

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



## *Portable Altar with Painting*

Triptych case: Japan, Momoyama

Period (1572 – 1615), c. 1610

Painting: New Spain (Mexico), 17<sup>th</sup> century

Wood, lacquer, gold and silver dust,  
mother-of-pearl, coloured glass and  
gilt bronze mounts; oil on copper plate

closed 50 x 34 cm.; 19.7 x 13.3 in.

open 50 x 75 cm.; 19.7 x 29.5 in.

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## Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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This extraordinary portable altar has great rarity value within the corpus of objects executed in the *namban* style of *urushi* lacquerware for exportation, as there are very few surviving examples of this kind of item compared to others such as chests, trunks, writing desks or lecterns (fig.1), more commonly found in European, American and, of course, Asian, public and private collections.

This original constructive and decorative technique, dating to pre-historic times, was extensively developed as a Japanese artistic genre during the Middle Ages. However, it only really took off on a global scale in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, in the Momoyama period, when the Portuguese and Spanish arrived on Japanese lands, driving the consolidation of a hybrid artform that would combine technical and aesthetic elements of traditional *urushi* lacquerware with imported forms of Western decorative arts.

The role played by the Jesuit missionaries, led on their Japanese expedition by St. Francis Xavier, would appear well documented, in the international development of this sumptuous artform, which they used to propagate the dogma of the Council of Trent, both within Japan's "Christian Century" and in the evangelizing project throughout the Americas to where, as we know, numerous *namban* artworks arrived on the Manila Galleons. It also seems clear that this was the route the piece we are addressing here must have taken, as the painting on copper featured in the middle of the altar undoubtedly came from the brush of some skilled 17<sup>th</sup>-century New Spanish artist.

The portable or travel altar is made up of a large rectangular central body arranged vertically. In the middle, as mentioned earlier, surrounded by a frame decorated with scrollwork and glass inlay of varying colors, we find the beautiful Mexican painting by an unknown artist, the upper half of which depicts the Coronation of the Virgin Mary at the hands of the Holy Trinity. The top of the scene is flanked, on both left and right, by four cherubim, two on each side. Somewhat further down the composition, towards the middle, we find St. Michael the Archangel on the left and St. John the Baptist on the right. The lower section of the copper is occupied by three saints. From right to left these are: St. Catherine, along with her traditional iconographic attributes, the breaking wheel and palm of martyrdom; then St. John the

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Evangelist in the middle, portrayed as a beardless man writing his gospel and flanked by an eagle and dragon, and finally, taking up the lower left-hand corner of the composition, we see the kneeling St. Francis Xavier, dressed in Jesuit habit and bearing a crucifix in his left hand. The composition is completed with a beautiful landscape scene in a range of greens, which serves to house a major array of Marian attributes. The altar is crowned by a curved pediment where the eye is drawn to a small cross inlaid inside an oval frame, with a little angel on each side. The final compositional element of our work comprises the altarpiece's rectangular doors, decorated with mixtilinear windows on both the inside and outside, on which elegant scenes from nature were drawn, a feature we see on works from as early as the 1610s.

To understand the importance of this portable altar within the corpus of *namban* lacquerware, it is essential to examine, if only briefly, both the constructive and decorative techniques used for these sorts of works, being particularly accomplished and skilled in the piece we are examining here.

As is often the case with Japanese lacquer works, the support chosen for this portable altar was wood. On top of that, the master artist applied a number of coats of *urushi*, the Japanese name for the sap of the so-called Japanese Lacquer tree (*Rhus Vernicifera*). After each coat was applied, to facilitate its oxidation and resultant hardening, the object was stored for several days inside a humidified wooden chamber called a *furo*. In addition, between each successive layer of lacquer, it was subjected to a painstaking polishing process, which is the secret behind the surprising texture and shine of these works, having a mirror-like effect and surprising resistant and impermeable properties.

Although the construction techniques are much the same for lacquer works intended for exportation as for those produced for the domestic market, the decorative techniques were particularly sumptuous in those intended for Europe, with more ornamentally sparing works set aside for the local clientele (fig. 2). As such, the portable altar we have before us here is a display of great technical and ornamental skill, where we can observe a large portion of the known decorative repertoire of *namban* artworks.

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The first of the decorative techniques used to adorn this beautiful altar, and the most common one in *namban* art, is known as *makie* (or *maki-e*), consisting in the application of gold and silver dust, in varying proportions depending on the intended tone, obtaining a figurative and abstract decorative pattern which, on this occasion, has been executed in flat relief, or *hiramakie*. Furthermore, combined with or derived from *makie*, the master lacquer artist used techniques involving *tsukegaki*, a contrasting combination of metal dust and *harigaki*, a type of sgraffito using the tip of a needle. The second technique on show, reserved for *namban* work intended for export, and particularly lavish in the work before us here, is called *raden*, which is the application of mother-of-pearl inlay. We can observe this technique throughout the entire surface of the portable altar, expressed through a plant and animal-based visual language made up of cherry tree leaves, birds and deer for the multilinear windows, and with decorations made up of *namban* scrollwork, interlinking chains of flowers (*hana-shippó*) and chains of half-wheels known as *katawaguruma* combined with triangles for the rest of the surface of the altar.

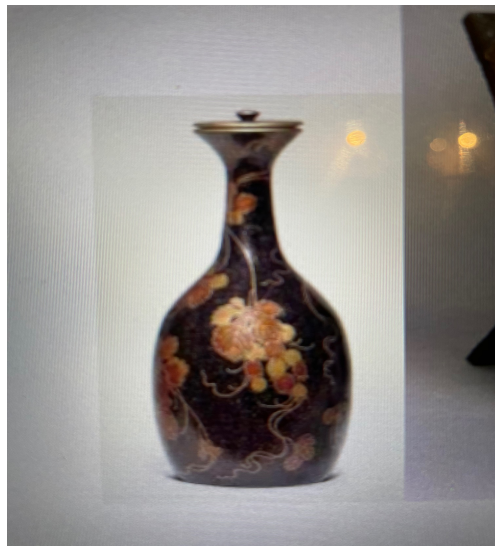
The above should enable us to understand that beyond the symbolic use assigned by the Jesuit Mission to this sort of object, its aesthetic nature, in no way comparable to anything previously seen in Europe, meant these artworks were coveted by the most important European collectors, featuring at the top of the lists of commissions from the Habsburg House of Austria and, along with them, the major noble families on the Spanish peninsula. Everything would indicate that the first owner of this extraordinary piece would have been a member of one such family.

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**Figure 1.** Altar Lectern, namban lacquer, Momoyama Period, 16<sup>th</sup> century. Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas, Madrid



**Figure 2.** Sake Bottle, namban lacquer, Momoyama Period, 16<sup>th</sup> century. Private Collection