

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Upper Peru (Bolivia), 18th century)

Writing Desk

c. 1780

cedar wood, painted in oil with purpurin
gilding. iron hinges, lock and key

56 x 64 x 34 cm.;

22 1/8 x 25 1/4 x 13 3/8 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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This writing desk is composed of a rectangular box standing on four feet. The drop-down front panel reveals a front that combines nine drawers and a little door, distributed over four horizontal levels. The drawers are decorated with palmette and fluted molding enclosing “c” and “s”-shaped plant motif struts, their gilding standing out against a red background. The knob on six of the drawers simulates a flower bud. The central door includes two pillars with shafts wreathed in gilt vegetation, supporting a trilobate arch festooned on the intrados and with spiral and radial ornamentation on the spandrels. The front panel boasts a knob among colorful painted bouquets, motifs that also adorn the inside of the drop-down front and external side panels.

The unusual quality of this piece lies, in the outside face of the drop-down front panel. The border that surrounds the dual scene exhibits profuse Rococo decorations, with rocaille, sea mollusk shells, flowers, struts and bows being prominent features; the voluptuousness of the curved line and delicate elegance of the pastel tones dominate these motifs.

Oblivious to the main action and inserted within a lush landscape, a hunter is resting next to his dogs, playing music; a melody listened to by a country girl standing behind him, holding a basket filled with flowers or wild fruits. The death of Louis XIV of France in 1715, and with it the personification of absolutism, encouraged noblemen to claw back their influence and individuality, which, until then, had centered on the monarch. At a time when tradition had started to wane, Rococo painting opposed academic doctrine: it abandoned the representation of topics that underlined power and patriotic grandeur, opting instead for smaller formats intended for private contemplation, showcasing the carefree mentality of the elites, whose life revolved around the pursuit of happiness, beauty, grace, enjoyment and sensual pleasure, excluding all rhetoric and drama. The classic myths of Arcadia and the noble savage, that is to say, the harmonious merging of man and nature which originated it, inspired pastoral views of rural environments in which aristocrats and the high bourgeoisie played the role of idle shepherds and farmers, youths with pearly skin, opulently dressed, their heroism based on bright conversation and amorous conquests.

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In the main scene, a family, distinguished judging by their attire, gathers around a table set outdoors, as if this was a *fête champêtre* (garden party). The young woman, however, is sobbing in the arms of her lover, while the priest scolds them, holding the Holy Book. Dumbfounded, an older lady, probably the young woman's mother, puts her hand to her head. If the *genre galante* is a courtly invitation to eroticism, this painting could be interpreted as having a moral overtone, as a warning against the grave danger of giving in to the provocations of love.

The writing desk (also known by the controversial term *bargueño*, a neologism coined in the 19th century) constitutes the most characteristic piece in Spanish furniture from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, always forming part of a set with a credenza or commode which served as support. Just like the example being analyzed here, it served three purposes: the storage of documents and small objects, support for writing and as an ornament demonstrating its owner's prestige, always linked to the wealthy classes. The 18th century witnessed the emergence of smaller writing desks than seen previously, born out of a quest for intimacy and domestic comfort, in reaction to the solemnity of the system and rigid etiquette finally associated with the *Ancien Régime*.

Having set out these notions, we will now go on to establish the links between this writing desk and others that appeared in the same historical and cultural context. The pictorial decoration of this type of furniture was often inspired by European works. Just as the writing desk studied here was inspired by the *style galant* of Fragonard, Watteau and Boucher.