

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Peru School, Vice-Regency of Peru,
17th century)

Salt cellar

no later than 1622

silver-gilt; cast, turned, engraved,
finely punched with dots and slightly
raised in relief

mark, repeated twice at the base of the
cylindrical body: royal crown inside a
pearled circle

31 x 17.5 cm.; 12 ¼ x 6 7/8 in.

Weight: 2.457 kg

Provenance

Recovered from the shipwrecked Spanish Galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*.

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The Salt Cellar is structured around four sections, with each recipient having a round cross-section, and coming together to form a pyramid structure when assembled on top of each other. The lower one, which serves as the base, is mounted on a six-sided stand with short spherical legs at each of the corners, on top of which there is a convex section. On top of this there is another of the same shape with a deep concavity for storing the salt; on top of this a second recipient is arranged, this time cylindrical and somewhat taller, which also has a concave depression to serve as a receptacle for the salt. And the fourth part, at the top, is shaped like a bell, whose pyramid-shaped handle (which screws off) has a perforated ball at the end for sprinkling pepper. The entire piece is decorated with abstract engraved scrollwork (c's) around oval and rectangular mirrors worked in relief, as are the little stud-like rhombuses. The background surfaces have been slightly raised in relief, and this technique produces a magnificent contrasting light effect by allowing the decorative elements to stand out against a toned down background. All of the sections of the Salt Cellar have cast ribs, with superimposed mirrors on those at the dome-shaped top.

This piece was devised for the seasoning of meat at part of a dinner service, being designed to contain two essential spices for use in such dishes; salt and pepper. Furthermore, Salt Cellars had the added value of a secondary function; that of being a decorative element and an iconic reference, pointing to the class of the diners being served at table. And that was the reason why impressive so-called salt cellars were executed (as opposed to pepper shakers or spice pots), in spite of the fact that they were often used to hold pepper and other condiments.

This type of Salt Cellar was what was known as a *torrecilla*, or turret design, being made up of a block of various sections which were not used (unless disassembled), as is the case with this double salt and pepper cellar, where the two lower receptacles were reserved for salt and the upper, half-globe compartment, was given over to pepper. The latter was sprinkled whereas the salt was “spooned” out using a little palette or carving knife.

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Although a large number of Salt Cellars were made at the time (some more important than others), few have survived today, which explains their interest for collectors. The most common type are those with a cylindrical body (with or without legs in one or all of the sections), or a square cross-section, but the type presented by the piece we have before us here is really extraordinary in its rarity. Here we find the two approaches being combined: the lower section (the base) is both polygonal and sinuous, lending it a voluminous layered effect we have not observed in other pieces¹, while the three remaining sections on top of it, being round-sectioned, are more reminiscent of what are known as *verdugado* Salt Cellars.

Fortunately, this Salt Cellar bears two fiscal tax marks, imprinted using an engraver's chisel on the pedestal of the cylindrical segment. These two symbols depict a five-pointed royal crown with a visible hoop, inscribed within a round frame bordered with pearls (interlinking circles), an icon which, in its different versions², shows that the piece went through fiscal controls, with a fifth part of its value, or *quinto*, being paid. The presence of this tax stamp leads us to conclude that it must have come from one of the silversmith centres in the old Vice-Regency of Peru and if, as we will be seeing shortly, it also formed part of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* galleon treasures, its Peruvian origin is beyond doubt.

We find that the version of tax stamp seen on the salt-cellar matches those of a jug with spout, a pair of plates from a dinner service, a candlestick-holder and the broken wick from another candlestick-holder³ that were recovered from the same wreck, and that of a previously unpublished *tachuela* (short cup with two handles) from an Argentinian private collection, so we know that all these works were stamped in the same royal deposit, but which one? If we look back over the pieces found from the *Atocha* shipwreck, we observe that there is a group bearing a mark from the city of Santafé de Bogotá and another simply with that of the fiscal tax office, which makes us think that these two latter works must have been stamped in Peruvian territory, given that they do not include the mark of the town or location (Bogotá, for example), and must therefore have been made in Potosí or in Lima, which were the two cities in control of silver. We would deduce that it could not have been Potosí because the mark used at that time was a "monetary stamp", so it is only logical to

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assume the mark was from the City of the Kings, which was exactly the place enforcing the greatest control over the silver being worked on after leaving Vice-Regal Peru. This does not necessarily mean the salt-cellar was definitely made in Lima, as it could easily have come from any one of the other important cities in the old Peruvian Vice-Royalty (such as Cuzco, Lima or Potosí), as records have survived of those who embarked on the “Atocha”⁴ including passengers from these three cities, such as Diego de Guzmán y Córdova, Chief Magistrate of Cuzco, Martín Salgado, Secretary of the Court of Lima (and his wife María de Ayala) and Lorenzo de Arriola, a resident of Potosí.

The fact that the Salt Cellar was rescued from the *Atocha* shipwreck puts its date of execution at prior to 6 November 1622 (including that year or previous years, but not subsequent to it), given that was the date that the galleon hit a coral reef just off the Marquesas Keys, between the Dry Tortuga and Marquesas islands off the coast of Florida, immediately sinking with 265 people on board, of whom only five survived. This tragic event took place when a hurricane wreaked havoc on eight ships out of the 28 that made up the *Tierra Firme* (Mainland) fleet on its return to Spain⁵. The *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* vessel was the flagship concluding the rear-guard of the fleet on its journey back from the *Carrera de Indias* treasure route and was discovered and salvaged in 1985 by the North American treasure-hunter Mel Fisher and his team.

Of all the salt-cellars recovered from the *Atocha* shipwreck (five in total, including ours), the one we have before us here is without doubt the most important and exceptional, both in terms of its extraordinary weight: 2.504 kg, equivalent to 10.887 marks (when the normal weight for this sort of piece was between four and five marks), and for the originality of its design and the astonishing quality of the decorative work, whose pattern, based on geometric motifs (arabesques) followed the abstract Mannerist tastes of around 1600. And if, to its undoubted artistic value, we also add its historic value and age, in addition to its excellent state of preservation considering the troubled life it has led, we can conclude that this Salt Cellar is a unique piece, deserving of a place among the very finest pieces of Hispanic silverwork, both from the Americas and the Spanish peninsula.

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Figure 1. Certificate of Authenticity

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Footnotes

¹ It is only reminiscent, without being exactly the same, of the Salt Cellar that the silversmith *Pere Rivago* submitted for his 1607 exam to gain the title of Master (Barcelona, Museo de Historia de la Ciudad, *Libres de Passanties*, Libro II, 1532-1629, fol. 381).

² Other than in one period from the beginning of the 17th century, when the “monetary stamp” was used as a fiscal mark, in South America, as far as is known, it was normally depicted using a bordered royal crown, generally using interlinking pearls, with variations in morphology and size (some variations on this model are reproduced in Esteras Martín, Cristina: *Marcas de platería hispanoamericana. Siglos XVI-XX*. Ediciones Tuero Madrid, 1992, pp. 160-164, 167-71, nos. 359-362, 366-368, 374-381 and 384).

³ The four pieces were published in *Gold and Silver of the Atocha* nos. 41 and 42, 66 and 28. Furthermore, it is possible that the type of Salt Cellar and jug are the same as a pyramid-shaped incense burner (No. 57, pp. 98 and 99), and a workshop board (presentation platter with leg, like a salver) also found in the wreck of the *Atocha* (No. 62, p. 106-107) (and currently preserved at the Museo de América: inv. no. 88-6-8).

⁴ See *Gold and Silver of the Atocha ...*, op. cit, p. 17 and Cummins, Tom: “Keros coloniales y Naufragio de “Nuestra Señora de Atocha: el problema de la cronología y el estilo heterogéneo”, *Revista del Museo Inka*, Cuzco No. 25 (1995), pp. 148. But the entire passenger list of the forty passengers travelling on the “Atocha” is included in the *Relación de lo sucedido en los Galeones y Flota de Tierra firme, 1622*, pp. 3r and 3v^o.

⁵ It set out from the port of Callao (Lima) heading for Panama, then went by land until Porto Bello and, having reached Havana, in April joined the fleet that was coming from Nueva España (Mexico), with the convoy heading for the port of Seville. The fleet tended to set out for Spain in the spring (mid-March) or in early summer, but on this occasion it was delayed, and that is precisely what caused the disaster and shipwreck, given that the hurricanes started in early July.