

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(New Spain (Mexico), 17th - 18th century)

## *Dressing Table Box*

paintings: oil on tempera on wooden panel,  
mother-of-pearl, gold and silver

box: Jacaranda and cedar wood,  
bone and iron

100 x 40 x 30 cm.; 39.4 x 15.7 x 11.8 in.

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### Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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The structure of this dressing table box is made of cedar wood, coated with jacaranda, a tree also known by the generic name Brazilian rosewood, a species native to tropical and subtropical Latin American regions, including Mexico, with a pleasantly fragrant wood that was traditionally much sought-after by cabinet-makers. The surface is beautifully adorned with inlay marquetry, symmetrically arranged and in the same material, combined with bone. The former is set out in square and rectangular panels seeking contrasts between the direction and tone of the grain of the wood, and the second, acting as a substitute imitating the ivory of Oriental pieces, forms a geometric perimeter made up of circles, rectangles, rhomboids and triangles, engraved with stylized plant scrolls, floral motifs and vases, and eight-rayed suns with cheery humanized faces. Also in bone, the middle of the lid is dominated by a semi-circular arched window divided into four sections depicting a winged heart in flames, a triple tiara, a ferula with three crossbars and the crossed keys of Saint Peter, the latter three all being papal symbols. The ornamental delicacy also extends to the iron mounts, where the lock fitting features an abstract interlinking design. It is also worth noting the fact that the original key has survived.

However, the importance of this piece lies in what we find inside. This is a work of *enconchado*, the current terms used to refer to a type of mother-of-pearl inlay painting that became widespread in Viceregal Mexico, particularly in the capital, from the middle of the 17th century until the first decades of the 18th.

In this marvelous *enconchado*, the elaborate ornamentation envelops the central motif. On top of a jet-black background, one's eye is drawn to a profusion of flowers, leaves, foliage, buds, fruits and bunches of grapes, which seem to be being pecked at by birds, illuminated by the mother-of-pearl's luster. The gold and silver dust serves to enrich the figures' clothing, as well as creating the illusion of the vases and angels standing on stone flooring. The birds and butterflies fluttering around the flower vases, little more than golden sketches, are exquisitely graceful.

This dressing table box would appear to have been an individual commission with a specific purpose. The central scene depicts the imposition of the chasuble on Saint Ildephonsus (607-

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667), arch-bishop of Toledo and Father of the Church. His Marian devotion, defended in works such as *De virginitate perpetua Sanctae Mariae adversus tres infideles*, was rewarded on the night of 18 December 665, when the Mother of God, sat on the Saint's episcopal chair and surrounded by a choir of virgins, clothed him while exclaiming: "*You are my chaplain and faithful notary. Come and receive from my hand this chasuble which I have taken from my Son's treasury*". On this occasion, the architectural setting and the heavenly accompaniment have been simplified, and one can just make out a fragment of the church wall, with the maidens replaced by an angel. Another two, outside this central scene, are portrayed bearing elements associated with the Saint: the angel on the right is carrying his bishop's crozier and altar cruets as chaplain of the Virgin, while the one on the left is carrying the episcopal miter and, curiously, a ferula with two crossbars, a papal symbol which in this case may allude to his role as Father of the Church. In addition, in amongst the vegetation on both sides we find a chalice on the left and the Holy Scriptures on the right.

Looking closer at the work's European heritage, the magnificent vases and the framing of the religious scene with an abundance of flora and fauna inevitably make one think of Flemish paintings with vases and garlands surrounding devotional images, produced on such prolific levels in the 17th century. Even the butterflies and birds fluttering around in the *enconchado* are reminiscent of the little insects, reptiles and amphibians that appear in said paintings. Even tulips have been depicted, a species of flower quite alien to the Mexican panorama, but enthusiastically cultivated in the Netherlands from the 17th century onwards.

Although the painting is unsigned, it could be attributed to the Workshop of Miguel and Juan González, two members of a family which, as recorded by what little surviving documentation there is, specialized in *enconchados*, and whose magnificent work is linked to the art form reaching its apogee. Cleaning has revealed the work's painstaking *fattura*: base layers of color (generally corresponding to the backgrounds) executed using tempera, and carnation tones and mother-of-pearl covering layers with oil paint or an oil and tempera emulsion. On top of the mother-of-pearl we can identify remains of yellow glaze of an oil resin nature, which originally provided the characteristic golden finish. The nacreous fragments have been meticulously prepared and inlaid in such a way as to meld with the base; alongside the lines

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of gold, and gold and silver dust, they generate a special glow that emanates from within the painting, making it easy to imagine how it must have been a joy to behold, shimmering under the effect of candlelight. The artist's technical skill is also demonstrated by his ability to apply a reduced palette without becoming repetitive, combining it with the Oriental iridescence of the mother-of-pearl.

Analysis of certain decorative motifs allows us to posit that this dressing table box may have been executed for a member of the Order of Saint Augustine. The flaming winged heart bears this out, as the Saint's most recognizable attribute is a flaming heart, and his prolific written oeuvre may be seen as a philosophy of the heart, with this being deemed Man's essence, where body and soul come together. In fact, the motto of the Order is *anima una et cor unum in Deum* (one single soul and one single heart in God), and its emblem depicts a flaming heart resting on a book and pierced by the arrow of charity.

Finally, the religious subject might point to the original owner sharing his name with the Saint, in this case either Ildefonso, Alfonso or Alonso, all derived from the same Germanic root. The commissioning of a work of such extraordinary characteristics as seen here would link it to a wealthy family from the Mexican society of the day.

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Dressing Table Box (closed)



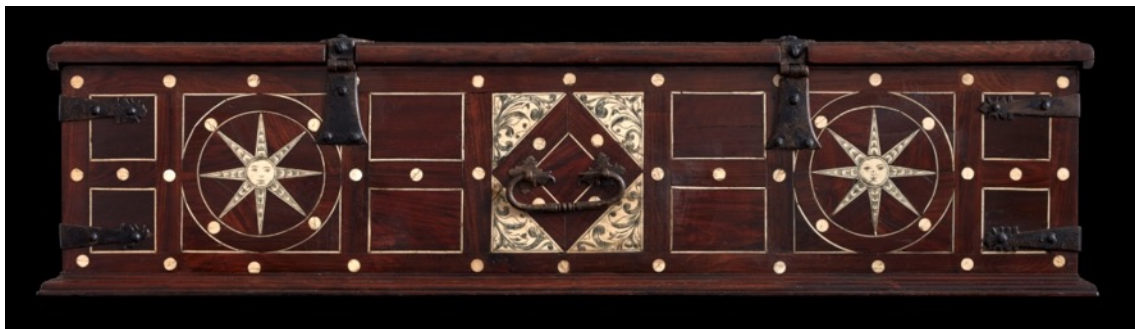
Dressing Table Box (detail of lid)

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Dressing Table Box (detail of the front)



Dressing Table Box (detail of the back)

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Dressing Table Box (detail of the left-hand side)



Dressing Table Box (detail of the *enconchado* inlay on the underside of the lid)



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Dressing Table Box (detail from the *enconchado* depicting the *Imposition of the Chasuble on Saint Ildephonsus*)