

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Vice-Regency of Peru (Peru), 18th century)

Box

c. 1770

silver in own colour, cast, beaten, chased
and engraved

37 x 28 x 24 cm.; 14 5/8 x 11 1/8 x 9 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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This chest has a rectangular cross-section and a semi-cylindrical lid. The four sides and convex lid are decorated with exquisite pastoral scenes in bucolic surroundings. It is supported on four simple plain feet with a flat and curved profiles.

On the front we observe two rural scenes separated by the keyhole mount: on the left, a peasant woman is collecting fruit in a basket under the watchful eye of her boss, a lady riding a donkey with a horsewhip in her hand. The elegant lady is depicted wearing a necklace, dress and fur stole, and her donkey is equipped with ornate tack, while a dog attempts to play with the peasant woman. To the left of this scene, we can make out a country house in the distance, sheltered by a leafy tree. On the right of the keyhole mount, a peasant man is attending to his livestock while two dogs sniff each other's snouts affectionately. The two scenes are portrayed in an exotic, idealized and bucolic setting, with an abundance of details depicting flora, architecture and varying types of clothing, differentiating the social classes.

The silver keyhole mount is rectangular and shaped like a shield, with one hole for the key and another for the latch fitting. It is framed by decorative motifs featuring plant and floral scrollwork and classic Rococo ornamental devices such as characteristic rocaille.

The latch that slots into the lock boasts an exquisite motif typical of Andean imagery: it features the profile of an indigenous native with a feather headdress. The piece is crowned by a strip decorated with rocaille.

The front of the lid also includes two scenes separated by the band securing the latch. On the left, we observe a romantic scene in which a male suitor is offering a drink to a lavishly-dressed lady holding a censer in her hand. Behind the couple we see the side of a citadel dominated by a monumental temple. Both this and the adjacent building are crowned by crescent moons, the traditional Islamic symbol. On the right, a peasant collecting firewood is wearing an exotic turban with the same symbol, while a camel observes him in a friendly manner. These scenes tell us that the master silversmith drew inspiration from some

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engraving from the Ottoman Empire or, rarer still, it could have been a commission from some wealthy figure of Turkish origin who had settled in the Peruvian Viceroyalty.

The back of the lid presents an ornate cartouche surrounded by profuse ornamentation in the Rococo style: ribbons, rocaille, borders, marine shells and a *treillage* background. In the middle, the owner's monogram has been embossed: *AMB*, and subsequently stamped. On the left of the cartouche we find a pair of hunting dogs, and on the other side elegant warriors on horseback, carrying spears and about to engage in combat.

The back of the chest features a scene that takes up its entire surface. An elegant carriage with six horses equipped with lavish tack is passing in front of a two-towered building, while a bird flying across the sky lends movement to the narrative. There are various figures, of which it is worth highlighting the servants or coachmen standing at the back of the carriage, the driver and, riding one of the horses at the front, another servant. The gentlemen being driven must have been extremely rich given the pomposity of the scene. The servants are dressed in the French fashion, with dress coats, wigs and three-cornered hats. The body of the chest is attached to the lid by two hinges decorated with scrollwork.

Both sides feature the same motifs: in the lower section there is a Rococo cartouche, while on the lid we see a lion standing on its four feet with its head turned looking back.

These scenes are framed by decorative borders with ribbons in saltire, scrolls, leaves, rocaille, scallop and mollusc shells, with a background of indented chasing, which creates a clear contrast with the motifs depicted.

The excellent technical execution and the fine chasing work combine with the creativity of the drawing of the subjects, in particular in the depiction of the different textures, such as the hair and fur of the animals, the clothing fabrics and the foliage. The work's elaborate design and the virtuosity of its execution make this an extraordinary piece of domestic silverware.

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As is well known, silver was so abundant in Peru and Bolivia that it was used to make many everyday objects. While in Europe such items were made of clay, ceramic, bronze or pewter, in the Viceroyalty of Peru these very same objects were made of silver. It was common for homes to be equipped with kettles, candlesticks, mate cups, chests, herb boxes and countless other items made in this noble metal. Criollo society, rich from the mining business, made its houses the showcases of such luxury and ostentation that there are endless accounts by astonished travellers describing these sumptuous palaces.

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Figure 1. *Box (detail), 18th century*