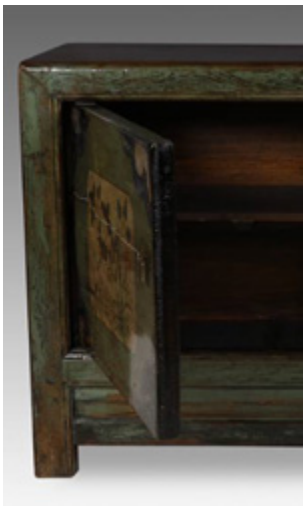
Chinese Vernacular Furniture



An unusual green and blue lacquered Chinese cabinet

The term vernacular, with a broad brush, describes Chinese society outside the Imperial court, whose influence spread far and wide from the Forbidden City in the capital of Beijing. Although this sphere of influence was pervasive and settled over thousands of court members and their families, there was significant life outside the court, marked by regional creativity that ranged from conservative to flamboyant.



19th C. Chinese lacquered cabinet (detail)

Cabinetmakers of the Ming and Ching Dynasties (1344-1911) inherited extremely high standards of workmanship from previous generations of woodworkers. However, during these centuries they created new forms and designs that have endured to the present day. Years of refinement, study, and practice, ultimately combined with great artistic license and the freedom to decorate furniture with color and imagery. The result can be called vernacular Chinese furniture, which can also be called lacquered and painted furniture.

Vernacular Chinese furniture is distinguished by beautiful shapes and simple, subtly decorated moldings. Designs can sometimes be so simple they might appear stark and plain, and by recreating traditional motifs artisans continually updated designs. It has been said, this furniture is like minimalist prose, conveying the richest meaning with the least clutter, and utilizing decorative patterns to achieve more with less.

However, ornate, highly carved pieces are also part of the vernacular Chinese repertoire. There are many excessively ornamented pieces that combine exquisite forms with bold artistry in terms of painting and carving. Oftentimes, the best craftsmen combined color, carving and the grain of wood to create beautiful works of art with interesting motifs.

During the 18th century the merchant class in China reached its economic, if not social zenith. Typically, vernacular Chinese furniture was made for this merchant class, and it marked a brilliant departure from the classical style associated with the Imperial court. In some instances this furniture was rustic and simple. In others, it was elaborate, made as luxury items for people with wealth of stunning proportions.

The vernacular Chinese furniture that is now available generally stems from the 19th century and dates from the latter part of the Ching dynasty (1644-1911). Historically this is important furniture. It represents, quite literally, the end of a cultural continuity that persisted uninterrupted for thousands of years. It also represents the beginning of a furniture tradition that expresses unusual creative freedom, vigor, and visual elegance.



Chinese lacquered and painted elm wood cabinet