

LUXURY

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Opposites attract

Top left: gold and diamond mesh bag, circa 1910, from Cartier. Above: gold, silver and ruby enamel bag by Van Cleef & Arpel circa 1950s.

A two-part exhibition shines a spotlight on objects of desire from East and West, writes Daniel Kong

It's a show of dichotomies, one that juxtaposes the masculine and the feminine, East and West, the ascetic and the extravagant. Titled "Scholars and Debutantes", the exhibition at the Liang Yi Museum on Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan, from September 1 to February 29, highlights the history of objects of desire that have titillated and enraptured scholars and sophisticates in historical China and Europe.

And it comes on the heels of the museum's previous show, "Great Minds Think Alike", an exposition which charted the parallels and similarities of French and Chinese furniture in the 17th and 18th centuries. Intrigued by its success – which pits two seemingly opposite narratives for visitors to contrast and consider – the museum's director, Lynn Fung, decided to repeat the theme.

on luxury products. One sees luxury as focused on simple and scholarly study and is found predominantly in a male realm. The other sees luxury as ornamental and external and is generally located in the female sphere. So these dichotomies were very interesting to bring together and consider for our understanding of luxury," says Fung.

The museum's bottom floor will display 100 scholarly Chinese objects, while the top floor will show a series of vanity-themed European artefacts from the museum's permanent collection. The former section will contain objects derived mostly from outside sources, while the latter is part of Liang Yi Museum's permanent collection.

"The segment on scholarly objects really came together through a friend, Marcus Flacks," Fung explains. "Flacks, a dealer, asked collectors he knew to loan him their scholarly objects to photograph and compile into a beautiful coffee table book. Once all the objects were in London, he figured why not show them in a museum?" This is how the seed for the exhibition was sown.

These objects span categories such as brush pots, ruyi sceptres, trays, ink stones and table stands. They offer an insight into lives of China's literati. The items highlight the social standing of scholars of the era.

Academics were placed second only to the emperor at a time when Confucian values placed education as king.

These objects also highlight many of the Buddhist and Taoist values that craftsmen and customers treasured. Although elaborate, the pieces have an air of humility and eschew the vulgarity of opulence. They also reveal a society with a strong reverence for nature and one which prized deep contemplation.

Materials favoured for construction include a wide variety of different woods, with grains, polished surfaces, burr formations, twisted roots and branches.

One key item on display is a 19th-century bird cage made of zitan, a rare species of tropical

hardwood. "Although birdcages were common in those days because they were considered auspicious, to make them out of zitan was unusual. The one on show is large – 78cm wide – and was most likely used to keep pigeons," says Fung.

Another unusual artefact is a carriage harness mount, also made from zitan from Shanxi province in the 18th century.

"Zitan is very dense, which is why it's so durable and heavy. To make an item like this for horse riding would not have been necessary or practical. It suggests that it was made to show off."

Just as the items are indicative of class and status, they also reflect social flux. In the Ming period, there was a lot of change, and merchants who

were starting to prosper became avid buyers of these objects. The hope was that by owning these items, merchants could climb the social ladder – even if they were illiterate.

Just as these objects tell a story of upper-class preoccupations in China's Ming and Qing dynasties, this is also the case in the Debutantes section of the exhibition which displays about 450 vanity cases. There is also a collection of minaudières that belonged to women from Europe.

In this section, Fung focused on items dating from the 1890s to the 1960s. Displayed in chronological order, the clutches chart the role of women in society from a cultural and anthropological viewpoint.

"The earliest bags on display are tiny, made from mesh and gold," Fung notes. "Very little could have fitted inside these bags because women didn't really need to carry anything. They had servants, so they didn't even need to bring a house key. They would have been purely ornamental."

By the 1920s these necessaires started to hold objects like cigarette lighters, lipsticks and powder. It started to mark the emancipation of women. They were allowed to smoke; previously only prostitutes were allowed to do this in public.

While many artefacts seem archaic and novel by today's standards, they highlight how much society has changed. One can only hope that the show will help visitors reflect, recognise and marvel at how society can change in such a short time. life@scmp.com



An 18th-century carriage harness mount from Shanxi province.



Rosewood and hardstone inlay boxes from the 17th-18th centuries.

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LYNN FUNG, DIRECTOR, LIANG YI MUSEUM