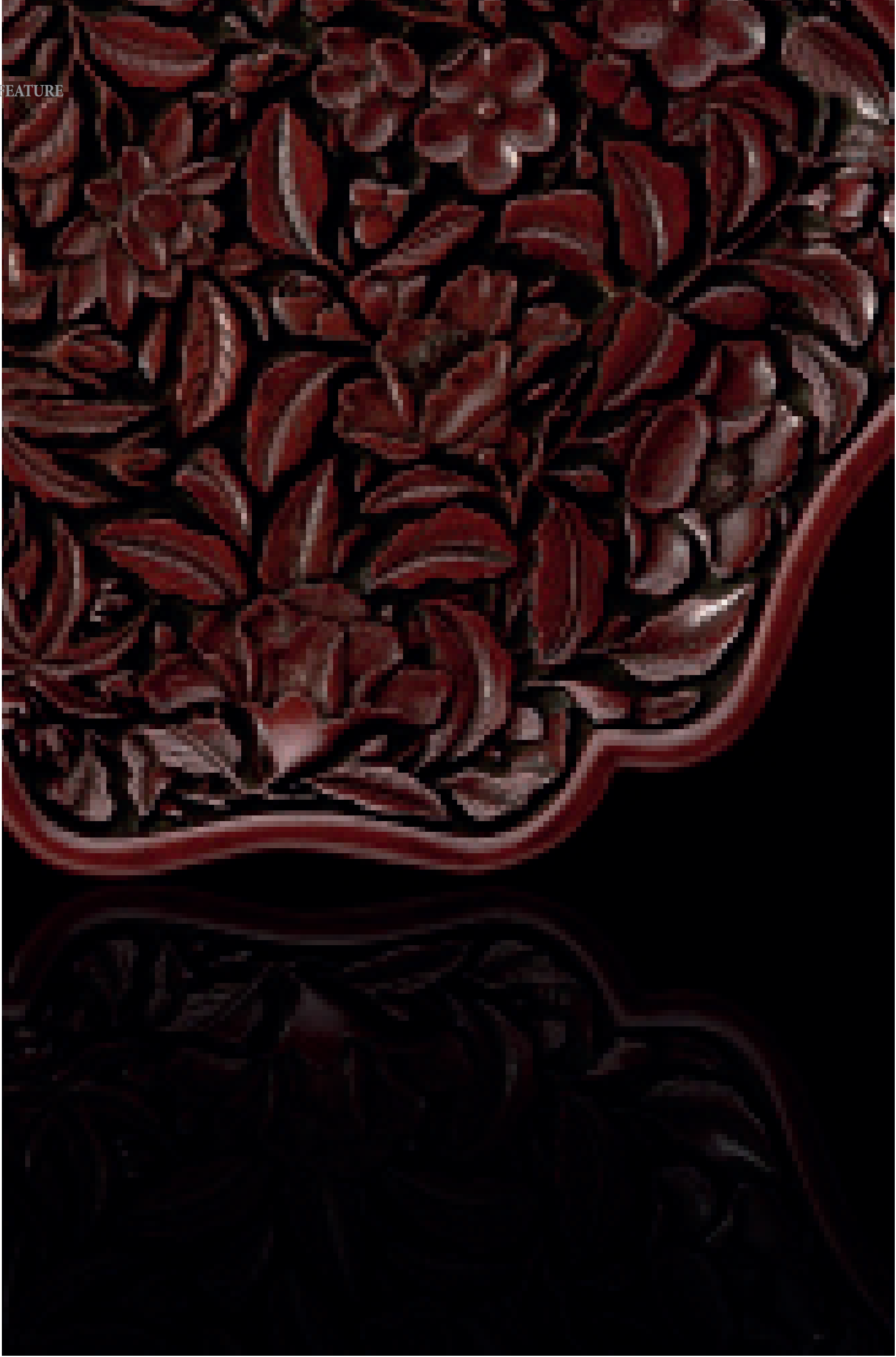


Sunflower-shaped, cinnabar lacquer tray, Yuan dynasty (1271-1368).



THE HUNT FOR CHINA'S LOST TREASURES

Chinese antiques dealer and gallery owner, Discovery Bay's Oi Ling Chiang tells Sabine Borgia about the last 16 years spent building up her business from scratch. A large part of her work has involved sourcing and authenticating artefacts from different Chinese dynasties. The three-storey gallery she has established specialises in the periods running from the Han (220 BC - 206 AD) to Tang (618 - 907) dynasties.



Oi Ling has no regrets about abandoning her career as a teacher and turning her attention to pursue her childhood passion for Chinese art history, following in the footsteps of her late grandfather who was an ardent antique collector during the late stages of the Qing dynasty (1644 - 1912).

She told dbi that she had been intrigued by the history of Chinese art since her childhood days when her mother would tell stories of her grandfather, a Mandarin official in charge of the salt trade and a private collector of Chinese antiques. The grandfather had had the means and wealth to collect many antiques, including paintings and porcelain from the Ming (1368 - 1644) and Song (960 - 1279) dynasties and the archaic period.

"A unique piece with exceptional workmanship is a great piece of art. As an antique expert I look closely at details and not just the obvious. Subtle details, which normally escape casual observation, can make all the

difference in evaluating a piece," explains Oi Ling.

In the last one hundred years China lost some of its heritage with the destruction or looting of an immeasurable amount of important cultural relics. She says the Japanese were responsible for a great deal of cultural looting in China during the occupation, seizing and destroying as many artefacts as they could. And unlike other European countries, the Japanese never published what had been looted.

More artefacts went missing during the Cultural Revolution that lasted a decade from 1966 under Mao Zedong. China's remaining antiques have been dispersed across the world, with the Europeans buying much from China between the 1960s and 1990s when the nation was relatively impoverished.

The Oi Ling Fine Chinese Antiques gallery is located at 52 Hollywood Road. She moved to the present location five years ago after more than a decade at her 1,400-square-foot shop, 'Mandarin Antiques,' on Lyndhurst Terrace. She admits the gallery is where her

"The design of traditional Chinese scholar and ancient pieces has influenced the art of neighbouring countries. They borrowed from (copied) China's art and culture."





Opposite, clockwise from left: Rare book, "Zhen xi Shan," late Qing period; square cinnabar lacquer tray with carved equestrian design, Yuan dynasty; bronze Luoyue culture drum, Han dynasty. Facing Page, upper: Foliated shape lacquer tray featuring a flying dragon, early Qing dynasty. Beneath: Small, carved cinnabar lacquer incense box, Qing dynasty.

heart is, not least because it provides jobs for people she cares deeply about.

The antiques dealer began her professional career teaching A-Level students at government schools in Hong Kong for ten years. Disillusioned by the educational system and the pupils' lack of interest in their studies and preparing for examinations, she took the brave step of entering the antiques business when her family returned to Hong Kong in the 1990s after immigrating to Australia some years earlier. She said they had presented her with a safety net were her business to flounder, particularly, as she started off as a newcomer with very little capital in a cash-intensive business.

AUTHENTICATING ANTIQUES

Oi Ling's original plan for her new business was to focus on selling antique furniture since it was the least expensive to acquire. She did her research and soon established a solid reputation among her clientele who were often passers-by, and her business began to flourish in a relatively short

period. She attributes this to the work her gallery undertakes to authenticate artefacts through scientific methods and academic research conducted by universities both in Hong Kong and in China. As a measure of her success, her clients are now institutions, museums, private collectors and corporations from Europe and Asia.

"We have purchased from families whose ancestors were important Mandarin officials in the late Qing empire. Needless to say these are exceptional pieces and are well sought after. We are honoured to say that we also helped to find good museums to house these pieces."

The current collection also includes pieces from the archaic dynasties of Shang (1600 - 1046 BC) and Zhou (1046 - 246 BC), and also important scholar pieces from the later periods of Ming (1368 - 1644 AD) and Qing (1644 - 1911 AD) dynasties. The pieces in her current collection consist of archaic bronze vessels, important terra cotta sculptures, furniture made of precious Huan-guali and zitan wood, as well as carved cinnabar lacquer pieces with imperial provenance, some of which can command millions of Hong Kong dollars. They also sell very fast, largely by word of mouth, or by making a phone call.

BURIED TREASURE

The best pieces in her collection include archaeological artefacts, which date back to the Neolithic period (2000 - 600 BC). Oi Ling says a major factor contributing to



the abundance of archaeological materials available on the market is a direct result of China's concept of burial. The Chinese treat the dead as they were treated when alive, so if a princess had 100 servants there would be 100 statues of servants placed with her in the tomb, along with all the things she loved.

The tombs were well built and lined with wall paintings, frescoes and stone engravings. They were also airtight and, hence, most of the artefacts stored inside were quite well preserved. She explains that these Northern Chinese burial tombs, mainly in Xi'an, Shaanxi, Hebei and Henan provinces, where the ancient capitals were located, were elaborate and massive, with an extremely long walkway leading down to the underground tombs.

REPUTATION

"We have worked very hard to establish a reputation," says Oi Ling.

When asked what she looks for in terms of quality and authenticity in purchasing

from an auction or private collection, she replies: "How well the aesthetic profundity and refinement of the artist are reflected in the representation of form and shape of the piece. In addition to this, I need to know the number of similar extant examples available in other collections and the history of provenance."

Oi Ling continues: "Basically, for Chinese antiques, the origin referring to the workshop which produced the piece determines the quality of a piece. A workshop which produces artefacts for the appreciation or consumption of the imperial family that naturally has the means and status to keep great artisans and artists and, therefore, will be able to provide artefacts of the greatest quality."

In terms of authenticity, Oi Ling's business "relies on our own experience and expertise and, for some pieces where possible, scientific testing," she says.

SCHOLAR PIECES

"We have a sizeable number of scholar





Opposite, upper: Flower-shaped cinnabar lacquer tray with laughing Buddha, children and landscape background, Ming dynasty. **Lower:** Lacquer incense box, Qing dynasty. **Facing page, upper:** Inscribed imperial lacquer tray with a flying dragon chasing a round pearl, Ming dynasty. **Lower:** Carved cinnabar lacquer incense box, Song dynasty.



pieces in our collection.” Scholar pieces are, as the name suggests, elegant art pieces that a traditional Chinese scholar would have kept in his study. They are considered the physical manifestations of the superior levels of spirituality and refinement associated with a gentleman scholar.

A Confucian gentleman is required to cultivate the knowledge and skills of the following disciplines: calligraphy; painting; guqin, which is an ancient string instrument dating back more than 3000 years; and weiqi, a 2000-year-old board game for two players that is rich in strategy. Scholar pieces are nowadays most sought after by experienced collectors.

“For Chinese antiques, an exceptional piece is generally one that has been commissioned to be made by the imperial family or people associated with the imperial family. This means the piece was made by the most skilful artists/artisans of the time. For this simple reason alone, pieces with such a background are always highly regarded, and when we see something of this quality available in the market, we will do our best to acquire them. They are not just great antiques, but also great art,” enthuses Oi Ling.

She maintains that the literary and artistic accomplishments of the scholarly gentry class of the 10th Century Song dynasty not only strengthened the social status and

notion of the gentleman scholar but also helped codify the behaviour and manners of a gentleman scholar.

The traditional Chinese scholar would have taken a bath before going into his study, where he would light some incense, or resin of aloes wood, to release a beautiful fragrance to calm the heart and invigorate the mind. Top quality resin from aloes wood now fetches HK\$30,000 per gram. It is made naturally in response to a common attack by a parasite fungus or mould on the *Aquilaria* tree. The scholar would have developed unique formula and concoctions using various fragrances that would have been capsulized in pills and stored in lacquer boxes to be used on different occasions.

Typically, in addition to a large collection of books, the study of a gentleman scholar would have an antique or good quality bronze censer, collections of paintings, rubbings and calligraphy by known scholars of old and his own time, and collections of different vases for floral arrangements, to enhance the atmosphere of the room.

“As mentioned previously, the scholarly gentry class of the Song dynasty has taken the standard of finesse and art to such a great height that anything of the Song dynasty became the epitome of good taste. This is also the reason that artefacts of the Song dynasty are always so well sought after by collectors around the world,” says Oi Ling.

END GAME

The work has been very demanding, including the day-to-day operation of the gallery. “It’s a very intense business.”

Oi Ling and her husband Philip, who helps with the gallery, have travelled much around the world in recent years to look for collectable pieces.

“You have to go to auctions and make a strategic decision about what to buy.” The auctions are held in Hong Kong, London, Switzerland, Beijing, Paris, Tokyo and New York, and some of these pieces can cost a few million HK dollars.

“We have to be very careful with our money and budget... I often joke with my husband that we should have invested in property in Hong Kong instead!”