

Brush Pots in the Scholar's Studio: Exploring Simplicity

Occupations in ancient China were broadly divided into four categories – scholar-gentry, peasant farmers, craftsmen and merchants – collectively known as the “four occupations”. Since morality was highly valued in ancient China, scholar-gentry who completed philosophical studies found easier to ascend the social ladder. This also explains why although China was an agrarian society, the class of scholar-gentry was always at the top of the hierarchy. Since the implementation of the imperial examination system in the Sui dynasty (581-618), scholar-officials were assessed by written examination, providing a supposedly equal opportunity for all to serve the country, as well as facilitate upward mobility. Scholars, thus, treasured writing tools that not only served as stationery, but were also seen as an opportunity to improve one's lot.



A Qing New Year picture of the “Four Occupations”

Brush pots, varying in styles and capacity, were produced from a wide range of materials including bamboo, wood, ivory, porcelain and metal. Prior to the use of the cylindrical brush pot, ancient Chinese hung their brushes on small racks. When brush racks gradually faded from use during the late Ming dynasty as most Ming scholars found them to be inelegant, brush pots came to the fore. Although renowned Ming writer and dramatist Gao Lian (active during the 16th century) tried to revive the tradition of using small racks, his contemporaries shifted to the use of brush pots. These containers are not only practical but also ornamental.



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

Liang Yi Museum houses 53 brush pots mainly made during the 17th and 18th centuries. They can be categorised into three main types: plain; carved; and inlaid. This article focusses on the plain brush pots that reveal the lustrous grain and natural pattern of woods.

The following two brush pots are made of *zitan* and *huangbuali* respectively, two highly valued precious hardwood. Upon close inspection, one should be able to spot divergent grains and colours from these two different kinds of wood. The body of the *zitan* brush pot is finished with a plain and smooth surface, revealing dark reddish-brown grain patterns and textured pores. The brush pot itself is constructed with flat beading around the edge of the rim; and the square base fitted at the bottom stands on *ruyi*-shaped feet, a symbol of auspiciousness.



Zitan Brush Pot with Fitted Base

17th Century

Zitan

Height 14.5 x Diameter 8.5cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

The body of this *huanghuali* brush pot is hexagonal in shape, instead of cylindrical, which makes this piece exceptional. The rim is accented with a wide and flat beading, outlining the distinct shape of the pot. The round base inserted into the bottom is carved to imitate twisted rope.



Huangbuali Hexagonal Brush Pot with Fitted Base

17th Century

Huangbuali

Height 8.5 x Diameter 17cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

Another brush pot to introduced in this article is made of *nanmu* during the 18th century. Since *nanmu* is relatively light in weight, it was more often used to construct storage cases or cabinets than for brush pots and other small objects. *Nanmu* was another type of wood favoured by scholars because of its even and lustrous grain; soft and smooth texture; and durability. This brush pot is crafted with a thick base as a counterweight. The interior is coated with a layer of black lacquer.



Nanmu Brush Pot

18th Century

Nanmu

Height 11.5 x Diameter 8.8cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum