

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Granada (Ecuador), 18th century)

Travelling Desk

polychrome wood, and iron mounts
28 x 45 x 36 cm.;
11 1/8 x 17 3/4 x 14 1/8 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Santa Fe (USA).

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From the dawn of time, man has created pieces of furniture with the purpose of increasing his comfort, lending his creations a series of aesthetic values and elements that reflect numerous aspects of culture, lifestyle and the way of thinking of the societies that produce them.¹ Each one of these pieces of furniture fulfils a function, and multiple types of model exist to meet the varying needs being satisfied. Some have no decoration and, while others present simple adornments, they may be austere or lacking in style. For those who could afford them, there were renowned workshops and artists that could be called on for commissions involving exquisitely decorated furnishings for civil or devotional use. Not all the citizens of the Viceroyalty were in a position to purchase sophisticated furniture, much less aspire to said objects also being intended to produce aesthetic delight, the purpose of which also lay in bestowing symbolic value and elite status. As such, one might say that beyond the practical functionality of such objects, what gave the workshops, artists and artisans behind these marvels fame and renown were their beauty, their craftsmanship and the rarity of the materials used.

A number of historians, such as Adolfo Luis Ribera, in his text *El mobiliario del Río de la Plata*, from the book titled *La Historia General del Arte en la Argentina*, published by the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, use the word *escritorio* to classify certain types of desk or cabinet which, though they may be manufactured using different techniques, and may have varying origins are, generally speaking, similar to the previously unpublished traveling desk being presented in this brief analysis.

We could categorize these pieces as *mestizo bargeños* or traveling desks due to the inclusion of iconographic elements of native origin in European compositions and structures. As such, in the Americas the term *mestizaje* may refer not only to a question of race but to all human activities producing hybrid art as a result of the cultural assimilation taking place, these works being visual manifestations and proof of a new society in the Viceroyalty of Peru.

The function of these desks, as would have been the case of the one we have before us here, was to store and, in some cases, furtively conceal, jewelry, secret documents and all sorts of valuable items.

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The subject matter being illustrated in the mestizo-style traveling desk we are presenting here is depicted through romantic scenes involving the wooing of a lady. We can assume, due to the opulent clothing worn by the figures depicted, that they belonged to the high social elite of the Viceroyalty of New Granada, which is now Ecuador. The outside of the top (fig. 1) presents decoration featuring scrollwork, floral motifs and birds. Taking into account the way in which the story is narrated, this reminds one of the covers of a book. On the outside of the drop-down front (fig. 2) we observe a scene divided by two gold-braided Solomonic columns around which climbing plants are entwined, in such a way that the composition is divided into three. In the first section we observe the encounter between an elegant *Yapanga* (mestizo girl from Quito) (fig. 3) and a gentleman who is making her a gift of a little bird (symbol of fidelity). In the central part of the composition, another suitor offers the maiden a heart as a symbol of his love for her, while the aforementioned *Yapanga* is holding a white flower in her left hand, representing femininity and fertility. Like the flower, the white handkerchief she has in her other hand represents purity and innocence. The right-hand section, meanwhile, depicts the second suitor being consoled by his parents, in anticipation of the decision the lady is going to make.

On opening the folding front lid, we reveal the second scene (fig. 4). Resting on a rock we find one of the characters from the previous scene, with a visible look of sorrow and dejection on his face, while the lady returns the heart that he had given her back to him, in a clear sign of rejection. On the right we observe the victorious suitor triumphantly wielding a club and with a look of satisfaction on his face at having won his beloved's affections.

Raising our eyes from the aforementioned scene, we find ourselves looking at a series of drawers with gilt moldings, the fronts of which depict scenes from the life of our heroic protagonist, who uses his skills and proven abilities to conquer the maiden's heart (fig. 5). He can be seen fighting a feline beast, hunting with a firearm, mastering the art of bullfighting and setting sail on a voyage with his lover bidding him adieu.

The third scene presents the now-familiar gentleman as a picador taking on a wild bull, being assisted by a hunchbacked servant who taunts the bull with a red rag while another man is perilously riding the beast (fig. 6).

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The fourth scene is depicted on the left-hand side of the desk (fig. 7). It portrays the lovers dancing, framed by an open landscape of trees with birds perched in them, like spectators admiring the pleasant scene. Musicians play the harp and violin while the hunchbacked servant reappears, this time offering drinks to the happy couple. The *Yapanga* is elegantly dressed in a florid waistcoat and long skirt, in accordance with the typical attire fashionable at that time in the Audiencia of Quito (current Republic of Ecuador). On the right of the composition we find an odd figure, that of an Indian dressed in Incan clothes and wearing an *Uncu* (cloak), who appears to be recording in a notebook what is happening at the charming festivities. That the native Indian should know how to read and write is something that catches the attention.

Acting as a conclusion, the fifth and final scene is only visible when you lift the upper folding lid (fig. 8), giving the impression that the dénouement of this agreeable story was intended for the lady owner of the desk's eyes only. The scene is framed by scrollwork and gilt flowers and depicts the celebration of the lovers' joining in matrimony, with a dance at which the bride and another woman are seen wearing elegant and elaborate dresses with brocade, one of them with touches of gold. On this occasion, the dashing beau of the story is depicted dancing while two musicians play the harp and the violin. The scene takes place once more in an open space with trees, various flowers and birds. Acting as a theatre curtain, two Sirens are holding up a mirror in which the lady owner of the desk can look at herself while trying on her jewels. As they float in mid-air, the Sirens are holding string instruments, violins looking like the native charango.² The mirror, incorporated into the scene as if it were a magic portal, is an extremely clever addition, which not only allows the owner of the desk to look at herself, but also magically immerses her in the story being narrated.

The iconographic subject matter of the wooing of a lady supports our theory that the owner of this rare and historical piece of furniture was a woman, no doubt the very one being depicted in this beautiful series of images. There are few surviving examples of painted pieces of furniture, and much less ones telling an elaborate story full of romanticism and ingenuity such as the one we have before us here.

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Figure 1. Detail of the upper lid



Figure 2. Detail of the drop-down front

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Figure 3. Vicente Albán, *Yapanga from Quito*, “Yapanga de Quito con el traje que usa esta clase de Mujeres que tartan de agradar” (Yapanga girl in dress that try to please), 1783, oil on canvas. Museo de América, Madrid



Figure 4. Detail of inside of fold-down front

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Figure 5. Detail of the drawers



Figure 6. Detail from the right-hand side

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Figure 7. Detail of the left-hand side



Figure 8. Detail of the inside of the upper lid

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Footnotes

¹ J. M. Martínez S., *El arte de guardar. Colección Joaquín Gandarillas Infante. Arte colonial americano*, Fundación Joaquín Gandarillas Infante 2016, p. 6.

² Charango is a native instrument: "The word charango comes from the quechuan culture whose language, runa simi [*sic*], denotes this instrument as *chawaqku*, which means joyful and noisy as carnival". J. Esain, P. Fernández and R. Echarte, *El charango*, prepared based on the reports of professors F. Paucar and A. Maqui, typewritten text, Mar del Plata 1987.