

## House and Home

THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH OCTOBER 18, 1998

PHOTOGRAPH: JUSTIN LEIGHTON



**Furniture-makers' art** 'Ming transcends not only time but also place,' says Grace Wu Bruce. Table, £60,000; chair, £15,000

on the outside only by tiny wooden pegs. Take them out, then the square pin will come out and all sections can be removed." These complex three-dimensional jigsaw puzzles hold the limbs together as tight as glue (which wasn't used at all). The furniture was made from tropical hardwood imported from south-east Asia.

What is extraordinary is that, in stark contrast to the western furniture-making tradition, in which the great makers are fêted, virtually nothing is known about the craftsmen responsible for these works of art. This is partly due to the turbulence of China's history even as long ago as the late 17th century, but also to the carpenters' lack of status in the rigidly hierarchical class structure of the time.

"Furniture was not regarded as art," she said. "But we know that the makers must have been respected within their group, as there was so little variation, just a gradual evolution and refinement."

Even in its day, the furniture was rare and when taste turned to the heavy, more ornate style we associate with China, the pieces were lost first to the bedrooms of the palaces and then into the storehouses. From there they disappeared, often dismantled, and ended up in all kinds

of unexpected places. The density of the wood, however, and the quality of workmanship make the furniture so robust that, once restored, it can be sat on, used and eaten off today. Miss Wu Bruce's client list is, of course, cloaked in discretion. The Asian business tycoons may have gone to ground for the time being, but her schedule for September reveals the scope of her interests: on the 5th she was in Beijing, official guest at a performance of *Turandot*. From there she travelled to Hong Kong, New York, Paris, Brussels (where a client has just built a new wing to house his collection), Minneapolis, Israel, London — and back to China.

And her choice of London

for her headquarters in the West — bucking the trend that is taking so much of the top end of the international art market to New York — is also being scrutinised by interested parties.

Is it because she wishes to hedge her bets in case a financial crisis destroys her Asian market, and from here Europe, Asia and America are all accessible? Or could it be that in Britain there is so much expertise in Asian art — at the V & A, the British Museum, the Royal Academy, Christie's and Sotheby's? Or is it just that her daughter Antonia is starting her first year at university here and she would like to be near her? A combination of all three.

Her move coincides with a great burst of confidence among London dealers. The launch-exhibition coincides with Asia Art Week in London, during which the Royal Academy is having an exhibition of ceramics, as is the V & A. Christie's and Sotheby's have rescheduled their sales of oriental art to coincide with this, and London's Asian art dealers are holding special exhibitions.

The time seems right for the Ming Dynasty to acquire fans in a new city. "People ask me, 'Is this modern?' 'Is this Charles Rennie Mackintosh?' But it is 400 years old. It really does transcend not only time, but also place."

□ Wu Bruce, 12a Balfour Mews, London W1Y 5RJ (0171 499 3750) opens November 17.