

Welcome Subscriber 75667 ( [Logout](#) or [View Account](#) )

February 27th, 2012

# Classic Chinese Furniture and a Sleeper Self-Portrait

by Jeanne Schinto

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#)

Grogan & Company, Dedham, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Grogan

Oak, maple, cherry, mahogany, pine, birch—American furniture enthusiasts know these woods, their grains, colors, and feel, intimately. But zitan and huanghuali? At Grogan & Company's sale on December 11, 2011, in Dedham, Massachusetts, attendees had the chance to examine, perchance to buy, pieces from a dozen-lot collection of classic Chinese furniture made from these Asian hardwood trees between the 16th and 20th centuries.

Early items made of huanghuali were the best sellers. Michael B. Grogan, the firm's president and chief auctioneer, said, "There was participation from all over —some from California, some from mainland China, some in the room. A local collector bought two pieces. So it was all good."

A pair of 17th-century high yoke-back huanghuali armchairs (est. \$60,000/90,000) was the top lot of the group, selling to a phone bidder for \$70,800 (including buyer's premium).

The same bidder paid \$29,500 for an 18th-century huanghuali corner-leg table (est. \$40,000/60,000). He or she also bought a late 18th- or early 19th-century zitan footstool for \$3835 (est. \$5000/10,000).

A bidding couple paid \$53,100 (est. \$20,000/30,000) for a high rectangular-back armchair from the early 17th or late 18th century. They paid \$23,600 for a 17th-century huanghuali side table (est. \$15,000/30,000).

The couple's underbidder, a man in the room, won a small 17th-century huanghuali chest for \$44,250 (est. \$15,000/25,000). He had bought two Chinese ivory pieces while waiting for the furniture to come up. One was a 19th-century tusk fashioned into a thermometer—perfect for a cabinet of curiosities—for which he paid \$708. He paid exactly double that, \$1416 (est. \$500/700), for the other ivory, an undated figure of a grasshopper resting on (or eating?) a cut bunch of bok choi.

Internet bidders were active on the less-expensive Chinese furniture pieces. A late 19th- or early 20th-century zitan stool sold in cyberspace for \$5747.50 (est. \$8000/12,000), and a 17th-century huanghuali kang table went the same way at \$8470 (est. \$8000/12,000). An absentee bidder won a late 18th- or early 19th-century huanghuali altar table for \$14,160 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The same bidder bought a pair of huanghuali stools a century older for \$5900 (est. \$4000/8000).

Gracefully and economically designed for specific uses, Chinese classic furniture has been compared to what the practical Shakers made. "Whether this is by example or coincidence remains controversial," Stanford University professor Thomas Bartlett commented in a catalog published when the collection, put together by J. Malcolm Swenson of Hanover, New Hampshire, was on view in 2004 at the Kimball-Jenkins Estate in Concord, New Hampshire.

Swenson, whose career was in the stone industry, spent many years in China as an advisor to the Chinese government on building projects. That's where he bought his collection, mentored by Cui Wei Lian (1935-2004), a director of the Beijing Hardwood Furniture Factory. American furniture aficionados might label some of these pieces reproductions. But as Swenson noted in the exhibition catalog, it's a Chinese tradition to repeat the production of earlier art forms. They regard the practice as "respecting [the forms'] artistic integrity."

To my eye, the furniture is light and clean-modern looking. Adding to its attraction are its polished smoothness and its color. It's inaccurate to call it merely "brown." Huanghuali ranges from yellowish to purplish, while zitan may go all the way to black as it acquires patina.

Before the sale Grogan said, given the vicissitudes of the market today, he really didn't know how the Swenson collection would do. "As an auctioneer, we keep our expectations modest." In the end he was more than satisfied. The group achieved a total of \$257,651 on an estimate total of \$191,000/304,000, with only one lot failing to find a buyer. That was a pair of late 17th- or early 18th-century huanghuali folding stools with woven seats. Bought in at \$25,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000), they had replaced bases and possibly some brasses replaced.

Besides Asian decorative arts, the 473-lot sale featured some fresh and desirable American and European fine art. *Old Trinity Winter (Wall Street)* by Guy Wiggins (1883-1962) went nearly to the top of its \$30,000/50,000 estimate, selling on the phone at \$45,375 against an aggressive absentee bid. Acquired at a Boston gallery in the 1960's, the 16" x 12" oil on board descended to the consignor in 1979 and retained its original Newcomb-Macklin frame.

Doing almost as well as the Wiggins, a 20" x 16" oil on canvas self-portrait of Augustus John (British, 1878-1961) sold for an unexpected \$44,250 (est. \$2000/ 3000). The buyer was a phone bidder calling from London.

"It came out of a house in Newport," said Grogan. "I tried my best to lose it, but the client kept saying, 'No, this is good. This is good.'" He laughed. "I couldn't read the signature to begin with." After research, he learned that John was revered in his day as the man who painted portraits of T.E. Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, and others. Known as the "King of Bohemia," John was also famous for the wildness of his lifestyle. (For starters, he was rumored to have fathered 100 children.) A display on view at the National Portrait Gallery in London through March 18 marks the 50th anniversary of his death with photographs of him.

Two small American artworks did well at the sale. One was a signed 7" x 9" oil on board portrait of the U.S. Navy's sloop of war U.S.S. *Peacock* by James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894) that sold for \$13,310 (est. \$4000/6000). It came from a local woman from a distinguished family, Grogan said. The other was a 3¼" x 2¼" unsigned portrait of Amory Austin, attributed to John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), that fetched \$1815 (est. \$500/1000). An inscription on the back read: "Amory Austin drawn by John Singer Sargent in his youth." Austin (1849-1920) of Boston and Newport, Rhode Island, was Sargent's cousin.

A very beautiful Boston school work, *Arrangement* by Frederick A. Bosley (1881-1942), fetched \$9440 (est. \$7000/10,000). The 36" x 34" oil on canvas is a portrait of a young woman in white posed with a statue of Nike of Samothrace—i.e., the Greek goddess of victory that the running-shoe company was named for. The painting was signed and dated 1913.

Regional artist Antonio Cirino's *Fall in New England* brought \$4425 (est. \$2000/ 4000). *Orientalist View* by Charles Edwin Lewis Green (1844-1915) sold for the same price (est. \$1500/2000). One of the Lynn Beach painters, Lewis was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, but traveled and painted abroad. The price for Lewis's 8" x 12" oil on canvas adds weight to the current idea that Orientalist subjects by Americans are gaining value.

The auction room never was crowded with bidders at this well-edited swiftly executed sale. After the fine art was sold and 173 lots of Oriental rugs went up, there were literally only eight or ten bidders left sitting in the folding chairs. People have become more efficient users of their time; they find other ways to participate, we commented to Grogan.

"That was the old-fashioned way," he agreed, adding that the new way remains plenty good for business. Even the rugs did "exceedingly well," he observed. "I think it's amazing that so few people show up but that the bidding continues. It's very encouraging that there's still broad—based buying across the board and across the world."

For more information, contact Grogan at (781) 461-9500 or visit the Web site ([www.groganco.com](#)).



**A portrait of Captain Benjamin Davies, attributed to Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), together with an unattributed portrait of Elizabeth Viscount Davies, sold in one lot for \$8470 (est. \$1000/2000). Each 29½" x 24" oil on canvas is laid down on board.**



**An 18th-century huanghuali corner-leg table, 31¼" x 58¼" x 19", sold to a phone bidder for \$29,500 (est. \$40,000/60,000). Because of its lack of stretchers, it's**

**rare and fragile.**



**A 16¼" tall Chinese butterfly-decorated bottle-form vase, possibly Qing Dynasty, with a Guangxu reign mark, sold to a room bidder for \$7670 (est. \$800/ 1200).**



**A small (38½" x 26½" x 13½") 17th-century huanghuali tapered chest sold to a room bidder for \$44,250 (est. \$15,000/25,000). Competition was in the room and on the phone.**



**This 19th-century Italian school painting of English merchants with a view of the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius fetched \$19,360 (est. \$3000/5000). The 29" x 35½" oil on canvas is inscribed "G. M.F." A catalog note speculated that the main merchant pictured may be James Close (1799-1865) of Gloucester & Company. For more information about Close, see *The Merchant of Naples*, edited by Julian Potter.**



**A signed 7" x 9" oil on board of the U.S. Navy's sloop of war U.S.S. *Peacock* by James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894) sold for \$13,310 (est. \$4000/6000). Schinto photo.**



**This 19th-century American oil on canvas still life with fruit, 18" x 22", sold for \$6655 (est. \$800/1200).**

Originally published in the March 2012 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*. © 2012 Maine Antique Digest

comments powered by Disqus

