



IN THE DETAILS This 18th-century dressing case is crafted from huanghuali wood and is inlaid with ivory and semi-precious stones

The Binaries of Finery

A new, two-part exhibition at the Liang Yi Museum explores differing notions of luxury in Asian and European cultures, writes *Madeleine Ross*

IN CHINESE HISTORY, thanks to Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist influences, there has long been the view that luxury should be discreet, simple and even ascetic," says Lynn Fung, director of the Liang Yi Museum. That philosophy is manifest in *100 Scholarly Objects*, an exhibition of treasures from the Ming and Qing dynasties on show at the Hollywood Road museum. From brush pots, imperial scroll boxes and *ruyi* sceptres to everyday pieces such as trays, inlaid boxes and table stands, the precious objects exemplify a quiet vision of finery that prizes craftsmanship and technique.

A seemingly divergent concept of luxury is evident in another of the museum's galleries. Upstairs from the sombre pieces crafted from *huanghuali* and *zitan* wood is a dazzling collection of European accessories from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Called *A History of Evening Bags*, this exhibition showcases bags made of gold and silver, and adorned with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, pearls and sapphires—materials that carry universal and inherent economic value.

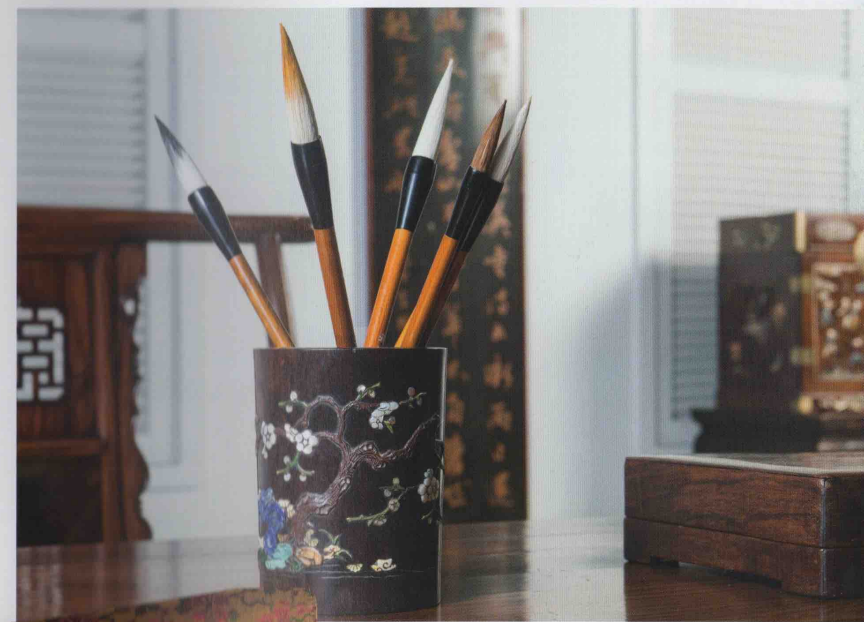
Together, the two collections of treasures from East and West make up *Scholars and Debutantes: A Contrast of Ascetic and Opulent Luxuries*, which is on display at the museum until the end of February. "The exhibition is premised on the comparison and contrast of Asian and European notions of luxury, as well as the gendered history of luxury," says Fung.

Pieces from global collections, including 14 from the Liang Yi and many from renowned London-based collector Marcus Flacks, feature in *100 Scholarly Objects*. In the Confucian social hierarchy, scholars were placed second only to the emperor. As such, scholarship was prized not only for the sake of learning and knowledge, but also as a status symbol. The Ming period saw the rise of the merchant class who, in their quest to climb the social ladder, acquired many of the accoutrements of the literati—pieces akin to a beautiful *huanghuali* dressing case on show, which is inlaid with ivory and semi-precious stones and covered in auspicious symbols.

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A History of Evening Bags showcases more than 200 European vanities from various collections. "These little design jewels are a concentrated distillation of the major fashion trends of the time, whether art deco or geometry, 1930s romantic revival or machine-modernist, militaristic 1940s," says Francois Curiel, president of Christie's Asia and a member of the Liang Yi Museum's board of advisers. Numerous items date back to the Victorian period, which was perhaps the most fascinating time for women's accessories, says Curiel. "Victorian ladies were the first to popularise make-up, creating the need for small, elegant bags to carry supplies for touch-ups," she says. "With nightlife becoming more prevalent and society ladies taking up smoking, evening bags and vanity cases became studier, with compartments to carry cigarettes, cosmetics and other items." ■

Scholars and Debutantes: A Contrast of Ascetic and Opulent Luxuries runs for six months from September 1 at the Liang Yi Museum. liangyimuseum.com



EAST AND WEST Clockwise from top: An 18th-century brushpot in zitan with inlaid decoration; a 1950s Van Cleef & Arpels *nécessaire* in gold, ruby and enamel; an enamel, gold, diamond and sapphire compact; a Cartier evening bag in silk, gold and jade from 1925

