

## The Geldart Collection: a Personal View By Robert Piccus

Fed and Peter Geldart are among that small group of enthusiastic Hong Kong collectors who, in the early 1980's, were inspired by the rather unexpected availability of fine classical Chinese furniture and scholars' objects that were leaving China after the economic liberalization policies of Deng Xiaoping began to take effect.

The serious collection of classical Chinese furniture dating from the late Ming to middle Qing periods (circa 1550 to 1750) began in the 1930's when a small group of foreign residents living in Beijing during the remaining peaceful years before the Second World War began to collect the antique furniture that local residents for a variety of reasons were abandoning. These pioneering collectors, many of whom were Europeans influenced by the Bauhaus concepts of design, were attracted to furniture of simple design with minimal decoration made from the precious imported hardwoods. With the end of the War in 1945 collecting resumed and the first scholarly studies by Ecke and Kates helped to spread knowledge of Chinese furniture to a wider audience in Europe and the United States. The Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the Peoples Republic in 1949 effectively put an end to collecting as foreign residents were forced to leave China and, in some cases, managed to take their furniture with them.

From 1950 onwards China was effectively sealed off from the supply of classical furniture as well as most other forms of Chinese art. Collectors assumed the many years of war and revolution had destroyed whatever furniture was left in China. All this changed in the early 1980's when the economic reforms opened the borders causing Chinese art, including large amounts of classical furniture, to flow into Hong Kong and then onwards to the rest of the collecting world. This resulted in what might be called **Phase 2** in the history of collecting classical Chinese furniture.

The new generation of serious collectors initially concentrated their efforts on finding furniture produced from the imported hardwoods: **huanghuali**, **zitan** and **jichimu**. In this sense most collectors followed the lead of the pioneer collectors as well as the Western scholars, Ecke, Kates and later Robert Ellsworth in favoring the simple but elegant types we have come to identify as classical Chinese furniture. The Geldarts took a broader and, in a real sense, more thorough approach by extending their interests to also include pieces in alternative woods such as **jumu** (elm), **namu** (cedar) and **tielimu** (iron wood). It was **Wang Shixiang**, the eminent Chinese furniture scholar, who was among the

first to point out that, while the imported hardwoods like huanghuali were the expensive luxury materials in their day, the same fine craftsmen also worked with the locally available alternative woods such as *jumu*. These same craftsmen produced furniture in the alternative woods that was as fine in terms of careful choice of material, precision of joinery and elegance of proportions as those they produced in the imported hardwoods. Given the fact the alternative woods were locally available the challenge for the collector was to be able to identify those pieces that were made to the highest standard from the more common generally available furniture. In this sense the Geldarts excelled by including in their collection a number of excellent examples manufactured in the alternative woods as well as the classic pieces in huanghuali, zitan and jichimu. In addition to their furniture the Geldarts also include a fine selection of scholars objects.

They also broadened their collecting interests to include antique Chinese rugs, mainly those produced in the Ningxia region. These rugs, many of which were woven for use in the Tibetan Lamaistic temples were produced in the Northwestern provinces of China where the finest quality wool was available and the tradition of rug-weaving was well established. The Geldarts “lived” with their collection in their well-appointed apartment where the furniture, scholars objects and rugs complemented each other.

In many ways the essence of furniture collecting is the “chase”; the virtually total absorption in the determined efforts to locate good pieces, study their characteristics, negotiate their purchase and integrate them in the collector’s overall environment. Collecting in Hong Kong from the 1980’s onwards was unique and exciting with the continued arrival of all types of Chinese art. Every weekend the Geldarts along with other collectors would scour the Hollywood Road antique district of Hong Kong visiting their dealer friends, examining new arrivals and bargaining how they could add to their collection.

To illustrate a few examples the coffer (Lot 8012) is among the rarest and finest pieces in the collection. Coffers can be controversial pieces in Chinese furniture because so many are not of the classic period but were produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, very often of re-used wood. The Geldart coffer is clearly an early piece with fine proportions, material and craftsmanship.

Similarly the massive pair of compound cupboards (Lot 8020) is an excellent example of this important type. The frame and door panels are made of huanghuali veneered to an underlying base. This veneering technique allowed the highly skilled craftsman to produce panels with perfectly matched design.

Among the scholars objects notable examples include the fine huamu brushpot (Lot 8021); the huanghuali table top chest (Lot 8028) with burlwood panels; the zitan two-tiered food box (Lot 8005) and the pair of huanghuali document boxes (Lot 8001).

Furniture leaving China invariably requires careful repair and restoration. Deception is always a concern and collectors are well advised to see pieces in their original state in order to determine what restoration is necessary and acceptable. The Geldarts were diligent as well as fortunate in being able to examine the pieces that interested them in their dealers' warehouses before making their purchasing decisions. A good example is the photograph of the unrestored coffer (Lot 8012) that illustrates the minimum restoration this piece required. The same applies to the bed (Lot 8010) photographed before restoration.

In summary the Geldart Collection is a fine example of a collection of furniture, scholars' objects and rugs put together at great effort by committed collectors who both loved and lived with their collection. They have now decided to move on and are making their pieces available to other collectors to enjoy.