also objects from other sources, is yet another step toward greater objectivity in the connoisseurship of Chinese furniture. Although there will inevitably be different opinions concerning the dating or the relative excellence of a

given piece of furniture, I sincerely believe that time will sort out these small inconsistencies, and cast the final vote on the "Best of the Best".

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