

## The Elegance of Ming and Qing Furniture – A Touchable Craftsmanship



Scholarly objects showcased at the exhibition *Chrysanthemum and Dragon: The Art of Ornamentation in Japan and China in the 17th – 19th Century*

The skills of a craftsman are largely reflected by the quality of construction, and in the context of classical Chinese furniture, the quality of the tenon and mortise joinery.

The tenon and mortise structure is the embodiment of Chinese craftsmanship. A protruding tenon fits perfectly into a corresponding recess mortise. When interlocked, the two pieces of wood are tightly - and neatly - joined together without any nails or glue. A Chinese saying goes: “The tenon and mortise can last for ten thousand years”.



*Zitan* and Bur Wood Armchair

Early 20th Century

*Zitan* and bur wood

Height 87.5 x Width 52 x Length 45cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum



*Zitan Kang Table*

17th Century

*Zitan*

Height 29 x Width 70.5x Length 43cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

The use of blind-tenon joinery and soft cane seat construction can be observed on this *zitan* and bur wood armchair. The *zitan kang* table, on the other hand, demonstrates another construction style: the tabletop frame houses a two-board panel, and the mitered mortise-and-tenon employs a small additional stabilising exposed tenon at the corner to increase its stability.



*Baibaoqian* furniture showcased at the exhibition *Chrysanthemum and Dragon: The Art of Ornamentation in Japan and China in the 17th – 19th Century*

The art form of *baibaoqian* (literally “inlay of hundred treasures”), thanks to the political stability and economic prosperity during the reigns of Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong, entered a period of rapid development. The technique of *baibaoqian* was invented by Ming artisan Zhou Zhu who was active during the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The technique inlays luxurious materials such as semi-precious stones, ivory and enamel onto wooden surfaces to create rich compositions of landscape, figure, garden and pavilion. Due to the preciousness of the materials and the complexity of the production process, craftsmen also had to be trained to handle different materials. Therefore, *baibaoqian* was initially only used to decorate the most important ceremonial objects, and luxurious items for the court.



*Zitan* Inlaid Table with Shelf

17th Century

*Zitan* and semi-precious stones

Height 78 x Width 75 x Length 38cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

The configuration of a small table with a shelf made of *zitan* is extremely rare, and the inlaid decorations on the tabletop makes it even rarer. The inlay depicts a branch of plum blossom, exhibiting a simple yet refined style that is characteristic of the Suzhou-style furniture. This table was possibly owned by the descendants of Suzhou scholar Hua Cha (1497-1574) who was a member of the Hanlin Academy. Members of the Hua family remained important gentry-merchants in Wuxi during the Qing dynasty, hence the financial ability to commission this table.





Liang Yi Museum's collection of over 400 pieces of Ming and Qing furniture not only showcases high levels of skill and technique, but also exemplifies the innovation of the craftsmen and the continuous development and wisdom passed down through the ages.