

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Pasto (Colombia), 17th century)

Barniz de Pasto Chest

wood, barniz de Pasto and iron mounts
31 x 13 x 20 cm.;
12 1/4 x 5 1/8 x 7 7/8 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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This European-style chest has a rectangular body with a semi-cylindrical lid. Its four sides and convex lid are covered with profuse decoration. The body of the chest is made of cedar wood, on which Pasto varnish has been applied in successive very thin, semi-transparent layers, generating a wide range of colors. We can observe a rich palette made up of yellows, reds, greens, blacks and oranges.

The ornamental elements form a sort of *horror vacui*, as the entire surface of the chest is covered with decorations in square boxes, featuring a fabulous compendium of Andean flora and fauna. Each box is separated from the one next to it by the thinnest cord-like border executed in Pasto varnish resin to imitate woven rope fabric.

Each of these boxes features a different bird or mammal. Of the former, we can identify parrots, hummingbirds, storks, long-legged herons and, of the mammals, a range of feline species such as jaguars, along with monkeys, foxes, armadillos and deer, depicted with the sort of distortion reminiscent of medieval figures and fantastical creatures. Each animal is surrounded by a rich display of local flora representing the lush Andean tropical world, and contextualizing it in said environment. Using the Pasto varnish resin, the artist's exquisite skills successfully create a composition that is exuberant and full of life, where we can make out the varying plumage of the birds and the fur of the mammals. Our author also uses delicate lines, dots and colors as a technical device to represent the characteristics of each species, displaying keen skills of observation, individualizing the different types of bird and mammal.

Each of the sides of the chest is framed by decorative borders featuring plant motifs, which serve to frame the central figures, and demonstrate the symbiosis and fusion of indigenous Andean, Oriental and European subjects.

The chest has two baluster-shaped side handles, two elongated, rectangular sheet-iron hinges on the back, and an iron keyhole and lock on the front. The inside is red lacquer, with thin lines tracing out geometric rhomboid motifs.

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In short, this example of Pasto varnish is a unique work of art, and living testimony to the extraordinary creative imagination of the artists capable of producing such a unique and beautiful piece.