

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Cuzco, early 18th century)

Trunk

wooden chest with iron fittings, handles, and lock. lid of the chest lined in studded leather, with 'S' motifs and the 'IHS' monogram. paintings on stucco, representing a Eucharistic celebration on the inside and scenes of hunting, fishing, and shepherding on the outside
24 x 88 x 52 cm.; 9 1/2 x 34 5/8 x 20 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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The lid of the rare and exquisite trunk we are presenting here is made of wood, and lined with leather on the outside adorned with studs, the larger ones being gadrooned, making up “S” motifs. In the middle, inside a cartouche of a rectangular shape with rounded edges, we find a Christogram with a cross at the top (fig. 1). The abbreviation IHS is one of Christianity’s oldest symbols, taking the first three letters of Jesus’ name in Greek, *Ἰησοῦς* (Iesous), which in capitals reads *ΙΗΣΟΥΣ*. When Latin became the religion’s primary language, sigma (Σ) was replaced by S, and eta (H) became the Latin H.

The iconographic painting on the inside of the lid (fig. 2) presents a varied group of devoutly-kneeling worshippers engrossed in the conclusion of Mass, the women with their heads covered, the men having taken off their hats in a sign of respect. Their ethnic features and clothing indicate the presence of *criollos*, *mestizos* and indigenous natives, with their attire also pointing to their social standing. The opulence of the embroidery and fabrics worn by the couple in the foreground, along with the gentleman’s sword and the pearl necklace and earrings shown off by the lady, are an indication of their well-to-do status.

It is precisely the clothing of the men, made up of long dress coats, breeches down to below the knees, tights and striking rectangular collars with intricate lacework falling down over their chests, which enables us to place the painting (comparing it with other works that have been more precisely dated) within a period spanning the years just before and after the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries (fig. 3).

As a member of the Cuzco school, rather than focusing on the portrait’s realism, the perfection of the perspective or the correct application of light and shade, the artist made great efforts at transmitting an original concept of art and beauty through decorative (such as the design of the carpet and the altar frontal) and anecdotal (the altar boy turning his head to his companion, or the figure looking directly at the spectator, thereby introducing us into the scene) elements, and a vibrant palette, where earthy and green tones predominate, from opposite ends of the chromatic spectrum, details that lend the painting a very particular candor (figs. 4a & 4b).

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The priest, with the aid of three acolytes, is consecrating the bread and wine with his back to the congregation, as was the custom until the liturgical reforms carried out by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). A large opening at the back of the chapel looks out onto an exuberant woody landscape where we see exotic birds perching in the trees, bearing close parallels with those embroidered on the priest's chasuble. The holy place thereby forms a union with nature, the most sublime divine creation.

Diego Quispe Tito (1611-1681), one of Cuzco's most prominent painters, is attributed with having granted landscapes an importance unprecedented in the region, as well as the inclusion of birds much like those mentioned above. In these earthly paradises it is possible to discern a desire for the mind to escape into a primitive indigenous habitat, the nostalgic recreation of a world prior to the arrival of the conquistadors.

If, in the painting on the inside of our trunk, the relative predominance of the human figures and natural landscape strike a balance, in the four panels featured on the outside, man is dwarfed by the enormity of nature (figs. 5a, 5b, 5c & 5d).

The shepherdess and her flock of sheep (front), the fisherman (left-hand side), the hunter who, gun in hand, is chasing a stag (right-hand side), and his companion guided by two hounds (back), are portrayed in idealized, timeless, rural surroundings, where neither danger nor hardship seem to have any place, with the ground a carpet of flowers and the skies dotted with songbirds.

This sort of non-religious and eminently landscape-oriented painting, executed with the sole purpose of being a joy to behold, became increasingly widespread as the 18th century progressed, featuring on objects such as trunks, folding screens, wardrobes, doors and so on. The combination, in the same space, of both religious and secular subjects, invites comparison with the frescoes from the chapter room of the convent of Santa Catalina in Cuzco. Here, the lower section includes images of worldly pleasures, such as banquets, concerts, hunting parties, courtship, etc., while the upper area is taken up by hermits and models of penitence, the only path by which sinners could find redemption.

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On another comparative note, the Santa Catalina convent has on display a trunk with a painting inside featuring a nun and monk kneeling before the Immaculate Conception, surrounded by symbols from the Marian litany. Their worship takes place against a beautiful landscape much akin to those described above (fig. 6).

Due to their age and the lack of care with which they have been treated, there are currently very few surviving examples of such pieces of furniture.

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Figure 1. Detail of lid



Figure 2. Detail of the underside of the lid

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Figure 3. Anonymous artist from Cuzco, *Wedding of Don Martín de Loyola to Doña Beatriz Ñusta, and of Don Juan de Borja to Doña Lorenza Ynga de Loyola* (detail), late 17th century. Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús, Cuzco



Figures 4a and 4b. Details of the painting on the underside of the lid

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Figure 5a. Detail of the painting on the front



Figure 5b. Detail of the painting on the left-hand side



Figure 5c. Detail of the painting on the right-hand side

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Figure 5d. Detail of the painting on the back



Figure 6. Anonymous artist from Cuzco, *Trunk with religious scene*, 18th century. Convent of Santa Catalina, Cuzco