

Arts

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Simply Ming China's classical gift rescued from time

Beautiful to the eye, ingenious in its construction, Ming furniture has become a collector's item.

Lyndall Crisp reports from Hong Kong.

Luckily, furniture made for the imperial families during the Ming era — 1457 to 1644 — survived the Japanese invasion, communism and the Cultural Revolution because it wasn't thought important.

But today it's commanding high prices among discerning collectors around the world, although its appeal has not yet seduced Australian buyers in any great numbers.

Ming furniture was virtually ignored until the later 1980s, when it was rediscovered after China opened up to the West following the death of Mao Zedong.

One of the first people to introduce the 400-year-old furniture to Chinese as well as international collectors was Grace Wu Bruce. Seventeen years later — with galleries in London and Hong Kong — she is acknowledged worldwide as the leading dealer.

"This wonderful furniture was lost to the Chinese themselves in the last dynasty," she says. "People like us, present-day Chinese, and people of the Qing dynasty were weaned on the imposing palace-style Chinese furniture — almost like Victoriana — and the subdued, clean line in furniture was banished to the great mansions, the warehouses of the palaces."

Demand has outstripped supply, not because Ming furniture — made from precious hardwood imported from Vietnam and Burma — hasn't survived, but because it was not common in its time.

"They were used at court and by the cultural elite so they were never abundantly available as the people's furniture," Bruce says. "And because they weren't really so much in vogue in the Qing dynasty [1644 to 1911] or during the upheaval years of China's modern history, they weren't the target during the Cultural Revolution, unlike the ceramics, the popularly known representations of the old culture."

"People who pillaged from the great houses didn't know what they were. The 40 or 50 families who moved into the great mansions divided the furniture and used it."

Bruce happened into the antique business almost by accident. She had long collected Ming furniture and while living in London, married to a Scottish lord, she attended a lecture at the Victoria & Albert Museum by eminent Beijing scholar Wang Shixiang, who became her mentor.

In 1985 she organised an exhibition of Ming furniture — her own and borrowed — for the launch of Wang's book, *Classic Chinese Furniture*, now considered the bible on the subject.



'Art lovers were amazed'... Grace Wu Bruce, above, has bought Ming furniture to the world in more than 30 major exhibitions. The large horseshoe armchair, left, is valued at \$US40,000, and the Pingtoun side table at \$US35,000.



"At that time what was assumed to be available was only what was taken out from China before the communist era," she says. "In the 1930s and 40s there was a group of foreign residents who lived in Beijing who, because of the European aesthetics of Bauhaus, chanced on this furniture."

"The first book on the subject was published in 1944 in a folio form by a German professor which stimulated the interest of scholars, collectors and foreign residents of Beijing."

"They were fascinated and then the communists came, so this group of people took what they'd collected with them when they left China in 1949."

Some pieces found their way into American and European museums and it was assumed that Ming furniture existed in quantities only outside China.

But Wang's book, translated from Chinese into many languages, alerted the world to this classic, restrained style of furniture.

"Chinese art lovers around the world, collectors of Chinese paintings, ceramics and porcelain were amazed because they'd never known that China had such beautiful furniture," says Bruce, who opened her first gallery in Hong Kong in 1987. Wang chose the name Jia Mu Tang, meaning Hall of Beautiful Woods.

It was the first time people had the opportunity to see the furniture on display.

"That's why someone like me can in a very short time become very specialised," Bruce says. Since then she has held more than 30 exhibitions around the world.

At the Asian Art Fair which opens in New York tomorrow Bruce has two rare pieces, a table

priced at \$US220,000 (\$292,000) and a display cabinet at \$US150,000.

But beware the copies. Now recognised as significant traditional Chinese furniture, reproductions are common in leading hotels — much like the Hepplewhite and Chippendale styles in Western-style hotels — and convention halls.

Forgeries are another story. They do exist and they are good.

"How do you tell a fake Rembrandt from the real Rembrandt? You have to study," Bruce says. "It's easy for people to think themselves experts but

'Are these modern?' And we'd say: 'But you're at an antique fair'."

"I shan't forget the impact the furniture made."

If you compare the best with the best — China's best with best American, best French and best English — Ming furniture is a bargain.

"The bonus is you can collect and use them," Bruce says. "One should buy the best of what one can afford, perhaps even a bit more than you can afford, because in a field where there's no speculation, it doesn't attract the types who speculate on art investment. Therefore the demands are real."

"I never advise people to buy for investment. In my time the price has always risen but we don't tell people to buy for that reason."

Tuyet Nguyet, editor of the international Asian arts and antiques magazine *Arts of Asia*, advises buyers to deal only with recognised dealers, to always take a local expert with them and to never buy in a shop that isn't well lit.

"Go to museums and exhibitions and touch, look closely," Nguyet says. "Only from that kind of experience do you learn. You can't just read books, you have to come face-to-face with things. That's a unique experience only you can develop."

"The more you look at these pieces the more you absorb and your eyes become expert." Something might be old but if it's not beautiful don't buy it, she says. You'll weary of it quickly.

"Whether you live in a country house or a small flat you should strive to surround yourself with things you love."

■ Lyndall Crisp visited Hong Kong as a guest of the Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office.

About town March 25 to 31

Sydney

Art Gallery of NSW: Chinese landscape painting from the Shanghai Museum, ends May 9.
Liverpool Street Gallery: Tony Bevan, ends April 17.
Stella Downer Fine Art: Ingrid Johnstone, ends April 8.
Museum of Contemporary Art: Rodney Glick, ends May 9.
Gow Langford Gallery: Lorna Napurrula Fencer, ends April 1.
Gould Galleries: Charles Blackman, ends March 28.
Sydney Theatre: *Talking Heads* with Maggie Smith, ends April 18.
Bell Shakespeare: *Servant of Two Masters*, Sydney Opera House, ends April 24.

Melbourne

Lauraine Diggins Fine Art: Peter Churcher, ends April 24.
Bendigo Art Gallery: Mathew Jones, ends April 18.
Judith Pugh: Greg Preece, ends April 1.
Axia Modern Art: Charles Reddington, ends March 31.
Tilt Contemporary Art: David Glyn Davies, ends April 3.
NGV International: Possum Tjapaltjarri, ends May 3.
Melbourne Theatre Company: *The Glass Menagerie*, at the Arts Centre, ends April 4.

Perth

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery: Lisa Roet, ends April 20.
Art Gallery of WA: Howard Taylor, ends May 2.
John Curtin Gallery: Tracey Moffat, ends March 28.
Goddard de Fiddes Gallery: Ben Pushman, ends April 8.
Musica Viva: *Different Realms*, Perth Concert Hall, March 29.

Canberra

National Gallery of Australia: The Edwardians: *Secrets and Desires*, ends June 15.
Beaver Galleries: Crispin Ackerman, Victor Greenaway, ends April 12.
The Hive Gallery: Jackie Goring, ends April 6.
Solander Gallery: Dylis Condell, Kerry McInnis, ends March 28.
National Museum of Australia: *Outlawed!* ends April 26.
Canberra Museum and Gallery: Jörg Schmeisser, ends May 23.

Brisbane

Queensland Art Gallery: *Video Hits: art & music video*, March 27 to June 14.
Jan Murphy Gallery: David Bromley, ends April 17.
Doggett Street Studio: David Hinchliffe, Karl De Waal, Betty Monro, ends April 3.
Museum of Brisbane: Contemporary Queensland sculpture, ends May 23.
Queensland Theatre Company: *The Underpants* at QPAC's Playhouse, ends April 3.
Queensland Orchestra: *Sentimental Journey*, at Concert Hall QPAC, March 28.

Adelaide

Art Gallery of South Australia: John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque, ends April 12.
Greenhill Galleries: Ian Greig, Trevor McNamara, ends April 13.
Hill-Smith Fine Art: Regina Noakes, Samone Turnbull, ends April 18.
Musica Viva: *Different Realms*, Adelaide Town Hall, March 31.

Hobart

Art Mob: Wirrimanu Wonderment, ends April 14.
SoapBox Gallery: Nathan Robley, ends April 2.
The Bett Gallery: Peter Stephenson, ends April 21.