

Interview

Grace Wu Bruce is one of Hong Kong's foremost specialists in the field of Ming period furniture. Established in 1987, her eponymous company has held exhibitions of Ming furniture in Hong Kong and at a number of international fairs, helping to increase both the awareness and the understanding of what to many connoisseurs is the most sublime period of Chinese furniture craft.

Orientations: Your exhibition last year, 'Best of the Best', featured the cream of Ming furniture from a number of private collections, serving to show the greater public what is really the 'best'. Additionally, the predominance of excellent material from local collections demonstrated how far connoisseurship of furniture has come in Hong Kong. What are the goals of your current exhibition, 'Ming Furniture'?

Grace Wu Bruce: This year, the show is a sales exhibition of 38 pieces, aimed at demonstrating to the collecting public that top quality, and indeed rare examples, are still available in the market.

O: *Zitan* furniture has recently become much more prominent as a subject of scholarship and in exhibitions and sales. As a connoisseur, what are your views on the relative merits of *zitan* and *huanghuali*?

GWB: *Zitan* wood furniture has always been prominent among Chinese collectors. It is curious how Western dealers, auction houses and collectors have focused on *zitan* pieces of late. Perhaps this interest is motivated by the guesswork that so-called 'Chinese taste' items will gain very much in value due to the opening up of China and hence the possibility of many more people entering the Chinese art market. Ironically, the Chinese collectors are revamping their furniture holdings, replacing *zitan* pieces, which are mostly of Qing and later manufacture, for Ming period pieces, which happen to have been mostly made of *huanghuali* wood.

I like both woods, but Ming and Qing furniture pieces are not comparable, the former being, in my opinion, objects of art, the other objects of historical interest. Although Qing period examples do not have the same artistic merit as earlier pieces, they provide important social documentary evidence of the material culture of the period.

O: What are the most significant changes in the market for Chinese furniture in the past five years?

GWB: The recognition of the field by a larger public as being worthy of collection, study and appreciation. This has occurred over about ten years' time, rather than five years. The most important factor has been the availability of fresh material from primary sources in China which has stimulated new collections and scholarly attention. Prices have also risen dramatically.

O: You have previously written for *Orientations* on methods of detecting fakes. Do you have any further advice on this matter? Are there any new 'tricks' that the forgers are attempting to use?

GWB: Since 1991, when I wrote that article, the field has moved at lightning speed in many areas. Scholarship and collecting have advanced knowledge of joinery techniques, for example, and this increasing knowledge has unfortunately also given rise to increasingly sophisticated fakes. There are so many new tricks it would require a book to attempt to list them all.

O: In your view what would be most sought-after piece of furniture?

GWB: A Ming period folding chair, of the type with horseshoe-shaped arms. In our exhibition at the Grosvenor House Antiques Fair in London in 1993, we had an example. Its form, construction and shape were such that the piece transcended all national boundaries and all limitations of period, rendering it *yongheng*, a Chinese word combining the meaning of timelessness, and of lasting and eternal appeal. Judging by the reaction of the visitors to the fair, my view obviously found much sympathy.

O: In hindsight, who or what would you say has been the greatest influence in the formation of your own taste and expertise in Ming furniture?

GWB: I came upon Ming furniture by accident, and became a collector in the 1970s. From the onset, I was powered by a passion and driven to learn everything I could about Ming pieces from any source available. My path since then has been marked by many events and circumstances, all somehow conspiring to increase my relentless pursuit of every facet of Ming furniture. I have not managed to work out who or what among the people, the material or the events has been the greatest influence in these last two decades. It is probably all of them in tandem.

Grace Wu Bruce Co. Ltd's exhibition, 'Ming Furniture', will be held at their Hong Kong gallery from 13 October-18 November 1995. A full-colour catalogue is available.

Unfortunately, as in other areas of art, when the demand is greater than the supply and the monetary reward is high, there will be forgeries.

O: In your view what is the acceptable level of restoration to a piece of Chinese furniture?

GWB: There is no fast and hard rule. A perfect piece is always preferred but rarity of type would persuade most to relax requirements.

Essentially, a piece retaining its original design and spirit in a condition that does not detract from its beauty is acceptable to me.

O: What kind of advice do you currently give beginning collectors of Chinese furniture? On what areas of the field would you suggest them to focus?

GWB: The same advice as I have always given. Buy what pleases oneself, buy the most expensive piece one can afford. Buy from reliable and knowledgeable people.

One strange phenomenon is that there seems to have been a scarcity of Ming period chairs in the market in the last two to three

years. For those collectors interested in chairs, don't wait for the sets or pairs, buy single ones that appeal before they too become scarce.

O: What do you think are the most pressing concerns in the mid-1990s as regards the connoisseurship of Ming furniture?

GWB: To encourage the continued entry of quality people, students, scholars, dealers, collectors and restorers into the field to explore the many aspects of what are still uncharted territories. Just to give an example, a more in-depth understanding of the sophisticated joinery system, long the exclusive domain of carpenters, can add immeasurably to the appreciation of the marvels of classic Chinese furniture.

The entry of Chinese scholars into the furniture field has meant that old texts are being researched for their references to furniture, and this also should be further encouraged. It is quite absurd that until recently this entire burden had fallen on the shoulders of Wang Shixiang, the eminent Beijing art historian and furniture collector, and his influential group of students.

O: Among the pieces in your present exhibition, which two best represent these concerns?

GWB: In our exhibition, understanding the construction of a piece such as the beautiful late Ming period wine table, which features the relatively rare flush bridge join (*chajiasun*), would add an unimaginable dimension to its appreciation. It is essential to understand such details to be a true connoisseur of Ming furniture.

Historical knowledge is also important. Would it not add to its appreciation and interest to know that the late Ming period large folding stool in the exhibition is similar to a piece that the Eastern Han emperor Lingdi liked to have with him when out hunting?

O: Is there still plenty of 'fresh' Ming period material yet to enter the market?

GWB: Yes. In our exhibition, for instance, there are two examples, a music stand and a display cabinet with an interior display shelf. These examples are types of furniture we haven't seen before. So not only is there 'fresh' material in the market – there is exciting material as well.

O: Until the late 1970s, the most prominent collectors this century were Westerners. What do you predict is the future of the Chinese furniture market? Do you see it shifting to a balance of Western and Chinese collectors, or do you think that Chinese collectors will come to dominate the field?

GWB: Ming period furniture was 'rediscovered' this century only during the 1930s and 1940s. During that time, there were at least five or six important private collections in Beijing owned by Chinese connoisseurs. Western scholars and collectors who lived in Beijing and had access to such collections brought the pieces to the world's attention. Soon after that, China closed its doors to the outside world and it was only until the late 1970s that they were reopened. From the 1950s to the late 1970s, the Ming period pieces known to be available in the market were in the West and it was natural that the field was dominated by Western-based collectors. In the 1980s and 1990s the market place moved to Hong Kong, so Asian-based collectors became very active. Important collections were still being formed in the West, however, e.g. the Renaissance Collection in California; they just shopped in Hong Kong. It remains to be seen where the market will move to.