

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(New Spain (Oaxaca), 17th century)

Chest

c. 1600

Granadillo, Mexican lemon and lign-aloes trees,
zulaque vegetable dyes, iron metalwork

87.5 x 58 x 22 cm.; 34.4 x 22.8 x 8.6 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, London.

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Exceptional piece of furniture from the viceregal period of the second half of the 17th century, made in the Analco neighbourhood in the Villa Alta de San Ildefonso in the Oaxaca region of Mexico. It was executed on a pinewood base or supporting frame, covered by delicate woods such as Mexican lemon, granadillo and lign-aloes. It presents inlaid engravings with Greek fret, lattice work, metopes and religious iconography. The entire work is studded with fine wooden nails, decorated with the *zulaque* technique and finished with wrought iron metalworks.¹

Works executed in Oaxaca feature as some of the well-studied Mexican pieces carried out to date, with their *zulaque* inlay technique, a bituminous paste made of calcined lime and black vegetable dye extracted from dyewood, out of which thin threads were formed and then inserted under pressure in the grooves made in wood, forming different decorative motifs such as those observed in this important chest which presents a decoration of animal, plants and geometric motifs, which in turn to frame the religious ones. This technique was used on chests, flat-lidded boxes called *bufetillos*, bureaux, writing desks and etc.

In the viceregal period, the steep-sided mountain range of Oaxaca was the backdrop of Villa Alta de San Ildefonso, a town that excelled for its refined cabinet-making skills. From the loving caresses of its artisans and their rich sense of imagination these exquisite works of art were born.²

The workshops of Analco, one of Villa Alta's most prominent neighbourhoods, had access to numerous European engravings, mainly Flemish, which served as a source for depicting the images adorning the pieces of furniture.

There is no doubt that the intellectual overseers, Dominican friars and direct patrons, provided the artisans with an extensive body of erudite images, and that explains the rich iconographic repertory of this type of furniture, presenting scenes of a religious nature and highly complex narratives in its interpretation, particularly messages from Sacred History and of a humanist nature.

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This chest presents religious motifs, among which stand out on the lid a coat of arms with the Papal Tiara and crossed keys to the Kingdom of heaven inverted, flanked on both sides by lavishly-attired Archangels, dressed as warriors (fig. 1). On the inside we find a coat of arms of Mercedarian Order, held by two lions and surrounded by four cherubs' heads (fig. 2). The back, front and sides feature depictions of the twelve Holy Apostles, dressed in tunics and robes, some with belts round their waists, of which it is worth highlighting Saint Paul and Saint Peter, both with their attributes of keys and sword (fig. 3).

The other Apostles are also portrayed with their attributes, which include swords, books, and farming tools. These figures are framed by semicircular arches held up on baluster columns, all decorated with engravings of mascaroons, Greek fretwork, filigree and grotesques, executed with great skill using the *zulaque* technique made with fine woods (fig. 4).^{3 4}

It is worth emphasizing this chest's excellent state of conservation and, in particular, the unusual religious iconography of the coat of arms of the Mercedarian Order, given that those charged with maintaining religious tradition were the Dominican friars supervising the region. As we have already mentioned, this chest includes the coat of arms of the Mercedarian Order, which suggests that it was executed on commission from a high-ranking Ecclesiastical authority, possibly from the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy.

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Figure 1. Detail of the coat of arms with the Papa Tiara and crossed keys on the lid

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Figure 2. Detail of the coat of arms of the Mercedarian Order

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Figure 3. Detail of Holy Apostles icons



Figure 4. Detail of apostles' icons framed by semicircular arches and baluster columns

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Footnotes

¹ S. Bomchil & V. Carreño, 'La policromía pintada: El Maque', in *El Mueble Colonial de las Américas y su Circunstancia Histórica*, Buenos Aires 2011, pp. 715-21.

² On the furniture from Oaxaca and their characteristic technique, see G. Curiel *et al.*, *Taracea oaxaqueña: el mobiliario virreinal de la Villa Alta de San Ildefonso*, Mexico 2011.

³ On the technique Zulaque, see A. M. Paz Aguilo, *Aproximaciones al estudio del mueble novohispano en España*, Barcelona 2008, p. 24.

⁴ On the variety of wood types used, see A. Quintanar Isaías, 'Las maderas del mobiliario virreinal de Villa Alta, Oaxaca', in G. Curiel *et al.*, *Taracea oaxaqueña: El mobiliario virreinal de la Villa Alta de San Ildefonso*, exh. cat., Mexico City 2011.