

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Mexico or Peru, 17th century)

Enconchado Trunk

wood, mother-of-pearl,
tortoiseshell, silver lock fittings
77 x 47 x 47 cm.; 30.3 x 18.5 x 18.5 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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The fine *enconchado* trunk we are presenting is a piece of furniture in a European format, made up of a prismatic main body, flat lid and four ball-shaped feet. The trunk is rectangular and made of tropical woods, richly ornamented with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlay marquetry, known as *enconchado* decoration, symmetrically applied across all four sides and the lid, creating both stylized and delicate ensembles of floral and geometric patterns.

The work before us here is a true testament to the link between Asia and colonial artistic traditions. Its sides and lid present central motifs made up of rectangles or squares inside of which, and contained within an octagon, a flower is depicted in the form of a rose with mother-of-pearl inlay representing a corolla that is particularly prominent thanks to an elevated central circle and stylized petals that stand out against a tortoiseshell background, generating a subtle interplay of light and dark, golden reflections and iridescence. The central motif is framed by a geometric border of interlinking latticework, featuring floral and geometric motives inside. In addition to this lavish ornamentation, the front also presents a shallow little drawer with a central lock towards the bottom, and an elaborate silver mount made up of a fluted fleuron-shaped lock and an elongated latch that fits into it, made up of floral motifs and sgraffito decorations. The elevated central circles on the two sides of the chest feature silver handles by which the trunk could be transported. The inside presents marquetry in a range of fruit tree woods of varying tones, making up geometric motifs and subdivisions, with compartments for storing papers or personal objects.

These mother-of-pearl inlay objects and pieces of furniture were highly-prized by viceregal society for their beauty. The elites liked to own the lavish items, which they treasured as if they were jewels. The Asian furniture, which served as a model for the pieces that were subsequently made in the Viceroyalty, arrived in the Americas via the busy trade route served by the Manila Galleons, linking Asia with Mexico. The Spanish

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occupied the Philippines in about 1565. From that point until 1815, the Manila Galleons, or “Nao de China” (Chinese Ships), were responsible for an enriching exchange between Asia and Mexico. The ships arriving in Acapulco provided a bridge for the exchange of goods and raw materials between the Pacific and Mexico and, indirectly, Lima, with the route from Acapulco to El Callao served by the Acapulco Galleons.

These exotic inlay objects were inspired by the opulent pieces of furniture, chests and other objects with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell marquetry, first produced for the European market in Gujarat, a Portuguese colony in India from the early 16th century until the 17th century. In the inventories of 16th-century royal European collections, these unusual objects were considered exotic jewels. Towards the end of the 16th century, Portuguese traders introduced them into Japan, where they were reproduced for the Namban trade with Portugal and Spain.¹ Due to the intense levels of trade in the Pacific, Filipino artists in Manila made their own versions to be exported to the Spanish colonies in the Americas, where they were very popular, and a true testament to the widely-felt Asian influence on colonial society, which put a high price on the silks, lacquerware, porcelain and other sumptuous goods that arrived from the Orient. In the Viceroyalty of Peru and New Spain in the 17th and 18th centuries, workshops emerged producing these opulent pieces of furniture and other *enconchado* works, including large-scale wardrobes, tables, chests, jewelry boxes and cases.² These were generally of a European design, including a wooden body covered with patterns including flowers, petals and leaves executed with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlay. Although the cabinetmakers of Peru and Mexico made sophisticated pieces of furniture and other objects with these materials inlaid in various styles, we can also find colonial pieces that point to the powerful influence of the Orient, which probably originated from the Philippines, as can be observed in details such as fluted moldings in the (fig. 1). In general, the varying models to be found also feature the presence of

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other materials, such as thin threads of silver, ivory and gold leaf under the tortoiseshell, which produces intense golden reflections.

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Figure 1. *Chest*, Viceroyalty of Peru, 18th century. LACMA, Los Angeles

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Footnotes

¹ G. A. Bailey, *Las artes decorativas en América Latina, Revelaciones: Las Artes en América Latina, 1492-1820*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Antigua Colegio de San Ildefonso in collaboration with Philadelphia Museum of Art and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles: Rishel, J. and Stratton Pruit, S, 2006), pp. 98-113, 135.

² On the influence of the Eastern world, see S. Bomchil & V. Carreño, 'Muebles Enconchados', in *El Mueble Colonial de las Américas y su Circunstancia*, Buenos Aires 2011, pp. 418- 420.