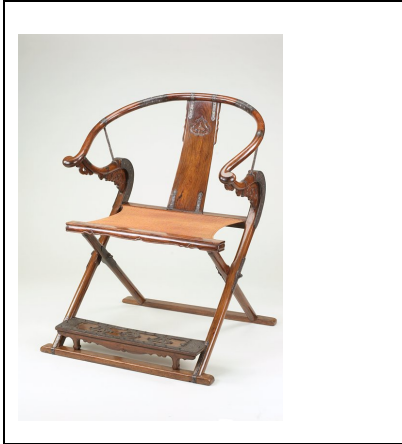

Title of Object

Folding round-back armchair

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: n/a

Culture: Chinese

Date of Object: Late 16th century

Country: China

Accession Number: 98.80.3

File Created: 11/18/2016

Material/Medium: Huang-hua-li hardwood
with iron hardware

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Department: Chinese, South and Southeast
Asian Art

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 8/29/2017

Tour Topics

Symbolism-art, symbolism-in-art, group 6 tour, highlights 1600 to 1850, Buddhism, power/status, ceremony, spirituality, lotus, nature/flowers, treasures of Buddhism, portable, wealth, wood

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. What do you notice when you look at this chair?
2. What do you see that might be symbols on the chair?
3. What are some other types of chairs that convey status?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

- This chair is made from huanghuali wood and iron fittings with silver inlays. The Chinese developed this style of folding armchair in the late 10th century.
- The curved arm rail is made of five parts with overlapping exposed tenoned joints and iron mounts to reinforce the joints.
- The curved braces and armbands feature lotus blossoms. The footrest is protected with an iron plate with cut-out designs of Buddhist emblems.
- Considered one of the most elegant forms created by Chinese cabinet makers.
- The Chinese term huanghuali literally means "yellow flowering pear" wood. Only highly skilled craftsmen were allowed to make furniture from this wood for the imperial family. The wood's beautiful warm color and grain remind the viewer of the tree trunks from which it was made. (Five Facts, artsmia.org)
- "The most valuable and precious of all of these materials are zitan and huanghuali, two types of hardwood found, among other places, on China's largest island, Hainan. Along with having beautiful lustrous qualities, the woods are difficult to harvest and mostly found outside China, making them even rarer.... Chinese furniture is generally made without any glue or nails — rather, the pieces are held together by a complicated network of joints. The sophisticated technical abilities of the cabinetmakers and carpenters who made them were incredibly advanced...It's very impressive to see the complexity and intricacy of the joints." (Christie's)
- It is estimated that only 10,000 pieces of huanghuali furniture exist in the world. Auction prices for such furniture have skyrocketed in the last 20 years. (The Independent)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

- This type of chair can be easily folded for storage or transport. Reserved for persons of high rank. Paintings and woodblock prints show these chairs placed in front of standing screens for formal receptions. And as portable thrones for emperors.

A common Chinese saying states that the place of honor within a room is identified as "the first folding chair", confirming the high status accorded this form of furniture.

The design of the folding chair developed from folding stools and was perfected during the Song dynasty.

The footrest plate includes cut-out designs of Buddhist emblems and a coin flanked by pairs of crossed rhinoceros horn cups. These are two of the eight Buddhist treasures and, in this combination, forms a rebus that provides a symbolic protection from any attempt at poisoning the chair's owner.

The braces for the legs and arm bands feature lotus blossoms surrounded by tendrils. (Jacobsen)
- The lotus is the flower of the sixth month and summer. It is a symbol of purity because it rises out of the mud to bloom. Lotus blossoms are often depicted as a throne for the Buddha, and the lotus is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism (ba jixiang 八吉祥). (British Museum)

- Dragons are carved into the curve of the arm support. The Chinese dragon is the ultimate symbol of the cosmic energy qi 气 and the most powerful symbol of good fortune. Ranked first among mythical beasts, it can bring rain to parched lands, which in turn represents abundance and relief. A dragon and phoenix (king of all winged creatures) symbolise the emperor and empress as well as marital bliss. The dragon is often used as an emblem of high rank and power on the robes of emperors and princes as well as on imperial art objects. (British Museum)

- The Mia chair was acquired in China in the late 1940's. The former owner was associated with the German embassy in Shanghai. The chair remained in Europe until 1996 when it was purchased at auction (Sotheby's, New York, Catalogue #6880, Sept. 18, 1996, lot 311). It was restored by Christopher Cook, London. (Jacobsen)

- In 2001 a visitor to Mia was very tired and decided this chair was a good place to rest. The visitor climbed over the rope, sat in the chair and caused extensive damage. It cost \$10,000 to restore the chair. (Lecture)

- "Classical Chinese furniture is closely related both aesthetically and technically to traditional Chinese architecture. The basic mortise and tenon system of joinery found in hardwood furniture is deeply rooted in the more ancient tradition of architectural timber framing. The preference for exposed structural elements, reliance on the natural beauty of wood and refined proportions, are principles fundamental to both traditions." This hardwood is only finished with wax. (Art of Asia, artsmia.org)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Considered by many to be one of the most elegant designs created by Chinese cabinet makers, the round-back folding armchair is a unique combination of utility and ceremonial grandeur. This large, harmoniously proportioned chair is an exact mate to one now owned by the Shanghai Museum. It retains its original patina, decorative carving, and most of its iron fittings, which are inlaid with a scrolling lotus design. An openwork iron plaque bearing auspicious Buddhist "treasure" emblems is attached to the footrest with iron bosses. Both comfortable and portable, folding chairs like this were reserved for persons of high rank. In paintings, they are often depicted in front of solid screens, the seat of honor from which to greet important guests at formal gatherings.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Jacobsen, Robert D, Classical Chinese Furniture: In the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. pp 57-59.

Collecting Guide: 10 things to know about classical Chinese furniture, Christie's:
<http://www.christies.com/features/Classical-Chinese-Furniture-Collecting-Guide-7612-1.aspx>

Mia label - <http://collections.artsmia.org/art/5814/folding-roundback-armchair-china>

Rare wood sparks buying frenzy in China, *The Independent*, June 11, 2011:
<http://www.independent.co.uk/property/house-and-home/rare-wood-sparks-buying-frenzy-in-china-2296824.html>

Five Facts: Don't Knock Wood!, artsmia.org: <https://new.artsmia.org/teaching-the-arts/dont-knock-wood/the-beauty-is-in-the-wood/>

Chinese Symbols, British Museum: http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Chinese_symbols.pdf

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