

# LIANG YI MUSEUM

## Hong Kong's Largest Private Museum Opens

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The exterior of Liang Yi Museum at dusk, Hollywood Road, Hong Kong

WHEN PEOPLE hear about Liang Yi Museum, a new private museum that is also Hong Kong's largest, I am invariably asked the same question, "Why is it that China has so many private museums, but not Hong Kong?" The trend of collectors opening their own museums on the mainland is indeed a real phenomenon, one that has been noted by journalists in every publication from *The Economist* ("Mad about Museums", December 2013) to the *Wall Street Journal*. Supposedly in 2013 alone, over 450 new museums were opened in China.

The simple answer to the question above, of course, is space. Unlike China, Hong Kong's tiny territory simply cannot accommodate the large amount of space that is required for even the most modest of museums. But a deeper and more meaningful question, I feel, is this: China may have an astonishing number of private museums, but can one really call them museums?



Powder compact, by LaCloche 1925, gold, lacquer, mother-of-pearl, done in a typical Orientalist motif



*Luo han chuang*, or day-bed, one of the most iconic Ming dynasty furniture styles, 17th century



Classic Ming dynasty six-poster canopy bed, *huanghuali*, 17th century

A museum, in the most simple and literal sense of the word, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited”. But this is too loose and generous a definition. To take this meaning literally, the houses of many wealthy people are veritable museums. Indeed, I feel that it would not be too harsh to judge that

is exactly what many of China’s new private museums are: in essence, a house of treasures, belonging to the wealthy, open to the public.

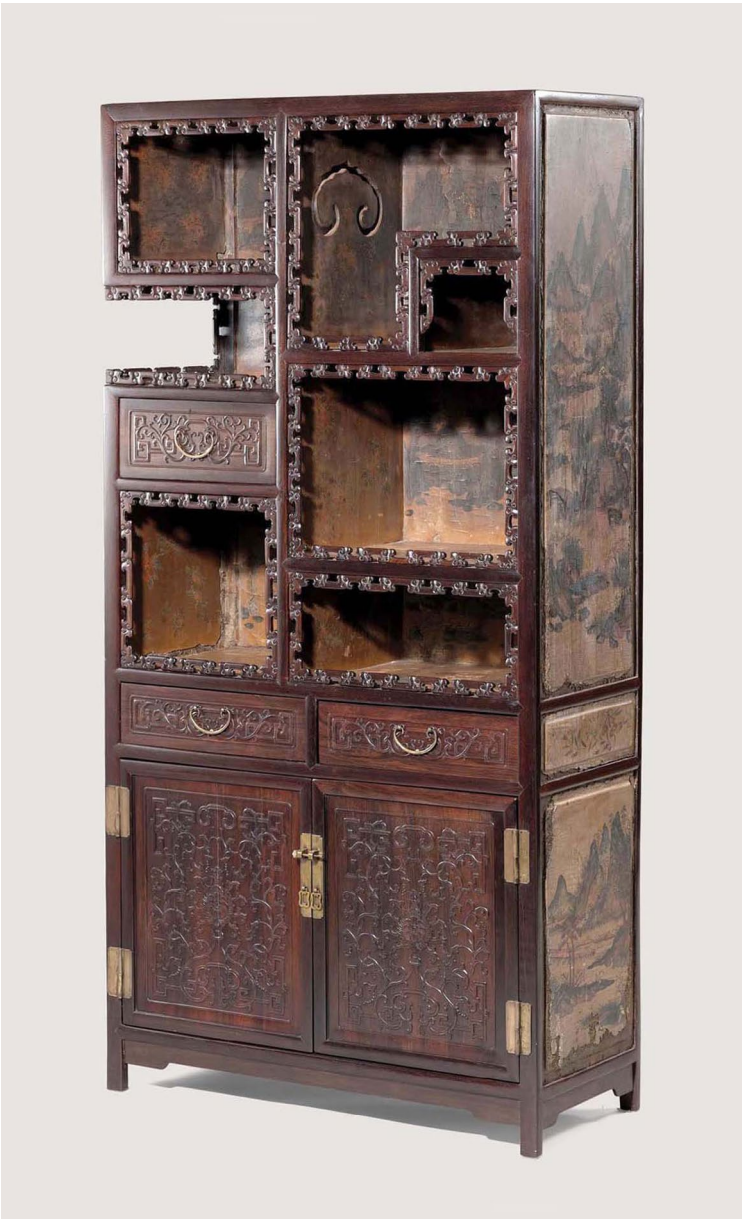
To be a museum in the truest sense of the word, however, the institution must serve deeper purposes. To be a world-class museum, it must serve the public well. The most fundamental of these purposes, naturally, is to edu-



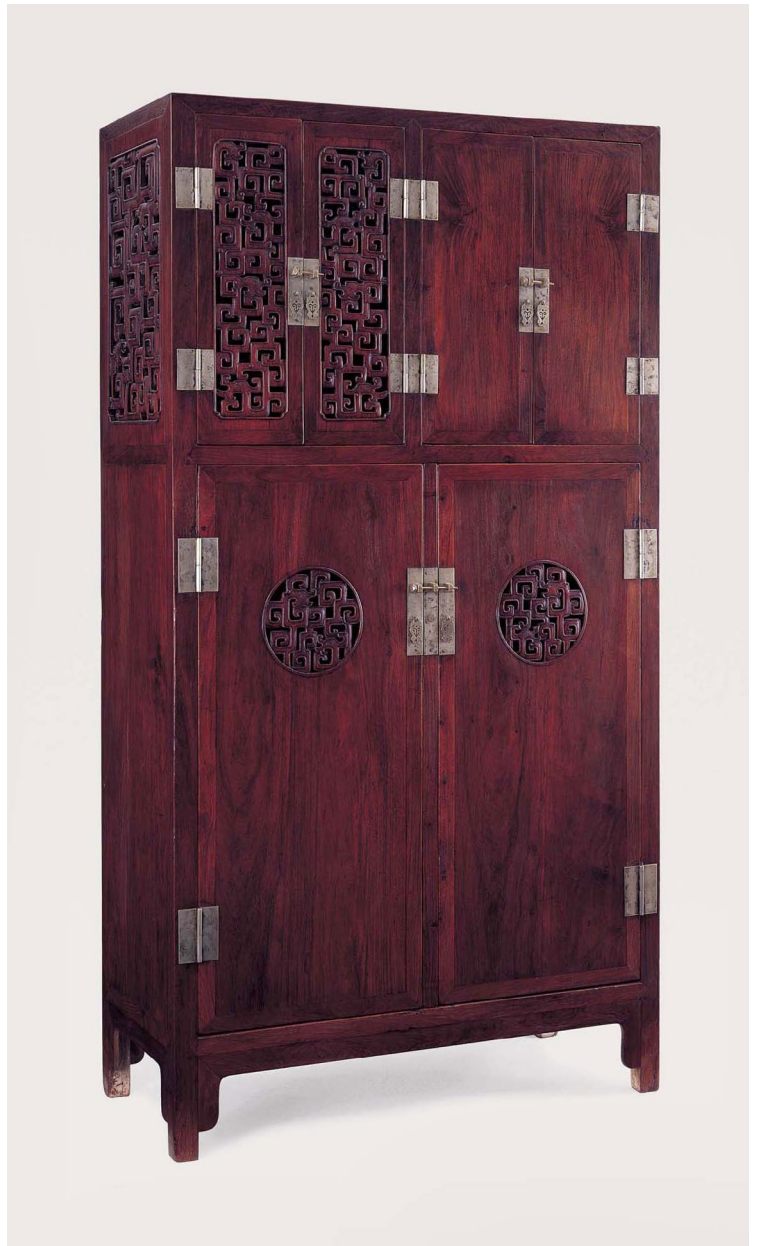
Box-style altar table from Fujian,  
17th century



Square game table, previously exhibited at  
the National Museum of History in Taiwan



Zitan and lacquer display cabinet, with landscape  
scenes and flower patterns on the sides, back  
and interior, 18th century



One of a pair of cabinets with lattice doors,  
*huanghuali*, late 18th century



Minimalist Ming dynasty bookcase, *huanghuali*, 18th century

cate. A museum must be educational, whether it is implicit through the way its wares are exhibited and contextualised, or whether it is explicit in the hosting of educational lectures and seminars, or through the sponsorship of internships, fellowships and educational grants. At Liang Yi Museum, we take a slightly more liberal approach to education. While we are treading the familiar path of opening our museum to students every Wednesday free of charge, and are hosting educational talks on the first Tuesday of every month, we are also doing something more radical in how we display and exhibit our collections. But first, some background on our collections.

Liang Yi Museum is the home to two permanent collections: the first is a collection of Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasty hardwood furniture; while the second is a collection of European vanities and compacts from the late 1800s to the 1970s. I will leave it to our experts in separate articles to give you more information on each collection. Here, I will merely explain what is unusual in our approach towards education. At Liang Yi Museum, we have an open-access policy for our furniture exhibits. What this means practically is that instead of seeing all our furniture behind glass or roped off, we offer our visitors complete access—they are welcome to sit on a chair, lie on a bed or examine an urn.

The Chinese did not traditionally collect furniture, preferring instead to collect jades, bronzes or ceramics. Again, one of the primary reasons for this was space. But a more subtle reason is that unlike in the West, where furniture makers were viewed as artisans, in China they were seen as common labourers. The furniture, in turn, was seen as beautiful of course, but more importantly, practical. It was



Eight-panel screen, with semi-precious stone inlays, *huanghuali*, 18th century



Lidded clothing chest with inlaid decoration, most likely a dowry chest, 18th century



Renowned antiques dealer and collector Andy Hei enjoys a glass of champagne at the museum's opening party



Guests at the opening party of Liang Yi Museum examine a European-style portable writing desk, made of *huanghuali*



Liang Yi Museum founder and collector Peter Fung gives his welcoming remarks

something to be used every day, not treasured and revered, and kept under protective cover. Therefore, to truly appreciate the secrets of the craftsmanship of these pieces, one must behold each using all our senses, not just by sight. A visitor needs to sit down in a reclining chair in order to imagine fully for what it was used. To lie down at this particular angle, a visitor might instinctively grasp that this chair was designed specifically to let a scholar recline and contemplate his next verse. Or perhaps by sitting in an upright chair with his feet dangling off the floor, the visitor will understand that this is an official's chair, meant for work and for making his visitor just that little bit uncomfortable.

I personally adore reading, but when visiting a museum, I do not enjoy the act of bending down to read a tiny caption, squinting in the darkness, before pushing my way over to the display case and trying to remember what I just read and how it relates to what I see in front of me; nor do I retain very much relevant information in this process. That is another reason that we decided to institute an open-

access policy. We not only want to enable our visitors to understand the context of our displays more organically, but we also ensure that each visitor is part of a guided tour, so that the relevant information is imparted in a more interactive manner. After all, who doesn't enjoy listening to a story or anecdote? In this way, we hope that each visit will be personalised to the visitor's needs and interest level, in the hope that he or she will genuinely retain some information.

Another purpose that a world-class museum must serve is its duty to its community. Why should any neighbourhood or city tolerate a major museum in its midst if it does not also serve them in one way or another? Liang Yi Museum attempts to do this in a variety of ways. The primary one has to do with its location. For those who have ever had any interest in antiques-hunting in Hong Kong, one location stands out above the rest: Hollywood Road. Since it was first paved in 1884, it has been a Mecca for treasure hunters. A century later, in the 1980s, it was the ultimate place to visit if you had any interest in Chinese antique

furniture. It was also along this stretch of road that Peter Fung, the founder of Liang Yi Museum, started his collection, which has grown to its current impressive size through the relationships and friendships he built with the many traders and dealers operating there.

When it came time to build his own museum, there was only one viable destination for Fung. The present Liang Yi

Museum is housed at 181–199 Hollywood Road, utilising four floors of what was for many dealers previously warehouse and storage space. Painstakingly negotiating with each owner, he managed to convince each to sell, until he had the current space, which measures over 20,000 square feet. One may ask how this benefits the local community. The answer is simple. Hollywood Road has in recent times



An exhibit currently at the museum, of a traditional Chinese games room, with a set of classic rose chairs



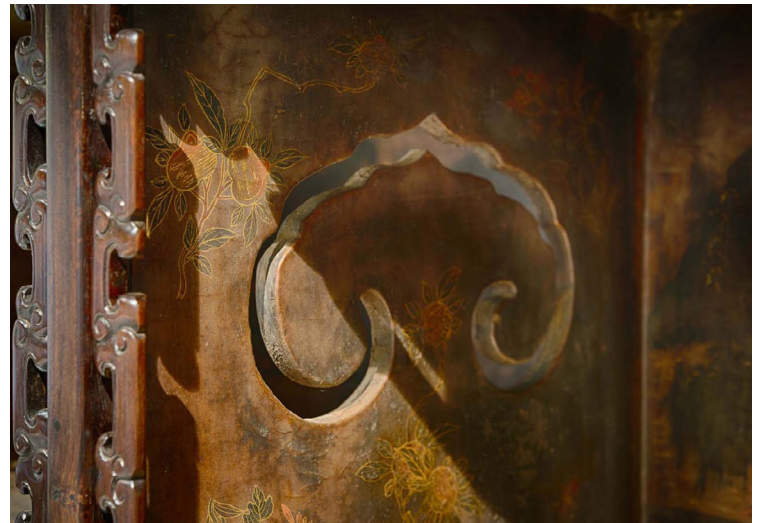
The exhibit of long-lost twins: this gallery showcases three *zitan* chairs and one cabinet; a mirroring gallery shows their other halves, some of which required up to twenty years of searching



Zitan screen gives a peek into the museum's other permanent collection: European vanities



Close-up of the elaborate carving on this 18th century household shrine



Beautiful detailing inside a display cabinet, made of zitan and lacquer, with hints of gold, 18th century

fallen prey to the most attractive and seductive of perils: gentrification. Even as Liang Yi Museum was being built, stores up and down the street gradually shut down, defeated due to the high rents being asked by their owners, and have been replaced by hip bakeries and artisanal cafés. In response, Fung decided that he would utilise only one tiny street-level storefront as the museum's reception to keep at least one block of this road safe from this fashionable takeover. He decided that the remaining street-level lots under his control would be rented only to traditional antiques dealers. This may not halt the trend, but it is certainly a good start.

It is also a mutually beneficial relationship. For many first-time buyers of antique furniture, entering any of these traditional shops can be a daunting prospect. How, after all, does one differentiate between a real item and a fake?



Close-up of a European-style desk, made of Chinese huanghuali



Close-up of the semi-precious inlay work on a *huanghuali* screen, restored by jeweller Wallace Chan



*Necessaire*, by Cartier, 1925, jadeite, onyx, gold, enamel and diamonds

How do you make sure you are getting a good price? For some, the potential embarrassment and pitfalls may well deter them altogether from entering. By positioning Liang Yi Museum in the heart of this stretch, these timid, but keen, buyers may enter and become familiar with the history of these pieces, discover the pinnacle of what this tradition can produce, and re-enter the stores below with a surer step and firmer grasp of what it is they would like to purchase. For the museum, it is certainly beneficial that Hollywood Road sees hordes of tourists daily, making it an easy pit stop for those who show a desire to appreciate this art form.

Most museums can propagate an important tenet of their vision, and it is no different for us. In fact, it could be argued that it is even more urgent in our case. The reason for this is simple: although Chinese antique furniture has a few notable scholars, it is in no way as well-researched as European furniture. Many of the most knowledgeable people in the field do not reside in ivory towers, but down on Hollywood Road, trading and dealing these pieces every day. What we aim to do is to encourage more young scholars, who have an interest in Chinese antique furniture, to view the museum as a resource. To achieve this, we are reaching out to the local universities to provide internship programmes, and perhaps even a fellowship in the future. It is important to us, and crucial for the study of Chinese antiques, that we foster the next generation of experts and scholars.

Finally, reaching out beyond the local community of Hollywood Road and Sheung Wan and prospective scholars in the field, we also thought about what Liang Yi Museum can do for Hong Kong as a whole. A museum cannot exist in a vacuum: to be truly successful, it must exist in equality with other museums. Hong Kong undoubtedly has a great number of excellent public, government-run museums, but for one reason or another, it is not often that we

are treated to excellent exhibits. Even Macau, our sister Special Administrative Region (SAR), has collaborated with giants such as London's Victoria and Albert Museum to co-host an exhibition on historical tea wares at the Macao Museum of Art last year. This is the level of quality exhibits that Liang Yi Museum wants to bring to Hong Kong.

Our collections have already been loaned to, and exhibited at, other venerable institutions worldwide. In the late 1990s, key pieces of our furniture were loaned to the National Museum of History in Taipei, where they featured in a show called "Splendor of Style: Classical Furniture from the Ming and Qing Dynasties". In 2011, a selection of our vanity cases plus select pieces of furniture were transported to the Palace Museum inside the Forbidden City in Beijing, in an exhibit titled "Contrast and Harmony: Selected Vanity Cases and Chinese Furniture of Liang Yi Museum". Most recently, in 2013, we showcased part of our collection of vanity cases at Goldsmiths Hall in London in an exhibit called "Ultra Vanities". It is our hope that by building on these existing relationships and partnerships, Liang Yi Museum will be able to support and host shows with partner museums from around the world, bringing to Hong Kong world-class curated shows with a focus on antiquities and craftsmanship.

There is no doubt that we have set ourselves some lofty goals. However, as one of Hong Kong's most prominent private museums, we feel a responsibility to set the bar high. Paul Getty once asked, "How does one measure the success of a museum?" To us, the answer is clear: it does not lie in ever-increasing visitor numbers, but in the self-evident quality of the exhibits, whether from our own permanent collections or the ones we host in collaboration with other institutions. As we enter our fourth month of operation, we welcome you to visit our museum and let us know whether it is a success or not.