

Golden 92

Chapter Ninety-Two: The Grassland Black Market (Part Seven)

"Langjie, what's with all this talk of shahtoosh shawls and Tang Bohu paintings today? Alright, let's move on to the next item."

Old Xie was clearly in a bad mood because he didn't manage to photograph the money tree, and he broke the silence in the tent with his words.

"Ahem... ahem, Mr. Xie, let's see the item first. This painting, 'Li Duanduan,' by Tang Bohu, is not an authentic work by Tang Bohu, but the level of the forgery is quite good. It's worth collecting and appreciating."

Lang Jie coughed twice and explained that he also knew that this so-called Tang Bohu "Li Duanduan Picture" was a complete fake. Regardless of the painting skills, you could tell from the scroll's shaft and the paper that it was definitely not from the Qing Dynasty. It was probably a copy from the Republic of China period.

However, this painting was delivered along with the money tree. The seller wanted to sell them as a package deal. The two items together were worth 20,000 yuan, and the painting was discounted to 5,000 yuan. The seller couldn't explain its origin. It seemed that it didn't come from a tomb, but rather that the man's henchmen had stolen it from someone's house while they were stealing chickens and dogs.

In Langjie's eyes, the painting was only worth a few hundred yuan, but since he had already paid for it, he might as well put it up for auction. If some sucker made a bad offer, then he would have made the money for nothing.

Upon hearing Lang Jie's words, the old man who had come with Xie Laotou walked forward with some skepticism. He put on a pair of white gloves, and after unfolding the scroll with a young man at the table, he only glanced at it a few times with a magnifying glass before shaking his head and walking back.

"Tang Bohu's 'Li Duanduan' painting starts at 3,000 RMB. Everyone is welcome to come and take a look. It's a painting of a beautiful lady, which would be nice to hang at home. You may not know that Li

Duanduan is the real-life inspiration for Qiu Xiang in the movie 'Tang Bohu Points at Qiu Xiang.' It has a solid foundation and a clear lineage."

Seeing that no one was interested in the painting, Lang Jie reluctantly lowered the purchase price by 2,000 yuan, announced the starting bid, and explained the story behind the painting, hoping that Mr. Ma would be generous enough to buy it.

However, the fat man seemed not to hear Lang Jie's words, and continued to flirt with the glamorous woman beside him, completely ignoring Lang Jie's comment.

"It's true that 'Li Duanduan' was painted by Tang Bohu, and its provenance is also clear. However, this painting was treasured in the Forbidden City before the fall of the Qing Dynasty. Later, it's unknown whether it was taken to Manchuria by Puyi or taken abroad by those remnants of the Qing Dynasty. It has never been seen in the world for so many years, and it has become a mystery. The Nanjing Museum has a copy, but it is said to be a forgery made by later generations, which is highly controversial. This Lang Jie is really something, actually trying to fool people with such a thing." A conversation came from next to Zhuang Rui.

"Uncle Li, how do you know it's fake if you haven't even looked at it? What if it's real?"

The young man brought by the middle-aged man surnamed Li asked a question. Zhuang Rui also had the same question in mind, so he pricked up his ears and listened carefully.

"Nonsense! If it were true, it would be auctioned off in Beijing or Hong Kong. Why would it be sold on the black market? Besides, Langjie is known for his shrewdness. If it were real, would he sell it for 3,000 yuan? He would have made hundreds of times more."

Mr. Li said with a disdainful look, but he did speak highly of Lang Jie's discerning eye.

Despite saying that, Mr. Li still stood up, walked to the table and took a look. However, after looking at it, he shook his head repeatedly, sat back down in his chair, and remained silent.

Langjie waited for a while, and seeing that no one else was interested in the painting, he didn't pay much attention. He had only brought it out to fool the fat shop owner, so it was expected that it would

fail to sell. So he said, "Since everyone is not interested in this painting, let's move on to the next item. The next item is..."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Langjie, let me take a look at this painting. If it's a pretty good imitation, we can indulge in a little luxury and take it home to hang in our house."

Before Langjie could finish speaking, Zhuang Rui interrupted him. Zhuang Rui stood up, holding the little white lion in his arms, and walked towards the square table in the middle of the tent.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, some people inside the tent wore mocking expressions, while others were dismissive, probably thinking of Zhuang Rui and Liu Chuan as spoiled brats from well-off families.

"I already said it's fake, why are you looking at this thing? It'd be disgusting to use as a butt wipe."

Liu Chuan couldn't stop Zhuang Rui, and muttered some foul language, which made the people in the tent even more contemptuous of the two of them.

Zhuang Rui had already walked to the square table where the painting "Li Duanduan" was displayed. Seeing that he looked normal, the others seemed genuinely interested in seeing it. After all, a few thousand yuan was nothing to them. If he wanted to buy it and hang it in his home, so be it. However, since it delayed the auction of the next item, the people's expressions were not very pleasant.

However, no one could see that beneath Zhuang Rui's calm exterior, his heart was like a turbulent sea, churning endlessly. If Zhuang Rui hadn't always been very composed, he probably would have lost his composure just now and let others see through his act.

Zhuang Rui wasn't really interested in the painting, and after hearing Mr. Li's evaluation, he lost all interest in using his spiritual energy to examine it. However, the first antique he identified with his spiritual energy was a painting, so he had a certain fondness for such antiques. Just now, when Lang Jie was about to put the scroll away, Zhuang Rui casually scanned it with his eyes.

However, after taking one look, Zhuang Rui almost fell off his chair. The reason was simple: the painting contained an extremely rich spiritual energy, more than any antique he had ever seen before. Even Wang Shizhen's manuscript could not compare.

Although Zhuang Rui couldn't figure out the origin of the spiritual energy in these objects, based on the spiritual energy he had absorbed before and his understanding of the origins of those objects, he discovered that the amount of spiritual energy was directly related to the age of these objects, and that the colors of these spiritual energies were also different.

The aura emanating from the money tree was purple, and Zhuang Rui saw the same color, a reddish purple. The aura in Tang Bohu's "Li Duanduan" painting, which was widely considered a fake, was also purple, only slightly lighter, suggesting it wasn't as old as the Han Dynasty bronze money tree.

Zhuang Rui can still remember the "Lian Sheng" couplet he absorbed in Pengcheng. It seemed to be white, while Wang Shizhen's manuscript had some yellow. As for the sandalwood root carving, it was yellow with purple tinge. The colors were not exactly the same, but Zhuang Rui had handled too few antiques to classify them in detail.

However, judging from the vibrant colors of this Tang Bohu painting scroll, Zhuang Rui believed it to be an authentic work. Although he didn't understand why so many experts in the room didn't think highly of the scroll, Zhuang Rui still chose to trust his eyes and asked to come up and take a closer look.

Although he wasn't particularly interested in the scroll, Lang Jie's businessman nature led him to have his men unroll it so Zhuang Rui could examine it closely. However, Zhuang Rui's performance was rather amateurish; he wasn't holding a magnifying glass or wearing gloves, and his hands didn't touch the scroll. Lang Jie didn't say anything about it.

"Young man, it's just a few thousand yuan, what are you looking at? Stop dawdling here, if you like it, buy it and take it home to look at at your leisure."

The old man below shouted impatiently at Zhuang Rui. Zhuang Rui didn't say anything, but it angered Liu Chuan. He immediately stood up and said, "Old man, stop acting like an old man. I'm not buying it. If you're not happy, let's have a fight. I'm not afraid of people saying I don't respect the elderly."

Liu Chuan's temper wasn't much better than the old man's to begin with, and he'd been putting up with the old man for a long time. He'd only been given a sideways glare upon entering the tent, and now, hearing him speak ill of Zhuang Rui again, he couldn't hold back his outburst.

As the saying goes, the tough are afraid of the stubborn, and the stubborn are afraid of the reckless. Although Old Xie was quite tough, he didn't dare to speak when he met Liu Chuan, this hothead. He just snorted and stopped talking.

“Da Chuan, say less. What this old man said is true. It's only worth a few thousand yuan. It's not worth arguing about. Boss Langjie, just because of what Boss Xie said, I'll take this painting. You can put it away for me.”

Zhuang Rui's behavior at this moment made it seem as if he was being humiliated by Old Man Xie. He didn't even look at it carefully, just glanced at it, and then decided to buy it. Seeing the situation just now, Lang Jie didn't want to cause any more trouble. He quickly put the painting away, and even included a fishing rod cover. After putting the scroll inside, he handed it to Zhuang Rui.

Zhou Rui had already counted out three thousand yuan below. The transaction was completed in one hand and the money was exchanged in the other, and both parties were even. Zhuang Rui remained calm throughout the process. It wasn't until he sat back down in his chair that a hint of excitement appeared on his face. However, at this moment, everyone in the tent was focused on the items to be auctioned below, and no one paid any attention to Zhuang Rui.

"Wooden head, is this lousy painting real?"

Having known Zhuang Rui for so many years, Liu Chuan naturally noticed the changes in Zhuang Rui's expression.

"I can't say for sure, but I feel like the portrait is real. Anyway, it's only three thousand yuan, so I might as well buy it."

Zhuang Rui spoke in a low voice, and only Liu Chuan and Zhou Rui, who were sitting next to him, could hear him.

Although Zhou Rui didn't know much about antiques, he looked unconvinced after hearing Zhuang Rui's words. He didn't really believe Zhuang Rui. Given Zhuang Rui's age and experience in the industry, how could his eyesight be better than those old foxes?

Everyone thought Zhuang Rui hadn't looked at the painting carefully, but they didn't know that he had already seen through its secrets and understood why so many people considered it a fake. However, Zhuang Rui couldn't explain it to Liu Chuan and Zhou Rui. To bring Tang Bohu's "Li Duanduan Picture" back to light, he estimated that the Song army would need to help.

"The next item to be auctioned is a set of gold artifacts used daily by a Ming Dynasty prince..."

The auction hosted by Lang Jie was still ongoing, but Zhuang Rui's mind was now entirely focused on the hanging scroll in his hand. He was recalling what he had just seen and wished he could end the auction now and go back to the hotel to examine it more closely. Since the scroll was not yet opened, he could not see it clearly with his spiritual energy.

Tang Bohu's painting "Li Duanduan" appears to depict five people on the surface.

In the center of the picture sits a scholar wearing a scholar's cap and sporting a mustache. His facial expression and posture exude an air of refined elegance and grace. On either side of the black desk to the left are the master's maids, one in a red suit and the other in a white blouse, their colors striking and layered.

On the right is the guest, a young lady holding a white peony, elegant and charming, with maids following behind. The four women surround their mistress, highlighting her importance and status like stars surrounding the moon. The background is a large landscape screen, with a poem inscribed above: "Li Duanduan of Shanhe Lane, truly a woman who can carry a white peony. Who would believe that Yangzhou, a city overflowing with gold, has rouge so cheaply sold to the poor?"

Strictly speaking, the "Li Duanduan" painting in Zhuang Rui's hands has a rather stiff expression and gesture, the lines of the figure's clothing are not smooth enough, and the paper used is very poor, as it is actually sized paper.

Raw Xuan paper, also known as unprocessed paper, is used directly after production. It is highly absorbent and absorbent of ink, making it ideal for ink wash painting and freehand brushwork. It produces clear, layered brushstrokes with varying degrees of dryness, wetness, density, and lightness. For over 500 years, from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the Republic of China, calligraphers and painters primarily used raw Xuan paper.

Prepared Xuan paper is made from raw Xuan paper through processes such as adding alum, burnishing, applying sizing, filling with powder, darkening, sprinkling with gold, adding wax, and applying glue. It is less prone to ink bleeding and is suitable for regular and clerical scripts. However, this paper will become brittle and crack after a long time due to alum leakage. In addition, prepared paper will cover up the charm of ink wash painting. Therefore, in that era, calligraphers and painters were ashamed to use prepared paper. This alone was enough for people to judge the authenticity of the painting.

However, Zhuang Rui didn't understand the difference between sized and unsized paper at all, and he couldn't appreciate anything wrong with the figures in the painting. What Zhuang Rui saw was that behind the gold-flecked paper, there was a thin Xuan paper painting, and the spiritual energy he sensed was entirely contained in that painting.

This painting should be divided into three layers. The outermost layer is the "Li Duanduan Picture" painted on sized paper. The second layer is the "Li Duanduan Picture" painted on raw Xuan paper, which is pasted on and attached to the first layer. There are also seven or eight bell seals on it. Because the sized paper is relatively thick and has poor breathability, it is impossible to tell from the surface that there is another world underneath.

After the raw Xuan paper was used, the painting was mounted according to the traditional methods of calligraphy and painting. If Zhuang Rui had any knowledge of mounting techniques, he would have been able to tell that the mounting of this painting was definitely done by a famous artist with superb skills, and the mounting method used was also very well-known.

This person not only hid the real painting behind the fake one, but also used the "Li Duanduan Picture" on the fake painting to perfectly cover the red bell mark that was easily visible on the real painting. However, this made the painting so fake that people would lose interest at a glance.

In the history of Chinese antiques, there have been four or five periods of prosperity. Accompanying the prosperity of these antiques was the large-scale appearance of some fakes and imitations. Even some famous people have made fakes and faked antiques.

However, there are also some people who, in order to protect the treasures in their hands, turn genuine paintings into fakes. This painting by Tang Bohu is such a case. Moreover, the mounting skills of this person are extremely high. It is likely that even the original owner of this painting did not know the secret. Otherwise, they would have kept it properly and it would not have ended up in this black market auction.

"Alright, here is the last item for today's auction: a Tang Dynasty tricolor horse. The starting bid is 50,000 RMB. If you're interested, you can come up and take a look."

Just as Zhuang Rui was in a daze, the black market auction came to an end. Three more items were auctioned off, most of which were unearthed from tombs. This suggests that Lang Jie's goods were likely sourced from tomb raiders. However, his black market auctions had relatively few fakes, which is why they attracted many well-known figures in the collecting world to participate.

The woman in sunglasses just now spent 650,000 yuan to bid on a set of everyday gold artifacts unearthed from the tomb of a Ming Dynasty prince.

Meanwhile, the middle-aged man sitting not far from Zhuang Rui had bid 380,000 yuan for a Han Dynasty storyteller figurine. Although it was somewhat damaged, Mr. Li still held it in his arms like a treasure. Zhuang Rui glanced at it casually and saw that there was indeed spiritual energy inside. However, the storyteller figurine was in very poor condition, with many parts missing and most of its spiritual energy lost. Zhuang Rui didn't even look at such an object.

There was also a bronze sword from the Warring States period. Its condition was decent, although the wooden handle at the hilt had completely rotted away. However, the blade still gleamed with a cold light and the patterns were clear. The starting price was not expensive, only 20,000 yuan. Liu Chuan took a liking to the sword and kept raising the price. In the end, only he and Old Man Xie were left. In the end, Old Man Xie bought the sword for 310,000 yuan.

Although Liu Chuan didn't manage to buy it, he still looked smug, while Old Man Xie had a livid face and glared at Liu Chuan. Zhuang Rui found it amusing; it would be strange if these two stubborn people didn't clash.

As Lang Jie enthusiastically introduced the Tang tri-color pottery on the stage, Zhuang Rui also began to search his mind for knowledge about Tang tri-color pottery.

Tang tri-color pottery was first produced during the reign of Emperor Gaozong. During Gaozong's reign, the Tang Dynasty's national strength gradually increased, and the extravagance of the ruling class intensified. High-ranking officials and nobles hoped to continue to enjoy wealth and honor after death, so they always buried a large number of treasures and tri-color pottery in their tombs, which led to the growing popularity of lavish burials.

Due to a surge in social demand, the production of sancai (three-color glazed pottery) wares became excessive. The Tang Dynasty was forced to establish a special agency to manage and regulate this production, and issued regulations to limit the number of sancai items buried with officials. For example, regulations stipulated that officials of different ranks could have 90 items (pieces or sets) as burial goods: officials of the third rank and above, 60 items, and officials of the fifth rank and above, and 40 items. The regulations also stipulated that the height of all items should be within one foot. However, archaeological excavations have revealed that the quantity and height of burial objects at that time largely exceeded these regulations. Some sancai horses were even over one meter tall.

The books on appreciation that Zhuang Rui had read recently were mostly about calligraphy and painting, but there were also a few about ceramics and antiques, including an introduction to Tang tri-color pottery. What he lacked most right now was experience in handling antiques, so he naturally wanted to take this opportunity to touch and examine them. He handed the precious painting in his hand to Liu Chuan and followed the group to the table.

The Tang tri-color horse on the square table is a standing horse, about 50 centimeters tall. Its two front legs are spread apart in a V-shape and it stands upright, while its two hind legs are slightly bent. The horse stretches its neck and lowers its head. The decorative craftsmanship is extremely exquisite. The horse mane, apricot leaf-shaped ornaments and green trim on the saddle are lifelike. It is also equipped with a rectangular base of moderate size. The base is not very flat and is slightly curved and raised.

Old Xie and Mr. Jiang from Sichuan were the most attentive. If they weren't forbidden from touching it, they would have loved to stick their heads into the horse's mouth. Fatty Ma did come up and wander around, but he was too big and no one made room for him. He reluctantly circled the square table once and then went back.

Zhuang Rui was a complete novice who had come to watch the spectacle. Even if he studied this thing for ten days or half a month, he still wouldn't be able to tell the difference without relying on his keen eyesight. However, judging from the spirit of this tricolor horse, it didn't seem to be fake.

After everyone had sat back down, Lang Jie announced loudly, "What do you all think? This tricolor horse, although many have been unearthed, is a top-quality piece in terms of its spirit, color, appearance, and craftsmanship. Especially with its predominantly black color, I don't need to say more; everyone knows its price. The starting price is 50,000 RMB. Those who are interested can place their bids."

Tang Sancai (Tang tri-color) works are somewhat like flowers blooming inside the wall but fragrant outside. In the international auction market, Tang Sancai horses are highly sought after. Sotheby's once

auctioned a Tang Sancai black horse, which sold for £50,000 in London, England, setting a record for the highest price ever paid for Chinese porcelain at auction at the time.

At the 79th weekend auction held by China Guardian Auction Company in 2004, a Tang Dynasty tri-colored horse that had returned from overseas was sold for 100,000 yuan. Although this tri-colored horse was yellow and brown in tone and the price was slightly lower, it was still far from the market value compared with overseas auctions. Therefore, these people should also consider its economic value as a collectible.

"Fifty-five thousand yuan."

Old Xie seemed a little hesitant, as if he wasn't very accurate in his assessment, but seeing that no one else was bidding, he still called out a price.

"Sixty thousand..."

Someone started bidding, and immediately others followed suit. The one who made the call was Mr. Jiang, who had tried to bid several times today but failed each time, which made him look bad. He seemed quite determined to get this tricolor horse.

"Eighty thousand..."

The one who made the bid was the woman in sunglasses. When the gold jewelry was being auctioned earlier, it was the man next to her who made the bid. This was the first time Zhuang Rui had heard her voice, and she didn't seem to be very old.

"One hundred thousand..."

Mr. Jiang was very determined in his bid this time, seemingly convinced that it was a genuine Tang tri-color glazed pottery piece. It should be noted that black and white tri-color glazed horses are extremely sought after internationally, and when auctioned at major auction houses, they can fetch at least a million dollars.

When the price reached 200,000, Old Xie withdrew somewhat reluctantly. It wasn't that he couldn't afford the money, but he simply couldn't see through the item and felt it was only worth risking 200,000. Although he had a bad temper, he wasn't a big gambler.

"I'll offer 300,000..."

To everyone's surprise, Zhuang Rui raised the price by 100,000, drawing everyone's attention.