

# Inspired by China

Traditional Furniture & Contemporary Inspiration **BY CHRISTINE TEMIN**

A fizzy explosion of red wire isn't what comes to most people's minds when they see a piece of seventeenth-century Chinese furniture, but that's how contemporary designer Gord Peteran responded to an ornate cloisonné incense stand from the Song dynasty (Figs. 1, 3).

Peteran is one of twenty-two furniture makers who were invited by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, to make new works in response to masterpieces of antique Chinese furniture. The result is *Inspired by China: Contemporary Furnituremakers Explore Chinese Traditions*.

"The idea was to expand people's knowledge of Chinese furniture," says Edward S. Cooke Jr., head of the art history department at Yale University, who, with Nancy Berliner, PEM's resident expert on Chinese art, co-curated the show. The two started by bringing the artists, who hail from the U.S., Canada, and China, to PEM for an intense three-day workshop in June 2005. "It was total immersion," Cooke says. "We looked at pieces in Salem and Boston, gave them books, and held demonstrations of traditional techniques." The makers then went home to create the pieces that are now on view alongside twenty-nine superb examples of antique Chinese furniture.

Furniture makers picked up on different themes; Silas Kopf chose several inspirations (Figs. 2, 4). The "cracked ice" pattern in Chinese furniture, which "looks accidental and surprisingly abstract" says Berliner, "actually symbolizes spring, when the frozen water breaks up." His design also shows the influence of the "tangram," a traditional game that involves the reconfiguration of geometric shapes, which "often resulted in seven small tables that could be arranged in various ways," Cooke says, adding that "It's a concept of flexible furniture that is remarkably modern." @

*Inspired by China, Contemporary Furnituremakers Explore Chinese Traditions* is at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA, through March 4, 2007 and at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale, FL, November 30–March 31, 2008. Visit [www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org) or call 978.745.9500.

*Christine Temin is the former art critic of the Boston Globe and now writes for various international publications.*



**IMAGES TOP TO BOTTOM:**

**Fig. 1:** Gord Peteran, *Inception Stand*, 2006. Electrical wire. H. 31, W. 24, D. 24 in. Photography by Dean Powell.



**Fig. 2:** Silas Kopf, *Cracked-Ice Puzzle Tables*, 2005. White oak, East Indian rosewood, various woods. Largest (1 rectangle): H. 34, W. 30, D. 15 in. Photography by Dean Powell.



**Fig. 3:** Incense stand, 17th century. Cloisonné. H. 33 1/4, W. 26 1/2, D. 19 in. Photography by Dean Powell.

**Fig. 4:** Puzzle tables, seven-piece set, 18th century. Hongmu, burl. Largest (2 large triangles): H. 31 3/4, W. 42, D. 21 in. Photography by Dean Powell.

