

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Viceroyalty of Peru, 17th century)

## *Trunk or Portable Writing Desk*

cedar and fruit tree woods.  
clasp, keyhole, handle and hinges  
made of hammered wrought iron

Closed:

55 x 84 x 40 cm.;

21 5/8 x 33 1/8 x 15 3/4 in.

Open:

86 x 84 x 71 cm.;

33 7/8 x 33 1/8 x 28 in.

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Provenance

Private Collection.

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A fantastic trunk or travel bureau; a portable piece of furniture consisting of a prismatic box and domed lid made of cedar wood. Delicately inlaid with marquetry featuring geometric and floral motifs, this exquisitely fine work was executed in dark and light woods from fruit trees such as the orange, pear and lemon, amongst others.

It presents a collapsible front section that, on opening, reveals a central drawer with a crowned two-headed eagle motif, the symbol of the Habsburg monarchy, framed by baluster columns; a simple design which reproduces an architectural entrance on a small scale. Around this drawer we find three rows of drawers of varying sizes arranged symmetrically, with their respective handles, and decorated with marquetry depicting little geometric elements in Moorish style, motifs in the shapes of crosses, stars, plants and lattice-work typical of the Mudejar style (fig. 1).

Framing this central motif with the two-headed eagle, and separating it from the little side drawers, we observe a decoration of architectural style made up of niches with flower vases, surrounded by scrollwork with decoration featuring Renaissance motifs. The rampant lions on each side are executed in, and framed by, fine marquetry featuring abstract geometric and plant motifs. Both the lions' fur, their anatomy and the vegetation in which they are contextualized were carried out with painstaking detail and naturalism.

The inside face of the collapsible front panel features the shield of the Dominican Order (fig. 2), made up of a fleur-de-lis cross on a field of argent (white) and sable (black), referring to the two colors of the habits of the Order. The shield or escutcheon is then flanked by two dogs carrying flaming torches in their mouths in allusion to the dream of the mother of Saint Dominic, the Blessed Juana de Aza, and to the evangelical and preaching mission of the Order, with Saint Dominic as "the Dog of the Lord". The presence of this shield suggests that this trunk may have been commissioned by a high-ranking Dominican priest.

The collapsible front section, which folds down on hinges, served to protect the lavish inner drawer section and its valuable contents. Furthermore, it could be used as a folding desktop for writing, thereby reflecting the trunk's increasing complexity, setting it apart from the simple

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storage box or chest, the specialization of the functions of everyday life and the growing evangelization and the process of reading/writing in Viceregal society.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth highlighting the skill with which these motifs were executed. The dogs with their flaming torches are portrayed with great naturalism, using the technique of marquetry inlay. Their bodies, made up of light and dark woods, stand out against a dark background presenting the geometric and floral motifs of Moorish tradition. Furthermore, the shield of the Order is executed in the same fashion, with marquetry in light and dark wood, with an exquisite aureole, made up of typically Renaissance scrollwork, surrounding and framing the shield.

The outside of the folding front section, the top of the domed lid and the sides of the trunk present the same kind of symmetrical decoration, consisting of rectangular frames made up of lattice-work of a Mudejar origin, with flowers in the middle surrounded by geometric and floral marquetry, in turn framed and surrounded by guarding lines containing them. The support and transportation elements include handles on the sides, hinges for the lids and a locking device, all made of hammered wrought iron. The keyhole is round and intricately fitted to a delicately-detailed clasp. All of these iron elements allowed the piece to be carried, transported and to withstand blows and knocks (fig. 3).

In America during the Vice-Regal period, items of furniture were an expression of the tastes that the Spanish empire popularized throughout its dominions, undergoing a *mestizo* miscegenation of materials and models present in successive artistic styles.

Furniture evolved in a context of luxury and ease, alongside the expansion of cities and the ceaseless evangelical efforts of the religious Orders. In colonial America, the way the cities developed with their churches proved a framework for a habitat that demanded more complex furnishing. The new resident *conquistadores* and their descendants, both white and of mixed race, as well as the member of religious Orders, tried to emulate the lifestyles of a Spanish metropolis, which called for pieces of furniture such as tables, chests, cases, trunks, beds, the famous portable travel bureaux and chiffoniers.<sup>2</sup> Classical pieces of Spanish furniture that not only offered efficient solutions in terms of utility, but also provided a symbolic value with

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regards status and power. In the 17th century, the chest and all its derivatives, including cases, chiffoniers, trunks, waste paper baskets and so on, constituted the most representative part of Spanish furnishing. It was as such that the furniture arriving in the Americas depended on the shapes and sizes that could be transported, and what would facilitate the transfer of the Hispanic lifestyle into Spain's New World dominions.<sup>3</sup>

The first religious order to arrive in Peru was the Dominican. During the initial conquest process, the Order of Preachers or Saint Dominic was represented by Friar Vicente Valverde, the priest who asked the Inca Emperor Atahualpa to renounce his beliefs, and who would later become bishop of Cuzco and protector of the Indians in the face of Spanish abuses. The religious orders that arrived in Peru had different methods of evangelizing the indigenous people: The Dominicans were known for disseminating scholastic teachings, focusing on popularizing the Gospels through colleges and higher education centers. The Dominicans also emphasized the knowledge of native languages and local customs in order to evangelize properly. Fruit of this concern was the "Lexicon or General Vocabulary of Peru, known as Quechua", by friar Domingo de Santo Tomás, and published in 1560. This work was a major contribution, as it helped improve understanding of indigenous grammatical and conceptual forms.

The Dominicans quickly set up monasteries across the entire Peruvian Vice-Regal territory, although they always maintained their educational approach, devoting themselves to teaching the Catholic faith throughout the whole region.

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**Figure 1.** Detail of drawers



**Figure 2.** Detail of inside face of the collapsible front

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**Figure 3.** Detail of the front

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> S. Bomchil & V. Carreño, *El Mueble Colonial de las Américas y su Circunstancia Histórica*, Buenos Aires 2011, pp. 409-442.

<sup>2</sup> See J. M. Martínez S., *El arte de guardar. Colección Jaime Gandarillas Infante, Arte Colonial Americano*, exh. cat., Centro de Extensión Pontificia de la Universidad Católica de Chile, 29 March - 30 July 2016.

<sup>3</sup> A. Taullard, *El mueble colonial sudamericano*, Buenos Aires 1944.