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We often hear the term "Ming Furniture" used by antiques dealers selling Chinese furniture, collectors and enthusiasts. However, this term refers not only to the furniture made in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), but also to Ming-style furniture, which includes pieces made during the early to middle Qing Dynasty (later 17th and 18th centuries) with the design, craftsmanship, and even the wood similar the "scholar's furniture from the later Ming Dynasty.

Ming furniture evolved from furniture making in the previous dynasties, particularly Song and Yuan, in which the creation of furniture had reached an unprecedented sophistication in the history of Chinese arts and crafts. Furniture before the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) consisted mainly of tables and beds with short legs, a style that lent itself to people's custom of sitting on the floor. In the late Tang Dynasty (618-907), reflecting the change in people's lifestyles, tables and chairs with higher legs gradually became popular. Furniture types became more varied in the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279), and the design and craftsmanship became more elegant, yielding to practical and aesthetic demands. Thus came about a new period of Chinese furniture making.

Ming furniture is fundamentally a minimalist style that emphasizes practicality and simplicity, with an emphasis on naturalness, balance, and elegance. Research has shown that Ming furniture was a result of scholars and craftsmen working together; a merging of deep cultural beliefs and superior artistic techniques. In the middle Ming Dynasty, economic developments and the accumulation of wealth allowed people outside the imperial palace to enjoy a lifestyle of material comfort. Ming scholars of Confucianism, however, including many civil officials, still lived simply in order to set a good example for society.

The furniture of the time, especially that used in a scholar's study, exemplified the simple lifestyle choice. One scholar, Wen Zhenheng, in his Treatise on Superfluous Things (*Zhangwu zhi*) (ca. 1615-1620), encouraged the practical

value and aesthetic content of the scholar's furniture at the time. He proposed that furniture design and decoration should be simple, elegant and refined. Any superfluously decorated furniture, including the then-popular styles of lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay, should not be favored by scholars. By studying the surviving samples of Ming furniture we can see that in addition to the simple style Zhenheng advocated, most of the furniture was made from rare hard woods such as huanghuali, zitan jichimu, and tianlimu. These woods have a discernable grain, distinctive color and unmatched durability. As a result, the furniture produced from these woods required little in terms of carving and adornment. Some soft woods such as jumu (southern elm wood), yumu (northern elmwood) and cypress were in abundant supply, but the harder woods elicited higher-quality work from those who created the furniture. Ming furniture reached its apex of design and artistic expression in the late Ming Dynasty. In this, its best expression, it differs not only from the simple but less artistic furniture of the previous dynasties, but also from the highly decorative Qing-style furniture to come.

Based on function Ming furniture can be categorized into chairs, tables, beds, cabinets and miscellaneous. Within the same categories, there are various styles. Some styles have different local and regional names, which are difficult to explain because of the long, dated origins. For example, a Dengguayi (lamp-hanger chair) got its name because the armless high back resembles a lamp hanger. The round cornered cabinet (with splayed legs) is conveniently called in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces Daxiaotou (cabinet with small top and large bottom), but oddly named as Miantiaogui (noodle cabinet) in Northern China. The three-sided daybed has a funny name of Luohanchuang, meaning "Arhat bed" (An arhat is a buddhist who has reached the stage of enlightenment.) A daybed with two sides or no side is imaginatively termed Meirenta (bed for a beauty). As for the well-known Southern Official's hat armchair, it seems impossible to know the exact derivation of its name, although its dignified and scholarly look suggests some ideas about sources.

Ming furniture's essential structure can be traced to the traditional architectural "post-and-beam" construction. The balanced structural framework is composed of four legs, rims and crossing supports. Each member of the framework is light but strong. In addition to the structural framework, other pieces of various lengths are added to create different designs. (In contrast, planks of wood were still the main building blocks for furniture making during the 16th and 17th centuries in many Western countries. Furniture made as such was often large in volume, and very heavy in weight.) Post-and-beam construction was essential in creating Ming furniture's effect of simplicity, lightness, and elegance. It was based on the joinery techniques well developed in Song and Yuan Dynasties; Ming furniture perfected these mortise-and-tenon

techniques with the creation of hundreds of new joineries that exemplified the combinations of practicality and aesthetic value.

A beautiful line is the most prominent artistic feature of Ming furniture. The Ming "line" acknowledges the physics of furniture building while enhancing the way such physical principles are put into practice. Examples can be easily seen with the crest rail and the S-shaped splat of a chair, the apron and spandrel of a table; legs with horse hoof or cabriole designs are also fine examples. It's easy to appreciate general outlines, but it's not as often that we pay attention to the more detailed fine lines. Many parts of Ming furniture, such as the surface of a table and the legs of a chair, have moulded edges that are decorated with beaded lines in various shapes. These elegant flourishes add to the liveliness of the design. Just like the carvings of different motifs that often appear on the splat, apron and armrest, these beaded lines change throughout geographical regions and different time periods. They can provide significant information for identifying and dating furniture.

During the 18th century Imperial furniture evolved into typical Qing style. However, among the ordinary people and scholars Ming-style furniture was still favored. Today, because the truly fine pieces of Ming furniture are highly sought after and the price is often beyond most people's reach, examples made in the Qing Dynasty, mostly softwood pieces of Ming-style or semi-Ming style, which have become a substitute for Ming furniture lovers. Many pieces that are seen today in antique stores and shows actually date from late Qing or even the period of the Republic. They have the Ming "look" in style and design, but a quick examination reveals a lack of fine craftsmanship that Ming furniture possesses.. Thus the value is certainly affected.

Some people raise the price of these relatively coarse pieces of "Ming" furniture by conveniently dating them to the 16th or 17th century, but common sense should dictate that China has experienced many natural and manmade calamities in its modern history, which has depleted the supply of top-tier examples. There is even a limited amount of softwood furniture examples. Since softwood furniture was usually less intricately worked by a cabinetmaker than a similar example in hardwood, it is difficult to believe there is still such a large quantity of softwood furniture surviving 200 and 300 years. It is also often true that even a 100-year-old piece of softwood furniture can be used only after major restoration, including replacing and adding parts. When considering one of these pieces for your collection, it's critical to be able to tell the replaced parts from the original parts. As for pieces that were either repaired beyond recognition or even remade completely of old materials, they usually have little or no value.

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