

Examples From Shen's Special Collection...

Small Wooden Jewels, Utilitarian Wares, and Functional Objects

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When it comes to Chinese furniture, in the recent years the emphasis has been placed heavily on the objects made of exotic hardwood. Although the hardwood furniture had long been the representation of social status for the Chinese people, more recently the trend of buying anything made of hardwood, whether authentic antiques or reproduced, whether the object is of good design and good craftsmanship or not, has surfaced because of the new wealth in China associated with China's incredible economic growth which needs more outlets for re-investment. Thus, any Chinese objects made of expensive material became the new favor for many from this trend. While this is a fact, we must also recognize the essence of art when considering what is artistic and what are the important elements of art.

Below are some beautiful smaller size furniture pieces and other wooden objects that might be of interest to some looking for the opportunity to study the examples of beautiful Chinese wood work with interesting or practical functions in everyday life. Behind it, it is really the aesthetics and unique cultural richness one is after. After all, these are the elements that shape our life.

Wood furniture and wooden objects bear some similarities in quality compared to other Chinese art objects made of different material as well as some differences. For an example, the wood material is a perishable material and rots easily through time. It can also be damaged easily from improper use or simply from being used for a long time, unlike other art objects made of different material such as jade, porcelain, other hard stones, stone, metal, and even lacquer, and so on. On top of that, it is harder to store furniture pieces than some other smaller art objects because of the size factor. Therefore, many furniture pieces do not survive the time of political changes, wars, and other events requiring moving these pieces.

So, this brings up an interesting question: How old is a furniture piece considered very old? Judging from the existing examples available today, furniture pieces from the mid Qing Dynasty to early Ming Dynasty and earlier, roughly from the beginning of the 1800 to the 1600's should be considered extremely rare and very old and are worthy of conservation work if the piece is of good design with good craftsmanship, and if the frame work and the major part and most parts of the piece are original. For some furniture pieces with heavy restoration or alteration on the finish, it will depend on if the finish is an enhancement to the overall quality of the piece or a destruction.

While good design and good craftsmanship are essential to evaluate a piece of furniture, we also need to take into consideration of the usage of the piece and the geographical source where the piece came from in order to determine how special the piece is, giving the different geographical cultural uniqueness and richness behind each piece made. While it can be difficult to obtain some of the information, it's the overall experience of the cultural aesthetics the piece represents and the aesthetics of the object itself one is after.

While furniture pieces are generally created for functional purposes, a lot of the old pieces are no longer used in the modern homes any more. This makes it interesting to examine these old pieces based on their cultural and historical background. After all, the aesthetics embedded in these pieces can not be separated from the culture which provides a meaningful background for the art created.

There are so many varieties of functional everyday wares and furniture pieces when it comes to Chinese furniture and related wooden objects. Shown below are just a tiny fraction of this vast and intriguing treasure of woodworking for studying Chinese art and culture that directly relates to the everyday life.

