

DESIGN & DECORATING

The French and Chinese Connection

BY KRISTIANO ANG

During the reign of the Kangxi Emperor in the 17th century, French Jesuit missionaries such as Joachim Bouvet thrived as tutors and diplomats in the Chinese court. At a time when chinoiserie, Chinese-inspired objects of art, was becoming fashionable among the French elite, Bouvet and his colleagues served as purveyors of culture and knowledge between the two empires. Hong Kong's Liang Yi Museum explores one aspect of this connection with its new exhibit, "Great Minds Think Alike: 18th Century French and Chinese Furniture Design."

The idea for a Franco-Sino showcase began last year when French gallerist Mikael Kraemer and his brother were visiting the Liang Yi Museum, which was founded by Hong Kong businessman Peter Fung and bills itself as the largest private museum in the city. Mr. Kraemer was stunned at the similarities between the imperial-era Chinese furniture on display and the 18th-century pieces sold by his family-owned gallery in Paris.

"They got down on their knees and were looking at the construction of the furniture for clues," said Lynn Fung, the museum's director and the Kraemers' host that day. "So I said out of the blue, 'If there are so many similarities, I'm sure there must have been a show done about it.'" The Kraemers went back to Paris, but in the following months neither they nor Ms. Fung could find a previous exhibition that juxtaposed furniture from pre-republican China and France.

At the exhibit, which opened this week, each piece of French origin is paired with a Chinese counterpart. The Kraemer Gallery shipped about three dozen pieces of furniture—including a bed, a lamp stand, and screens—to Hong Kong. The Liang Yi Museum, drawing on Mr. Fung's extensive collection of Ming and Qing dynasty ornaments, supplied a similar number of Chinese furniture pieces. While many of the French pieces were created by licensed craftsmen who marked their work, Ms. Fung noted that their Chinese counterparts, who might well have been illiterates working for an aristocrat, didn't leave similar stamps on their pieces.

Until May 9 (with a possible extension into summer); liangyimuseum.com



Kraemer Gallery (French furniture, 4); Liang Yi Museum (Chinese furniture, 4)

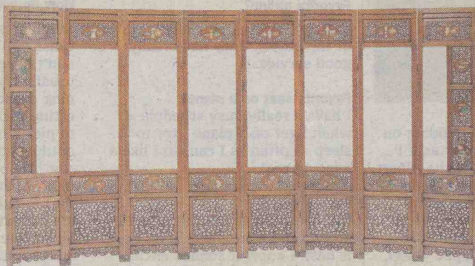


18th-century molded-wood armchair (left); 17th-century zitan horseshoe armchair (above)

According to Ms. Fung, the horseshoe shape of the Chinese chair, as well as its being made from precious zitan red wood, suggests it was created for a mid-ranking member of the Chinese elite in the early Qing dynasty. Whereas the Chinese used chairs to symbolize status, the French piece, which has a free-flowing back and is attributed to two artisans, reflects how the French were "more-easy going about who sits in what," Ms. Fung said.

18th-century four-leaf mahogany screen (bottom); 18th-century eight-panel screen made from huanghuali and semiprecious stone (top)

One example of chinoiserie, or French objects created in a Chinese style, is this four-leaf screen, which was made by a Paris-based artisan named Canabas and features a Chinese landscape. The 49-centimeter-tall piece is dwarfed by the Chinese screen, which consists of 147-centimeter-tall panels. "The French screen is a bit small and purely decorative, but for the Chinese, furniture always served a function," according to Ms. Fung, who said that the quotidian objects in the inlay of the Chinese panels suggest it may have been used in a child's chambers.



18th-century canopy bed made from painted wood (left); 17th-century canopy bed made from huanghuali (right)

The French bed bears the stamp of craftsman Pierre Pluvinet, who was licensed as a master in 1754, while Ms. Fung traces the provenance of its Chinese counterpart to the late 17th century, when the lattice-work on the piece was popular. "There's a sense of grandeur that you don't see in China," said Ms. Fung. She suggested that the Chinese bed might have belonged to the wife of a rich aristocrat, who had multiple concubines and bed-hopped regularly. "Beds were part of the dowry that women brought over," she said. "They were a seat of feminine power, almost."



Circa 1700 two-part cabinet made from brass and ebony (left); 18th-century display cabinet made from huanghuali (right)

The Gallic bookcase was created by André Charles Boulle, a French cabinetmaker known for his veneer displays, whereas the Chinese treasure cabinet, whose maker is unknown, is derived from huanghuali, a precious Chinese wood. "When you look at them side by side, in terms of proportion and aesthetic, there's a striking similarity," Ms. Fung said. "But [Chinese] furniture is a lot more durable and sturdy, whereas the French piece is noticeably delicate."