

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist  
(Mexico or Peru, 17<sup>th</sup> century)

## *Enconchado Trunk*

wood, mother-of-pearl,  
tortoiseshell, silver lock fittings  
75 x 47 x 48 cm.; 29.5 x 18.5 x 18.9 in.

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Provenance

Private Collection.

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LONDON

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An elegant rectangular *enconchado* trunk with a flat lid, whose main body rests on four carved ball-shaped feet with moldings. The body of this prismatic chest is made of tropical woods, richly adorned with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlay marquetry, known as *enconchado* decoration. This features across the entire surface of the trunk, forming a symmetrical pattern on both sides and lid, presenting a beautiful and profuse ornamentation of floral and geometric motifs that are by turns both stylized and naturalistic.

The sides and lid of the trunk feature alternating squares and rectangles containing varying motifs executed in mother-of-pearl that stand out against the marbled tortoiseshell background with its golden reflections. The designs depict stylized and rippling petals as well as geometric elements. All of this serves to make up an extremely attractive, exuberant and dynamic surface. Towards the bottom of the front there is a shallow little drawer with lock, intended for storing papers or personal objects. The keyhole is in silver openwork with sgraffito phytomorphic motifs and a long, plain silver latch combining elements of both straight and undulating designs. The sides of the chest have handles to allow it to be transported. The lower sections of the trunk, as well as the edges of the lid, feature borders made up of semi-circular mother-of-pearl inlay motifs, lending the trunk a particularly lavish appearance. The inside of the trunk presents inlay marquetry in a range of fruit tree woods of varying tones, making up geometric motifs, and subdivisions with little compartments for storing the papers or personal objects mentioned earlier.

The trunk we are presenting here is an example of the link between Asia and colonial artistic traditions. The Philippines became a Spanish colony in 1565, with its capital in Manila. The Crown designated the Viceroyalty of New Spain to take charge of its administration and government, and Philip II ordered the provision of an armed fleet between Acapulco and Manila, known as the Manila Galleons or Nao de la China (Chinese Ships). This operated between 1565 and 1815, and bore witness to the great commercial exchange that took place between Mexico and the Pacific. The cargoes transported from the Orient included silks, furniture, porcelain, ivory, pearls and other luxury goods, as well as “Chinese Indians”, in the capacity of slaves and servants, along with passengers.<sup>1</sup>

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On their return journey, the ships carried lead, silver, wine and other merchandise aimed at meeting the needs of the Spanish population living in Asia. In Manila, a major storage facility was built to house the merchandise arriving from Persia, India, Indochina, China and Japan and being sent to Acapulco. This facility was known as Parián, and the same word was used in Mexico for the markets selling Oriental products. These also reached the River Plate, thanks to an alternative fleet based in El Callao. From there, they were transported to Upper Peru, and then headed south through Salta, La Rioja and Córdoba before reaching Buenos Aires.

These mother-of-pearl inlay objects and pieces of furniture were much sought-after by the wealthy viceregal elites, who liked the rich and luxurious oriental goods: silks, lacquerware, porcelain and ivory. These sophisticated inlay works were inspired by the opulent furnishings, chests and other objects with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlay that were first produced for the European market in Gujarat, a Portuguese colony in India from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These sumptuous objects were included in royal European collections from as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Portuguese traders introduced these objects into Japan, where they were reproduced for the Namban trade with Portugal and Spain. Due to the intense levels of trade throughout the Pacific, Filipino artisans in Manila made their own versions to be exported to the Spanish colonies in the Americas, where they were very popular, and a true testament to the widely-felt Asian influence on colonial society, which revealed in displays of luxury and opulence in their homes. In the Viceroyalty of Peru and New Spain in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, workshops emerged producing these highly-valued works of inlay furniture and other objects, including large-scale wardrobes with cresting or “peinetón” comb motifs, tables, chests, jewelry boxes and desks (fig. 1).

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**Figure 1.** *Barqueño enconchado*, Viceroyalty of Peru, 18<sup>th</sup> century, wood, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell. Private Collection

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> G. A. Bailey, *Las artes decorativas en América Latina, Revelaciones: Las Artes en América Latina, 1492- 1820*, exh. cat., Los Angeles 2006, pp. 57-69.