

There's more to Ming than ancient and extraordinarily expensive Chinese porcelain. **John Windsor** charts the rise in popularity of the dynasty's furniture

MING'S AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE

TO ALMOST EVERYONE, "Ming" means rare Chinese ceramics; it means medieval underglazed vases worth more than £1m. But in the past few years, a different Ming, long forgotten, has begun to appear on the market – Ming furniture. Next month, Hong Kong dealer Grace Wu Bruce, the world's leading dealer in Ming furniture, will open London's first gallery specialising in it.

While our Tudor carpenters hammered crude oak dowels into heavy, uncomfortable benches, craftsmen of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) were assembling the complex joints of Chinese puzzles that are now seen not only as masterworks but as the first minimally designed furniture. Its lines are fluid and graceful and its correct placement in the home was in accordance with an advanced aesthetic of elegant living. It is comfortable too.

Had it not been for a monumental guide book on Ming furniture published in Beijing in 1985 by the scholar Wang Shixiang, now aged 85, even the Chinese themselves might have remained ignorant of it. Three centuries of the post-Ming Manchu invaders, with their flashier tastes in furniture, and China's recent revolutionary and cultural upheavals, have meant that the few pieces of Ming not burnt or carried off by Western connoisseurs have been languishing under layers of dust in Chinese attics and barns.

Wu Bruce, who spotted Ming furniture while still a teenager and began collecting it, helped to launch Wang's book. Two years later, she founded the first gallery selling it in the financial district of Hong Kong. Americans, Europeans – and Chinese – flocked to buy the latest, very old, collectable. Its minimal lines suit modern interiors perfectly. Since then, prices have risen tenfold. At her white-walled gallery in Balfour Mews, Mayfair, where Wang's calligraphy announces "The Hall of Beautiful Woods" – a pun on her Chinese name – the top price will be £90,000 for a table.

Born in China but educated in Vancouver and at McGill University in Montreal, where she graduated in psychology, Wu Bruce considers herself a product of the old China, having been brought up by her grandfather, a merchant who traded in South East Asia and Brazil. "I think I have been at the right place at the right time," she says. "I came upon Ming furniture by accident and was smitten from the beginning. I became enveloped by a passion for it and was driven to learn everything I could. The thrill of discovery and the sight and feel of a perfectly constructed piece of classical Chinese furniture transcends East/West aesthetics."

Wang is her mentor. "He introduced me to 16th-century Chinese novels about life in the big houses of the time. They illustrate Ming furniture and its correct arrangement: I used to read them at night and jump out of bed whenever I came across a picture that showed a design similar to that of a piece I had discovered." She also gained experience as a furniture restorer.

Wu Bruce runs her hand over a joint in a horseshoe armchair of the late 16th or early 17th century. The horseshoe-shaped arm is in three sections joined by two "scarf" pressure pegs. Each square peg, carved with hairbreadth precision, sits in the middle of a jigsaw-like joint. You could knock the pegs out, take the chair to pieces, and transport it. "Some people used to think these pegs were restorations, they are so intricate, but they are part of the original design," she explains. "The arm could not have been steamed into shape as it would have sprung back – wood is organic. Pegging makes the arm so strong that the chair can be sat upon for centuries without falling apart." The chair is priced at £18,000.

The simplicity of some of the construction techniques is breathtaking. The doors of a gently tapering cabinet swing on integrated dowels, top and bottom. Wu Bruce lifts one of the doors out of its sockets. The central stile, separating the two doors, is removable,



Right: Grace Wu Bruce sits on a rose chair, £28,000 for the pair, on the left is a travelling giatouan table, £68,000, at the back is a painting table, £40,000 and horseshoe armchair, £18,000; above the horseshoe armchair in detail

too, so that bolts of cloth as wide as the shelves can be stored in it. The cabinet costs £60,000. The simple look often hides ingenious complexity. Up to 36 surfaces may be intricately jigsawed into a "bridle" joint at the point where a wine table's legs meet the top and the apron suspended from it. All that can be seen from the outside is a slanted line between leg and apron. Most tables of the period have floating tops in morticed frames which, in the variable Chinese climate, expand and contract in grooves without warping.

Mortise and tenon joints have been found in remnants of Chinese Neolithic architecture, 6 to 7 thousand years old. But it was not until an industrial revolution in the early Ming dynasty that Chinese furniture approached its "golden age". By the time the textiles, ceramics and iron smelting industries had expanded tenfold and the Longqing emperor (1567-1572) had lifted the ban on maritime trade, the tropical hardwood huanghuali was being imported from South East Asia. Most Ming furniture is made from this. It is dense, highly grained and beautifully figured, with a wide range of colour from pale honey to rich mahogany, and it polishes to a translucent, golden sheen. When cut, it has a characteristic scent, hence its latin name *Dalbergia odorifera*.

Because the Manchus of the lengthy Qing dynasty (1644-1911) closed China to the outside world, an added attraction of Ming huanghuali furniture is that it can be appreciated as symbolic of an emancipated China that has, once again, opened its doors. There are knife marks on the top of a long Ming dining table, priced at £80,000,

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH BY CLIVE FROST

in Wu Bruce's gallery that were inflicted during China's most recent period of closure under Mao's regime, 1949-1976. She found the table in a mansion that had been seized by government officials. Its owner had been thrown out and the rooms occupied by 40 families. The table had been dragged into one of their living cubicles and used as a chopping board for meat and vegetables. "It has resisted over 20 years of chopping," she says. "It's a miracle it is still intact."

Would there not have been a great-grandmother, I asked, who would have said: "That's a good table" and halted the sacrilege? No, she explained, the only fine furniture they would have recognised would have been the Imperial "Palace" taste, the black lacquer with gaudy gold and silver inlay favoured by the Manchus – which dates back only three centuries.

Wang had to wait until after Mao's Cultural Revolution, during which ownership of dynastic artworks was punished, before publishing his 50 years of research on Ming furniture. The reason why it has taken off so quickly as a collectable is not only due to its sensational rediscovery, but also because Western diplomats based in Beijing before the Communist revolution of 1949 quietly collected it, savouring its Bauhaus-like lines. They introduced Western connoisseurs and curators to it.

When the Communist regime threw the Westerners out, their Ming furniture went with them. It found its way into museums in America and Europe, and curiosity created pent-up demand among the rich and discerning. Mainland Chinese, alerted to its value by Wang's book, began exporting it to Hong Kong dealers and auctioneers. Now a new wave of foreign collectors, following in the footsteps of the Beijing expats, has depleted indigenous stocks. As a result, prices are likely to rise even further.

Wu Bruce built up her collection from pieces that had already left China. While still a private collector, she held the first exhibition of Ming furniture, in Hong Kong in 1985, which coincided with the publication of Wang's book.

Two years ago, a landmark auction of the contents of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, at Christie's New York, was a sell-out, raising over \$11m (over £7m). The Museum's curator had bought a third of the pieces, all Ming, from Wu Bruce. In the sale, a 17th-century standing screen went to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts for \$1,102,500 (£707,000), a record for Chinese furniture and an indication that Ming furniture prices could challenge Ming ceramics prices. The record price for a Ming ceramic is £1,761,600. A year ago, a collection of 99 pieces of Ming furniture accumulated by the American couple Alice and Robert Piccus, early birds on the Ming trail, raised \$2,371,885 (£1,482,000). Avid collectors, they had moved to Hong Kong in 1968, where dealers told them that there was no classical furniture left in China. They recall that the first authentic huanghuali furniture began appearing on the Hong Kong market in 1984. They found a bundle of sticks in a sack that turned out to be a horseshoe-back chair.

Setting up in London, Wu Bruce seems poised uncomfortably between the new rich of China and the old rich of New York. The Chinese new rich still lack sophistication – their money is more likely to be spent on cars and mansions than ancient art – and New York beckons, especially as a haven from EC taxes on art sales. "But," she says, "London has its community of scholars, connoisseurs and expert restorers. It makes the life of an antique dealer more pleasant. I like it here."

□ Grace Wu Bruce's prices start at £1,500. Her gallery, The Hall of Beautiful Woods, opens on 17 November at 12a Balfour Mews, London W1 (0171 499 3750). Her Hong Kong gallery is on 00 852 2537 1288

