

Classical Chinese Furniture

BY THEA GRAY



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1 FOLDING HORSESHOE-BACK ARMCHAIR, of the late Ming Dynasty—from a collection of classical Chinese furniture shown at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, California.

Walking into an exhibit of late Ming and early Qing dynasty furniture, I was struck once again by the long, lean lines and the elegant proportions which typify this style, established over four hundred years ago. This is the furniture from the “Golden Age” of Chinese furniture which lasted from roughly 1500 to 1650, and some of the best examples of that time can be found at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, in a show entitled *Essence of Style: Chinese Furniture of the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, on exhibit through September 6th.

Furnituremakers living during the Ming dynasty were very fortunate when a governmental decree went into effect which helped set their furniture apart from that of their predecessors. This decree lifted a ban on imports, allowing exotic hardwood timbers from south-east Asia and other parts of the world to enter the market. Woodworkers chose golden *huanghuali*, deep purple *zitan*, black *wumu* (ebony), and yellow *huangyang* (boxwood) as some of the stars to chart their furniture by. Some samples of *huali* and *zitan* have been identified as species of *Pterocarpus*, the same family from which padouk and narra originate, and some have been identified as *Dalbergias*, or true rosewood. Furnituremakers continued to work in native woods such as elm, *jichi* and *ju* wood (*zelkova*), but these had less cachet than the new exotics.

It's long been assumed that the simple furniture made of these rich hardwoods was considered in its day to be the finest furniture available. But it is now believed that during the late Ming and early Qing dynasty, ornate furniture made of lacquered softwoods was just as, if not more, popular with the public as those made of *huanghuali* or *zitan*. In an inventory of household items from a deposed government official, beds, tables and other items were listed by descending order of value,

and plain furniture made of hardwoods was consistently listed at the bottom of each group. Ming dynasty hardwood furniture's lasting appeal is then partially based on its ability to last—the natural rot-resistance of these durable tropical species. Apparently, lacquered softwood furniture could not survive the centuries of damp stone and hard-packed dirt floors, and few examples are left.

Two black lacquer pieces represent this style in the show: a slope-styled cabinet (2), and a high-waisted stand, both inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Some of the first books on Ming Dynasty furniture were written in the forties by American ex-patriots living in China, and it's possible that lacquered furniture and ornate hardwood furniture were simply left out



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of these texts because they did not appeal to the Modernist aesthetics of the Westerners who wrote them.

Whether they made hardwood or lacquered softwood furniture, craftsmen would have worked in an imperial shop, a guild, or, after the end of the Ming dynasty, a private commercial shop. In the imperial shops, they worked under the direction of government officials, making furniture exclusively for royalty. Woodworkers were often instructed to make new furniture according to an older design, or to directly copy an entire set of furniture. The exceptionally slow stylistic changes in Chinese furniture have, in part, been attributed to this tendency to



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copy old furniture. At other times, officials who wanted a direct hand in designing furniture would go so far as to provide detailed directions specifying the dimensions of a chair or the number of drawers in a table. Some chairs and other pieces of hardwood furniture are as much as twenty-five percent larger than normal household furniture, suggesting that it was scaled up to fit the grand houses of royalty or other wealthy patrons. The pair of horseshoe-back armchairs made of *huang-huali* and *zitan* are an example of this phenomenon (3).

The combination of commercial shops and the removal of the import ban was a boon to the furniture industry, and the increase in foreign trade also served to fatten the pocketbooks of the merchants, who then sought a way to show off their new wealth. Furniture was a relatively inexpensive way for this newly rich class to rub elbows with their old-money neighbors, and the merchant class became another important source of

commissions for woodworkers. Oftentimes, the merchants bought their own lumber and then hired a craftsman to make it into furniture. The writer Fan Lian, who was born in 1540, remarked that hardwood furniture was rarely seen in the time before the import ban was lifted, but by 1600, it was common even in the houses of the middle classes.

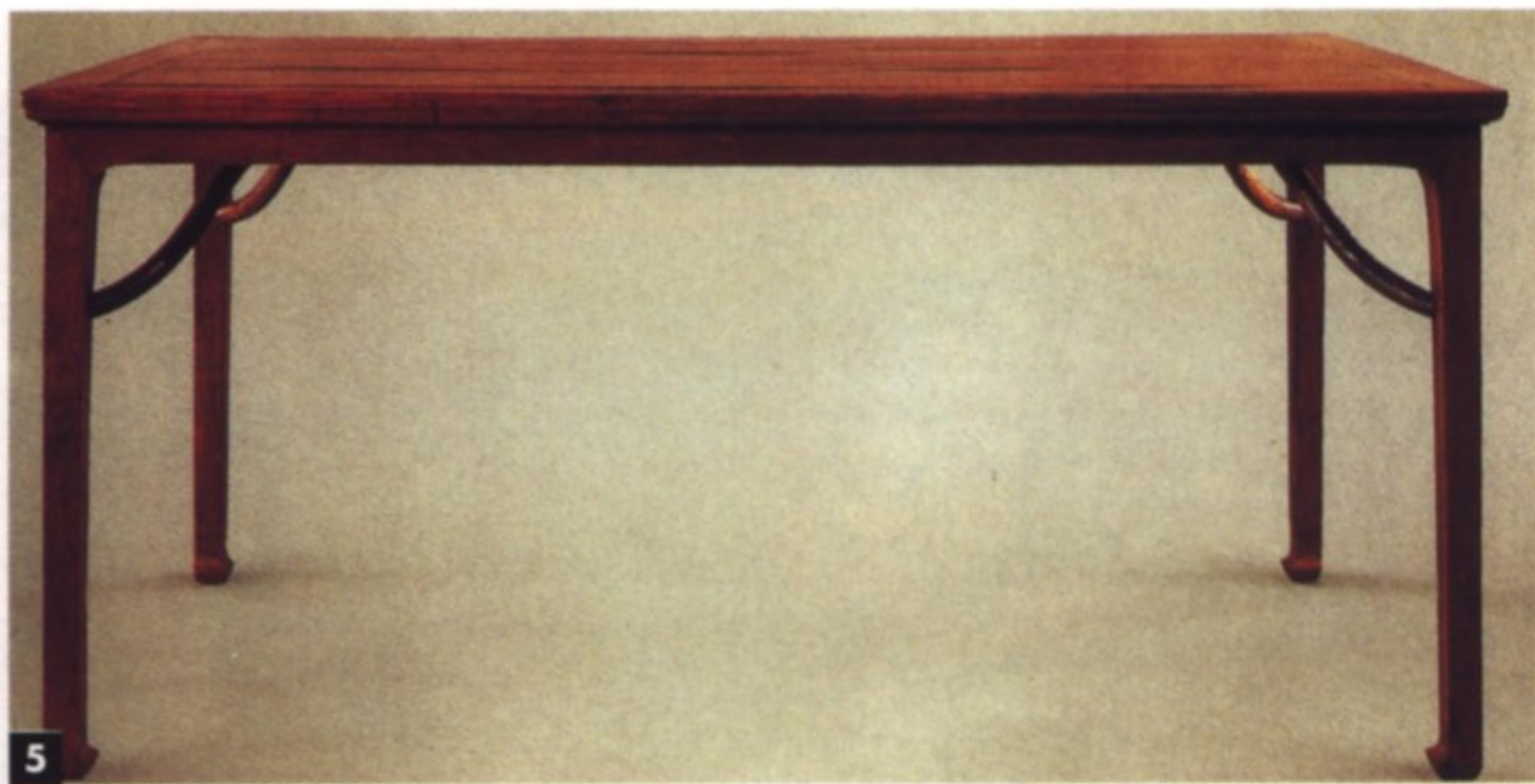
Whereas the bulk necessary when working with softwoods had confounded the woodworker's efforts for delicate lines, the dense hardwoods they now had in their shops held whatever fine lines their tools could produce. Clean planes were favored to show off the wood, which was cherished for certain clusters of knots, and special grain patterns said to resemble "ghost faces." They let the wood speak for itself, often adding only simple beading along an apron or a single carving of a flower to draw the eye along the seat and up to the back splat.

It was possible to create complex joints with these new materials, delicate but strong interlocking elements which were hidden behind serenely mitered corners. Legs flow seamlessly through the seat of a chair to support an arm rest. Elegant s-curved posts support quiet scarf joints in continuous-arm horseshoe-shaped arm chairs (1). These nearly-invisible joints serve to keep focus on the form as a whole.

Furnituremakers in the Ming dynasty were still adjusting to a major cultural move, which had begun nearly five hundred years before—the introduction of the chair. Until that time, most day-to-day business was conducted from a dual-function platform *chuang* which served as a seating platform during the day, and a bed at night (4). The height from the floor protected the sitter from the damp ground.



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The earliest known reference to a chair in Chinese history was the notation of the second-century emperor Ling Di's interest in the "barbarian" chair. The word *hu* can be defined as both "barbarian" and "foreign," and may have referred to the Indian-influenced nomads with whom the Chinese had contact along the Silk Route. Stools and high chairs were used first by Buddhist monks as early as the fifth century, although the sitter maintained the same folded-leg posture used on mats, and the custom of hanging the legs pendant from the chair did not catch on until later.

The transition to everyday lay use of chairs began around the tenth century, during the Tang dynasty, and by the twelfth century during the Song dynasty, chairs were in widespread use and sitting on a platform became so unusual that a scholar wrote an essay on the subject in order to inform his students of the proper methods. Eventually, the design of chairs evolved to include a convex or s-

curve splat to better support the back (3).

The move to chair-height had an affect on all aspects of interior design and architecture. Windows and ceilings were raised, room size was increased, scrolls were hung higher, and tables had to be elevated. At first, the change was awkward, as tables were made the same height as chairs, and the sitter's legs would not fit beneath the table. This was soon corrected, but when these revisions were first executed in softwoods it was necessary to add braces and stretchers for stability. With hardwoods, and the natural evolution of design, it was often possible to eliminate these extraneous elements.

So-called "giants' arm" braces are an example of this evolution. The braces, suggesting a giant holding up the weight of the world, are a prominent design element on many high tables, originally added to prevent the long legs from splaying out and breaking, without getting in the way of the sitter's legs as tradi-

tional stretchers might. Improved joinery techniques made the giant's arm braces no longer necessary, but they remained popular as a decorative element (5).

Identical pairs of chairs (6), cabinets, stools and even tables were very common, and the symmetry of the pairs was matched in each individual piece by details such as bookmatched doors and frame members. Although the tumult of revolutions throughout the centuries separated many pairs of furniture, the collection on exhibit at the Asian includes several.

The placement of screens, beds, and pairs of furniture was prescribed by the



study of *feng shui*, and by the members of the cultural elite. One gentleman, Wen Zhenheng, wrote *A Treatise on Superfluous Things*, a document which instructs the reader on the proper placement of paintings, plants, books and furniture in relation to each other, to windows and to the compass points. Simply stated, the goal of *feng shui* is to create harmony in any given room, regardless of its function, so that the resident is at peace with it, and him or herself.

In many cases, though, the functions of some of the rooms in a compound were fluid. Tables and chairs could be moved outside to the courtyard in the summer, or several tables and chairs could be arranged together for a banquet, at a time when the style was for each diner to have his or her own small table. This same table might be used for painting or as a side table the next day.





In either type of household, beds (12) and large cabinets tended to stay in one place because of their size and weight, thereby determining the main function of that room. Two sets of cabinets are included in the show, one set nearly twice the size of the other. The set of large compound cabinets likely held clothes and linens, the massive size and flush floating panels creating austere plain surfaces conveying power and importance (8). Cabinets were actually a relatively new addition to the household, developed alongside chairs. Prior to the popularization of cabinets, people kept their books and documents in boxes rather than in a pair of small, slope sided cabinets such as the exhibit's second set. This type of cabinet might be used in a bedroom or a study, and often times featured a removable third stile, which provided extra security as a fixed point to which the two doors could be locked (7).

"Document" and other types of boxes continued to be popular even after cabinets were common. The pillow box (9) is one such piece, an elegant narrow chest serving a dual function of both pillow and safe. The owner of such a piece



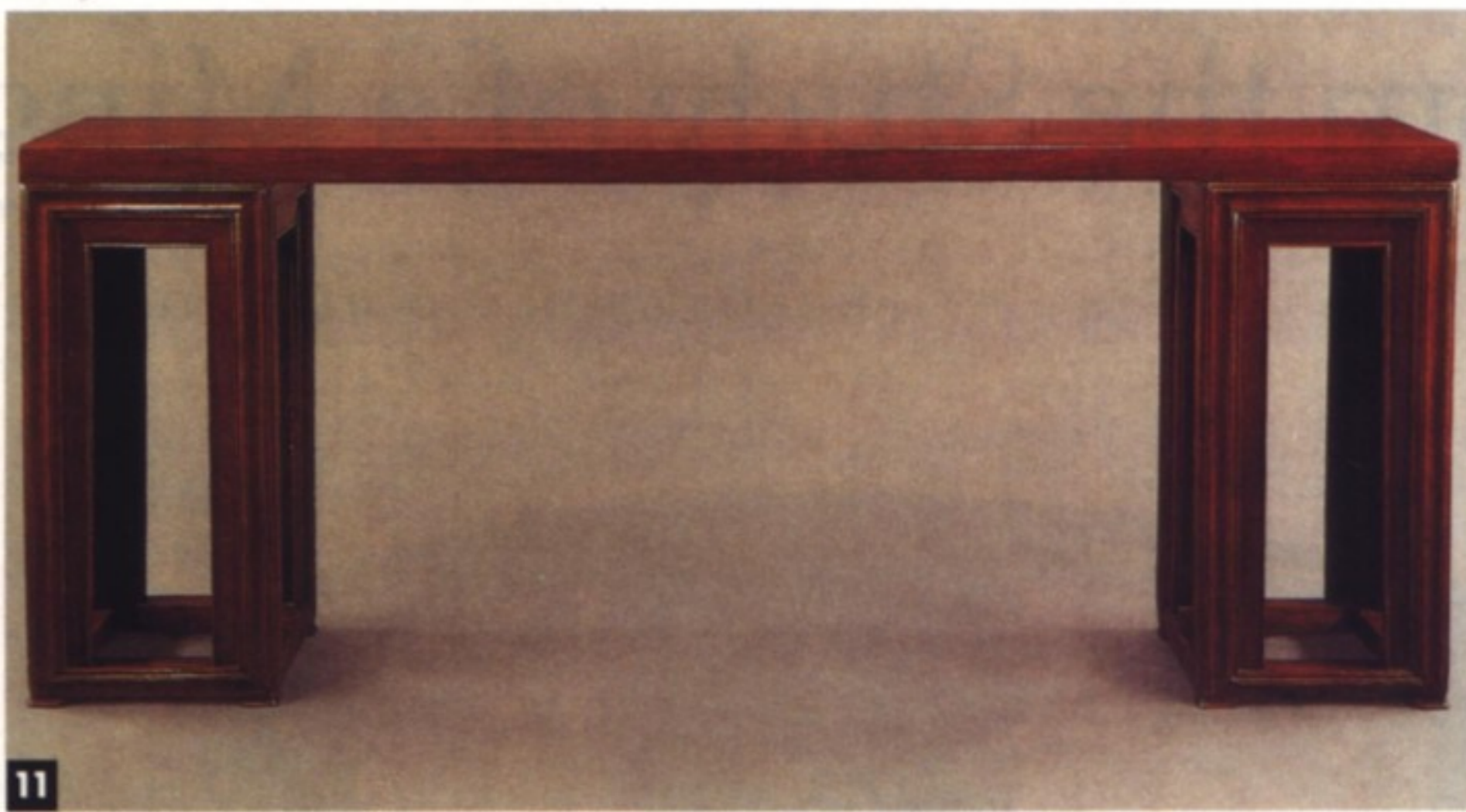
would sleep with it beneath his head, assured that the contents were at least as safe as he was. Consistent with construction methods of the time, the domed top was sawn from a single piece of *huanghuali*, not veneered, coopered or steam-bent. The only decoration is the brass hardware: edge reinforcements, handles, a simple round escutcheon and a cloud-shaped hasp.

Metal hardware is a central element on Chinese cabinets. Escutcheons, hinges and pulls are often composed of flat stock in basic shapes like circles, squares or rectangles. Some are pierced or formed to resemble bats, lanterns, or other objects and animals with auspicious meaning, such as the escutcheon in the shape of a chrysanthemum blossom on the rectangular scholar's chest (10).

This hardware was usually created by a metalsmith after the furniture was completed. The techniques used to fasten the hardware to the furniture is fairly crude compared to the sophisticated woodworking joinery; it was generally applied by the metalsmith, not the woodworker. In some cases, metal strapping and edging was added some time after the completion of the piece, when it became apparent that the joinery was not sufficient to hold it together. Undoubtedly, this occurred more often early in the development of the Ming style, when woodworkers were still testing the limits of their materials to produce the most delicate and elegant profiles.

Some Ming furniture was not delicate, but simple and monolithic, all the while maintaining an air of grace and elegance.





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The compound cabinets are a good example of this aesthetic, as is a pedestal table on exhibit (11). The table is a massive slab top of *huanghuali* supported by a rectilinear framework of moulding. The effect is serene, but the table also conveys a feeling of suspense, or of waiting, perhaps because the top is just a bit longer than one might expect, and so creates an unusual balance. Wen Zhenheng suggested that a solid plank table such as this should be placed on the left side of a room, facing east, preferably with inkstones, brushes and a water pot on top of it. The table itself is rare, as the tops of most tables of this sort were separated from their bases and used to repair or to create new pieces of furniture, the bases then sold off as stands.

There were many other pieces of furniture which did not survive the twentieth century without alteration. Early in this century, traditional low Ming tables from the early mat-level culture were snatched up by Western collectors to serve as coffee tables. When demand exceeded the supply, woodworkers cut down the legs of taller tables, and grafted on horse's hoof feet similar to those on the painting table (5).

A roomful of Chinese furniture has an awing affect, like walking into a den of big cats. Their regal bearing, powerful lines and splendid woods are parts of an elegant whole. They sit poised and waiting, commanding our attention. But, due to the lack of primary source documentation from that era, there is much which is still unknown about the furniture and the furnituremakers of the Ming Dynasty who produced this work.

And yet, equally as important as schol-

arly information, there is the strong visceral response that people have to this furniture. On one of my visits to the Asian Art Museum, I shared the galleries with a young couple who dashed about the rooms from piece to piece, excitedly discussing the furniture in front of them. Her hands clasped and unclasped, mirroring the joint in front of them, as he listened to her explanation and peered at the corner of the four-hundred-year-old table. It's unlikely that she knew that "interlaced fingers" (*chashou*) is the woodworker's graphic term for dovetails, or that her hands, forming joints in the air, evoked the oral tradition the Chinese masters used for thousands of years to pass along joinery techniques and design proportions to their apprentices. But it is

this kind of intimacy, curiosity and exploration which Ming and Qing dynasty furniture excites.

This furniture has survived the generations: fires, civil wars, foreign invasions, Communism and the Cultural Revolution. Through exhibits such as these, its essence may be passed along again, perhaps diluted, or intertwined in another art form, but still alive in the hearts and minds of a new generation.

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