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Antiquities

An interior designer visits China and brings back a collection of genuine antiquities that represent some of the country's finest craftsmanship and artistic beauty. By Joy Lawrance Photography by Emily Minton-Redfield

Not many people can say that a teepee propelled them to fame, but interior designer Cassandra Lohr can claim just that. It was during her years in Aspen, a time when she designed interiors for the residences of royalty and celebrities, that she took on a challenge—design a complete living environment for a 28-square-foot-diameter teepee, a project she initially thought would be easy.

Her talent and ingenuity prevailed, and the resulting gracious and sumptuous interior became a cover feature for *Architectural Digest* magazine. That successful project established her place among the top echelon in her field.

Today, Lohr's own furniture collection, displayed in high-end showrooms, consists of antiques and one-of-a-kind hand-crafted pieces. Although well-known for her talents in Southwestern and mountain-lodge styles, it was her interest in antiques that took her to the next phase of her career—Chinese antiquities.

On a pleasure trip to China in 1995, she and a friend filled many hours seeking out the best antique stores, and a new passion emerged. "It was like a treasure trove of antiques and ceramics," she says. No sooner was she home than she began to plan her return expedition. She contacted a friend, a renowned professor and authority on Chinese antiquities, who offered this advice: "If you really want to buy wisely, take me with you."

But it took seven years for all the pieces to fall into place, for all the contacts to be made in China. Then, when they arrived there in 2003, "We were picked up at the airport, and we were off and running."

Traveling via Russian-made airplanes, taxis or river-boats, Lohr and her expert appraiser hopped from shop to warehouse. Because of their prior planning, dealers were ready and waiting.

"To be honest, sometimes I didn't even know where we were," Lohr says. "We'd go into private collections and

warehouses—sometimes very dusty. We went into remote areas where they'd probably never seen a Westerner before. We'd drive into small villages, down dark alleys and climb four flights of stairs where a cell phone wouldn't work." She admits to some trepidation.

But even through the dust and disarray, her expert could spot the real thing. She ended up with 90 objects, one as small as a bronze brush rest, one as large as a 12-panel lacquered and painted screen.

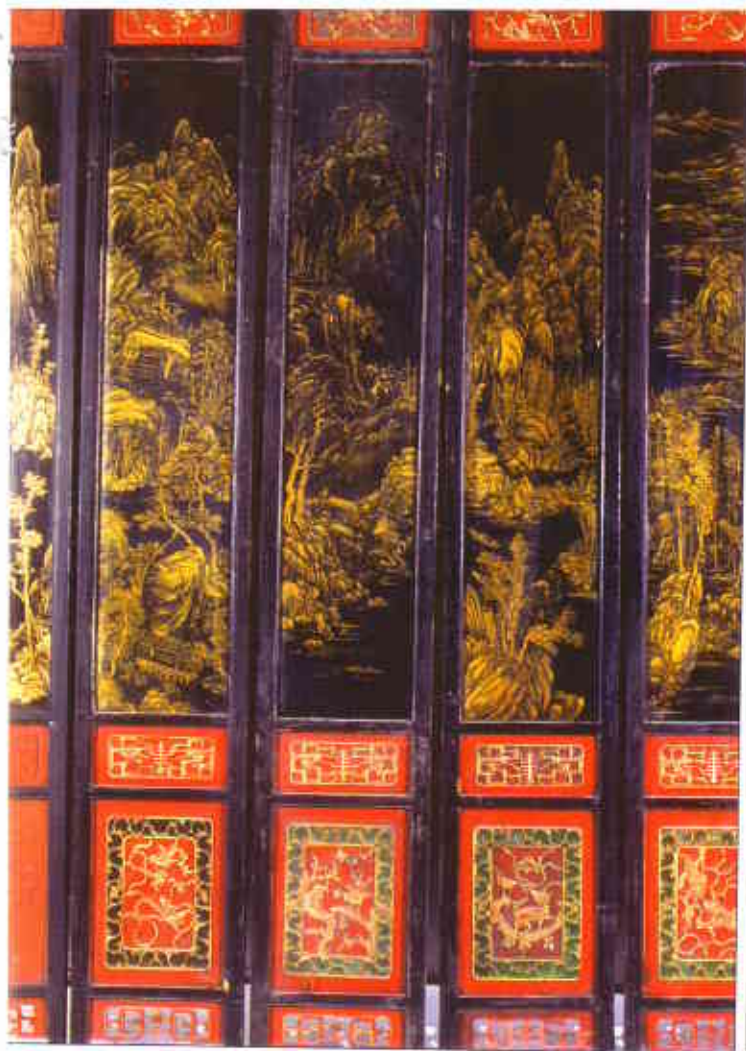
On getting things back to the United States, Lohr comments, "There are definitely some challenges—there's a ton of details."

Each of the 90 pieces she collected represents some of the finest craftsmanship and artistic beauty of Chinese history. "What I was trying to bring back was a well-rounded exposition of porcelain, stoneware and antique furniture that we'll be selling to collectors." She adds that while containers filled with Chinese work at a reasonable price arrive daily in the United States, she feels her collection to be of exceedingly high quality and, therefore, greater value.

Most pieces she collected were made during the Ming (1368-1644) or Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, and the task of dating each object has consumed much of her time since returning to the U.S. In addition to the original appraisals, she requested assessment by yet another renowned professional from San Francisco.

"While some pieces are dated, it's taken me over a year to come up with values and





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dates on others, and we still have a disclaimer, because without carbon dating you can't be positive," she says. However, the statue of a Buddha in Parinirvana (casual pose or "at royal ease") is of particular interest to her. This 3-foot-high sitting figure, hand-carved of wood with gesso and original polychrome, probably dates from the 16th or 17th century. Lohr plans to have this carbon dated.

Other acquisitions include an ornately carved altar table, a 30-drawer apothecary, a huanghuali (wood) desk, clay and bronze statuettes, porcelain and stoneware. One of the oldest pieces, a Yue Ware miniature wine pot, dates from the 10th Century. However, one of the most valuable is a painted porcelain Tungchih vase made between 1862-1865, the only time such pieces were made.

A prized specimen is a 12-panel screen measuring 20 feet across and 10 feet high. Calligraphy, recently translated, authenticates its 1791 date and describes honors bestowed upon one Mr. Lu Yifan, for whom the screen was made. On the reverse side, paintings depict the creation and triumph of the Qing Dynasty. Another red- and-black-lacquer eight-panel screen, from 1777, was presented to a woman on her 70th birthday.

One artifact that Lohr would like to see in a museum is an elaborately decorated marriage bed, circa 1860-1870. According to Lohr, "This was made during the period that the Chinese were trading with Europeans, and they were impressed with the English



language." While the bed was made for a wealthy Chinese merchant, the inscription reads in English, "Very Good Night Mister Hee and Mistress Woo Wate Your Happiness." Delicate carvings include cranes, leafy trees, bats (for good fortune) and a canopy with elaborate Phoenix birds.

Graceful 19th Century Qing cassia wood display units would fit comfortably in almost any home today, while a moon-shaped display unit might easily serve as an attractive room divider, according to Lohr. A set of bamboo chairs, c.1900, have a clean, contemporary appeal.

"What's so wonderful about the Ming Dynasty is that the style was so elegant and simple," Lohr comments, "so those pieces really work in a traditional home or a contemporary setting." She adds that even one or two pieces can make a statement, like a wonderful table or a red-lacquer bed.

Furniture made of rare woods is yet another facet of the value of Chinese antiques. Huanghuali, yellow flowering pear, was highly sought after by the nobility who

requisitioned it from Hainan Island. Rarest of all is zitan, a tree growing only a tiny amount each year. With its blackish-purple hue, royalty commanded its use for palaces. Hardwoods such as rosewood or teak allowed for the carving of open, elegant forms not attainable with softer varieties.

One must also consider the adaptability of antique furniture to a dry climate, Lohr remarks. Taking such fine pieces from the high humidity of China to the arid west requires careful adjusting. "If you let it go through four seasons, and let it 'move,' then you can repair it." Her collection is housed in a climate-controlled facility with 55-percent humidity. But she cautions, "In transferring a piece of furniture to a home with lower humidity, it will move some more."

For a novice, purchasing a Chinese artifact is filled with pitfalls. As her antiquities expert explained, one may walk into a warehouse in China and find authentic pieces that have been restored—a process that often decreases the value of the object. It takes a keen eye—and nose—to spot a treasure propped in a corner, covered with dust and grime. The nose is very important, as Lohr learned when she brought in a woman to translate the calligraphy on her screens.

"When she walked in she said it smelled like her grandmother's house," says Lohr. "She recognized the fragrance of the wood."

Lohr once asked her expert appraiser the basic question, "How can you tell if it's good?" His enigmatic reply included these



words: intuition, smell, shape, feel and weight. And still, even the best curators can make mistakes.

Her best advice to a serious collector, should you choose to shop in China, is to seek a referral for an agent there. For casual collectors, those looking for decorative pieces, she adds, "If you see something that you love, and it has an aesthetic value to you and you'd like to have it in your home, by all means buy it. Have a ball."

As with any major purchase, research is essential. With a few excellent books and information on the Internet, doing your homework is not difficult. Lohr recommends the book *Asian Art* by Lark Martin, who spent 24 years with Sotheby's, including a position as senior vice president in Chinese art.

Other helpful advice she offers, "Look at the base of a table leg, near the floor. If it looks new, it's probably been refinished, or may even be a reproduction. Look underneath the table top. Does it look new?"

Another clue may lie in the wood itself. During the Ming Dynasty, even a small piece of furniture was carved from one large piece of wood. Reproductions are frequently pieced.

At the end of Lohr's buying trip, she engaged an award-winning photojournalist to videotape the beauty of China as well as record interviews with her expert. His discussions on the history of China, the dynasties and their influence on the artistry of those periods will eventually be seen in a special HGTV presentation.

Lohr says, "I would almost venture to say that as we went through the Santa Fe period, we're going through the Asian period. Even Christie's and Sotheby's have Asian auctions which have added to its popularity."

With her love of travel, from West to East, and her desire to expand her collection for clients, Cassandra Lohr is well positioned to nurture this trend in Chinese antiquities. She can be contacted at Cassandra Lohr Design International, 303-377-7121; www.cassandra lohrrdesigns.com.

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