Antique Chinese Furniture



Mid 18th C. antique Chinese altar cabinet with 2 drawers

Antique Chinese furniture can be loosely divided into two broad categories: classical and vernacular. Classical pieces were made from imported hardwoods and commissioned by members of the imperial family, ranked officials, scholars, and those connected with the imperial court. Like many other prized artwork in Chinese culture, classical furniture emphasized the natural beauty of hardwoods. Those woods were waxed or thinly lacquered so the elegant wood grains could be seen and appreciated; and the wood identified. Most importantly, classical pieces were minimal in design right through the Ming and into the Qing dynasty; as if to reflect the frugal, unpretentious lifestyle of the exemplary scholar official. During the Qing dynasty, furniture designs became more elaborate with intricate carvings and fine detailing.



19th C. antique Chinese compound shrine cabinet

Vernacular furniture, on the other hand, is less well known. In fact, up until the mid-1990s, the term was non-existent even within Chinese literature. However, in the past two decades the category has gained appreciation among collectors worldwide. Vernacular furniture refers to pieces that were made for use outside the imperial courts using indigenous woods. These woods are often called 'softwoods,' but the term can be misleading because these include walnut, elm and oak, which are very durable ‘semi-hardwoods.’ These were simply less appreciated than imported woods and were often elaborately lacquered to enhance their appeal. Nevertheless, vernacular furniture was a symbol of status, commissioned by wealthy merchants or retired officials who had returned to their country estates. Modeled after classical furniture but not bound by austere aesthetics, craftsmen of vernacular pieces enjoyed great creative freedom. From conservative elegance to lavishly lacquered pieces, the vernacular class represents an important and compelling facet of antique Chinese furniture.

The golden age of furniture making came to an end with the decline of the Qing dynasty, which ended in 1911. This dynasty produced some of the finest examples – innovative in nature while still adhering to traditional forms and designs passed down through hundreds of years. However, during the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966-1976, a great deal of antique furniture, both classical and vernacular, was confiscated – and in many cases burned – by the government for representing the bourgeoisie class. When the surviving pieces were released years later, they were scattered across the country with no regard to

original ownership. These eventually appeared as a flood on the international market in the 1980s and 90s, but in recent years has been reduced to a mere trickle. The disappearance can be attributed to several factors including the West's enthusiasm for the antiques and China's desire to buy back and reclaim their heritage. As a result, antique Chinese furniture today has become a rare and valuable category of collectibles.



19th C. antique Chinese winged altar table