

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(New Spain (Mexico), 18th century)

Pair of armchairs

carved mahogany, red damask,
gold leaf decoration
each 180 x 70 x 49 cm.;
each 70 7/8 x 27 1/2 x 19 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, US.

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LONDON

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Latin America proved fertile soil for the development of Rococo. During the 18th century, this style, with its respective formal repertory, spread throughout the continent, but with regional characteristics depending on the influence taken on board, and the skills attained, by the varying cabinetmakers.

This exceptional pair of armchairs were delicately carved in solid mahogany. It is worth noting they borrowed numerous formal aspects from the mid-18th-century Anglo-Dutch repertory. They took as their benchmark the furniture of Thomas Chippendale, whose book *The Gentleman & Cabinet Maker's Director*, published in 1754 (fig.1), was incredibly widely distributed. Furthermore, the healthy commercial market in the Caribbean did not just involve Spanish colonies, but also contraband between English and French ones, thereby generating an interesting cultural exchange. It was thanks to this trade that mahogany of excellent quality arrived in Mexico from Jamaica and Cuba. Meanwhile, among the artisans of the New World, it was extremely common to copy new styles and fashions from illustrations in publications and prints, which also served to showcase a catalogue of furniture for customers to commission. These European models were recreated in the Americas with their own additional touches, making use of great inventive imagination.

Of the two prevailing styles in 18th-century Europe, the French and the English, it was the latter that was most enthusiastically adopted in Mexico, basically due to the influence of Chippendale's furniture, which local artisans cultivated and interpreted in their own way, lending the works a certain magnificent and astonishing disproportion in the exuberant undertaking of specific decorative elements. The Mexican pieces of furniture are generally a combination of Queen Anne style and Chippendale, with marked Spanish features.

This superbly opulent pair of chairs is made up of four-sided seats and high backs, topped with rocaille-shaped crests which, in turn, house a cabochon, with a symbol of ownership, surrounded by energetic decorative elements including scallops, shells, scrolls, garlands and volutes which, in the style of a great piece of filigree, lend the works a rare elegance. The cabriole legs present elegant and twisting curves, culminating in wavy scrollwork. They are joined by central and lateral stretchers with decorations in the middle.

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The front seat rail extends downwards like a pediment, with convex and concave curves, rocaille and foliate decoration, and a medallion in the middle, culminating in a pronounced crown at the bottom, forming a vertical axis with the main rocaille decoration at the top of the back of the chair. The central padding of the back and seat is upholstered in a sumptuous, crimson-coloured brocade. The mahogany back around the fabric presents undulating decorations with details of flowers, leaves and rocaille. Compared with the rest of the chair, the arms are simple and rectilinear, attaining a delicate balance with the rest of the decorative elements.

It is worth highlighting the enormous imaginative capabilities of the cabinetmaker, emphasizing the application of gold leaf in the exultant crests and in the edging of the mahogany back of the chair, which contributes to heightening its undulating borders, with convex and concave curves. The upper part of the back also creates a contrast between the mahogany rocaille carving and the sumptuous crest which has been gilded with gold leaf.

The extraordinary quality of the carved decoration, in addition to its sophisticated *fattura* and design, demonstrate the high level attained by Mexican cabinetmaking.

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Figure 1. Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director* published in 1754. Facsimile of a page from Chippendale's book, 'A design for a State Bed'