



Jewelry Chest

González Workshop
Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico),
late-seventeenth century

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Jacaranda, cedar, bone and iron (chest), oil and tempera on panel,
mother-of-pearl, gold and silver (painting)

100 x 40 x 30 cm





The structure of this jewelry chest is made of cedar wood coated with jacaranda, a tree more widely known by the generic name of rosewood, a species originating in American tropical and subtropical regions, including Mexico, of pleasantly aromatic wood, which has traditionally been highly appreciated in fine woodworking. The surface is beautifully decorated with symmetrically arranged inlays of the same material and bone: the former laid in panels that seek contrast in the tone and direction of the streaks and, the latter, imitating the ivory in Eastern productions, shaping the perimeter of geometric forms, circular, rectangular, rhomboidal and triangular plates engraved with stylized vegetable volutes, floral motifs and vases, as well as nice eight-ray, human-faced suns. Also in bone, in the middle of the lid a semicircular arch stands out, divided into four parts representing a winged heart in flames, a triple tiara, a triple-barred cross *ferula* and St Peter's keys, the last three of which are papal symbols. The ornamental delicacy lies also in the ironwork, such as the abstract interlaced design in the lock. It is worth noting that the original key has been preserved.

However, the importance of this piece lies in what is inside. It is called *enconchado* (i.e., mother-of-pearl inlay) painting, a current term that refers to a type of painting

widely used in Mexico at the time of the Viceroyalty, mostly in the capital city, from the mid-seventeenth century to the first decades of the following century. Its defining characteristic is the inlaying of mother-of-pearl, or nacre, sheets of various sizes and shapes for configuring some areas of the characters' clothing, their architectonic background and decorative items such as the flowers, birds and fruits that fill the frames. Following the preliminary drawing, they would be stuck with animal glue to a wooden, sometimes fabric-covered, support primed with a layer mainly composed of gesso. The mother-of-pearl would be veiled by fine oil or tempera strokes, albeit letting its iridescent brightness show through its surface. This luminosity would be commonly emphasized by applying powdered gold and silver, and by the subtly gilded finish produced by varnishing with a yellow resin. Greens, reds and ochers prevail in the color palette, clearly defined among marked strokes.

But the most interesting feature in *enconchado* paintings is that they are a unique expression of the exuberant New Spanish Baroque, resulting from the combination of artistic traditions from three continents: Asia, Europe and America.



Enconchado or mother-of-pearl inlay painting may undoubtedly be considered a formal, rather than a technical, appropriation of Japanese lacquers (*urushi*) expressly made for exportation to the Western market, called *Nanban*, which blossomed from the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries during the Momoyama period, after the contact initiated by Spanish and Portuguese missionaries. From these they drew solutions such as the black backgrounds, the inlaying of mother-of-pearl fragments (*raden*), the use of powdered gold and silver (*maki-e*), the motley decoration of vegetation and birds or the emphasis of the line. Even a linguistic appropriation took place, since from the word *maki-e* the term “*maque*” was derived, to refer to Mexican lacquers, which are similar to Japanese ones only in their polished, bright finish.

The aspects referred to above are perfectly identifiable in the *enconchado* under study, predominantly in the ornamentation surrounding the central motif. Over the jet black-colored base there stands out a profusion of flowers, leaves, branches, sprouts, fruits and bunches of grapes that some birds seem to be pecking at, lighted up by the gloss of the mother-of-pearl. The gold and silver powder enriches the characters’ clothing, and helps to create the illusion that the

vases and angels lie on rocky soil. The birds and butterflies fluttering around the flower vases, merely golden sketches, show exquisite grace.

Japanese lacquers arrived in Mexico with the Manila Galleons, or China Ship, which between 1565 and 1815 caused the landing in Acapulco of treasures never thought of before. Mexico became, then, the meeting point between the East and the West, the hub of the first trade route on a global scale. This cosmopolitan atmosphere was perfectly depicted by Bernardo de Balbuena in his work *Grandeza mexicana* (Mexico City: Melchior de Ocharte, 1604):

“¡Oh, ciudad rica, pueblo sin segundo, / más lleno de
tesoros y bellezas / que de peces y arena el mar profundo!
¿Quién podrá dar guarismo a tus riquezas, / número a tus
famosos mercaderes, / de más verdad y fe que sutilezas?
¿Quién de tus ricas flotas los haberes, / de que entran llenas
y se van cargadas, / dirá, si tú la suma dellas eres?
En ti están sus grandezas abreviadas; / tú las abasteces de
oro y plata fina / y ellas a ti de cosas más preciadas



Fig. 1 Namban Portable Oratory, Japan and México (1580-1630). Central painting: *The coronation of de Virgin with Saints*, oil on copper. In the interior and exterior decoration of this Oratory we can see elements from the Nipponese flora and fauna commonly used in Namban ornamental grammar, such as citrus leaves, wild cherries, maple trees, camellias, herons, birds and gazelles, made of mother-of-pearl and gold on black lacquer. 49 x 70 x 5,5 cm. Jaime Eguiguren Collection.

En ti se junta España con la China / Italia con Japón, y finalmente / un mundo entero en trato y disciplina
En ti de los tesoros de Poniente / se goza lo mayor; en ti la nata / de cuanto en su luz cría el Oriente.”



Besides the Manila Galleon imports, the settlement of Japanese exiles in New Spain because of the persecution to which Catholic converts had been subjected and the Japanese embassies that visited the territory in 1610 and 1614 also played a key role in the appropriation, and later adaptation, involved in the emergence of *enconchado* paintings, just as Japan was closing itself to the West. A similar phenomenon is that of blue and white enameled ceramics made in Puebla imitating Chinese porcelain.

As regards subject matters, *enconchado* painters took as models the engravings brought from the Old World that served to reinforce the religious education of novices or to kindle political propaganda. Many *enconchados* were made in large series of copies, but the one we are examining seems rather to have been individually commissioned for a specific purpose. The scene shows the investiture of St Ildephonsus (607-667), archbishop of Toledo and Father of the Church. His Marian devotion, advocated in works such as *On the Perpetual Virginity of Holy Mary Against Three Infidels*, was rewarded in the night of December 18, year 665, when the Mother of God, sitting in the bishop's chair and surrounded by a choir of virgins, invested him, while claiming: “*You are my chaplain and faithful notary. Come and receive from me this chasuble I have picked from my Son's treasury*”. On this occasion, the architectonic setting and the heavenly escort have been simplified, and instead we can see a portion of the church wall and an angel substituting for the maidens. Another two, outside the frame, hold items connected with the saint: the angel on the right, the bishop's crosier and his cruets and tray as the Virgin's chaplain, and the one on the left the bishop's miter and, oddly enough, a triple-barred cross *ferula*, a papal symbol that might refer here to his role as a Father of the Church. In addition, amid the side vegetation we find, on the left, a chalice and, on the right, the Holy Scriptures.

Elaborating upon the European legacy, the magnificent vases and the overwhelming frame of flora and fauna of the religious subject matter inevitably recall the Flemish paintings of flower vases and wreaths around devotional images that were prolifically produced during the seventeenth century.



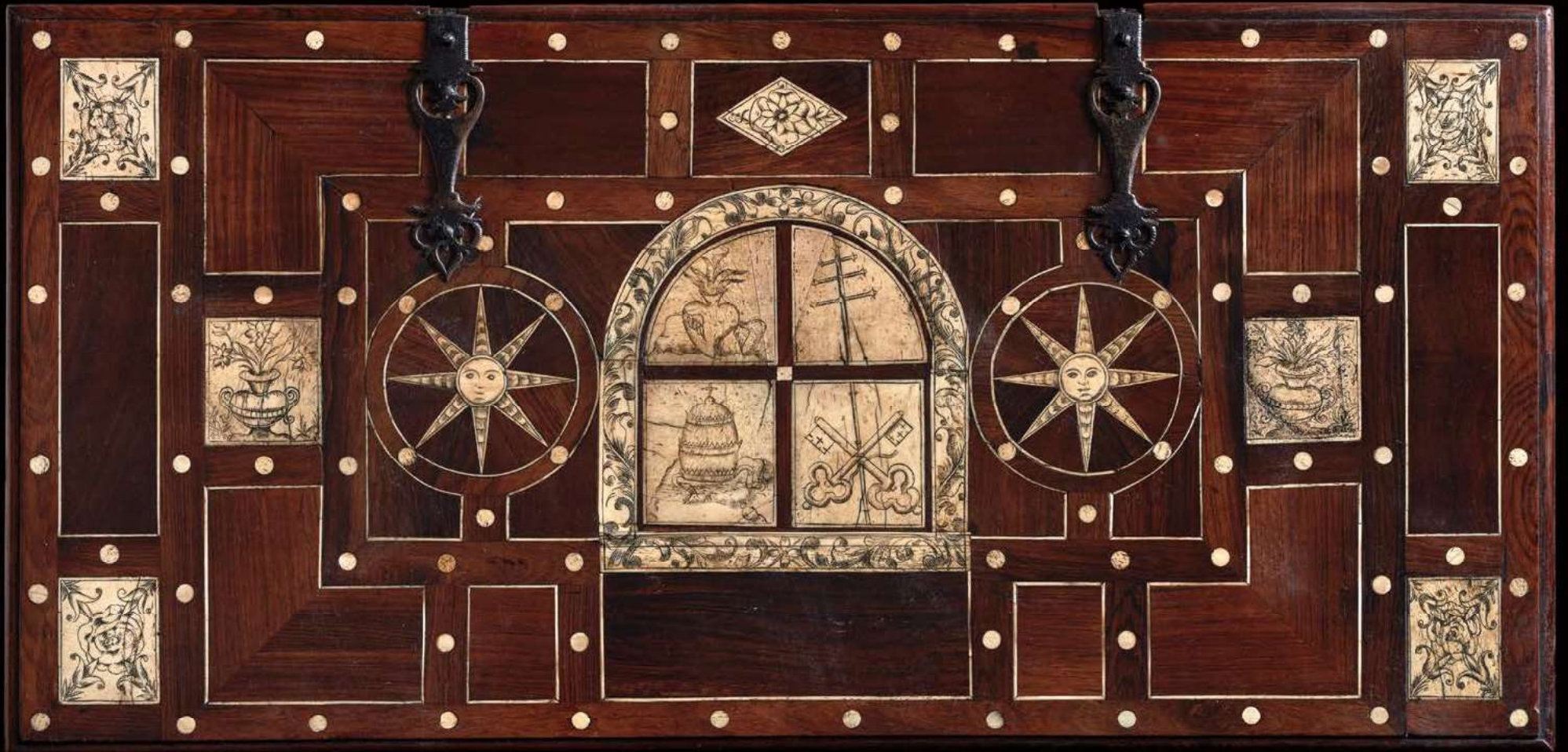






Fig. 2 Detail of the *enconchado* showing the investiture of St Ildephonsus.



Fig. 3 Hieronymus Wierix, *St Ildephonsus of Toledo*, 1616, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 4 Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Flower Vase*, first quarter of the seventeenth century, Madrid, Prado National Museum.



Fig. 5 Erasmus Quellinus and Daniel Seghers, *Garland of Flowers with the Virgin, the Christ Child and St John*, first half of the seventeenth century, Madrid, Prado National Museum.

Also, the butterflies and birds fluttering in the *enconchado* reproduce the small insects, reptiles and amphibians which are common in those European productions. Even the tulips have been copied, a species alien to the Mexican environment, which had been enthusiastically grown since the early seventeenth century in the Netherlands, causing a true fever that moved people to run into debt and sell their possessions. The speculative rush gave rise to an economic bubble and a financial crisis in 1636-1637 that led many people into ruin, and proved to be one of the earliest developments of this kind we are aware of.

Precisely the orchard making up the framework helps to build parallelisms with other *enconchados*, such as the following:

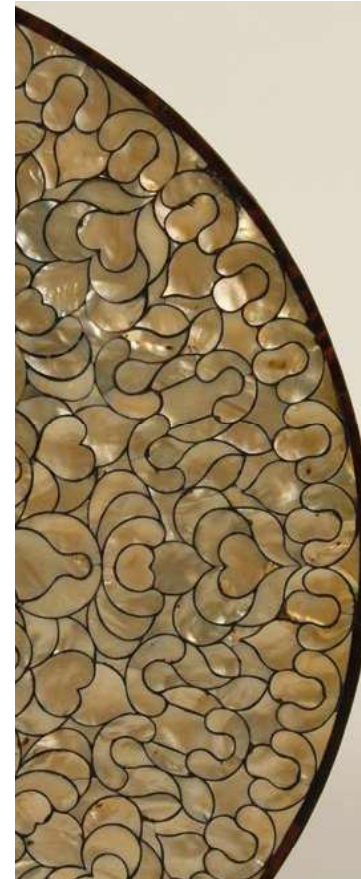


Fig. 7 Circular table, wood, tortoise shell with mother-of-pearl inlays, 49 x 70 x 5,5 cm. Anonymus, Hispanic Colonial work of oriental influence, seventeenth century. Jaime Eguiguren Collection.

Finally, concerning the hybridization process, some authors defend the pre-Hispanic substratum in the use of mother-of-pearl, mentioned in chronicles and letters by the conquistadors, for example in mosaics composed of tesserae made of this material and stones, stuck with copal resin mixed with other vegetable substances. *Criollos*, the major *enconchado* consumers, may have recovered the use of mother-of-pearl and favored its hybridization as a means for defining their idiosyncrasy and establishing themselves as a social class in the map of a vast empire. In fact, according to the documentation, most *enconchados* owned by Spanish kings and noblemen were gifts directly sent from New Spain rather than commissions.

Ultimately, paraphrasing Octavio Paz, *enconchados* in particular and New Spanish art in general, “like the very society which created it, did not want to be new; it wanted to be another [...] The art of New Spain is not an art of invention but of free use of the fundamental elements of imported styles. It is an art that combines and mixes motifs and manners” (foreword to Jacques Lafaye’s *Quetzalcóatl y Guadalupe. La formación de la conciencia nacional de México*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977).

Although the paintings are not signed, it may be associated with the González workshop that, according to the limited documentation available, specialized in *enconchados*, and with whose superb work both the emergence and the height of this type of painting is connected. Cleaning has evidenced careful workmanship: color bases (usually for backgrounds) in tempera, and flesh-colored tints and covers of mother-of-pearl with oil or with an oil-tempera emulsion. On the mother-of-pearl there are quite faded remains of yellow glazes of an oleoresinous nature, which originally contributed the typical gilded finish. The mother-of-pearl tesserae have been meticulously prepared and inlaid so that they are merged with the base; together with the gold lines and the powdered gold and silver they make the painting pour out a special brightness, and it is easy to imagine how it should have excited the viewers’ eyes when it flickered by the light of candles. The artist’s technical mastery equally shows in the skill at combining the limited color palette without repetition, and at playing with it and the iridescent orient of the mother-of-pearl.

Attribution hypothesis

The analysis of certain decorative motifs allows us to surmise that this jewelry chest was made for a member of the Order of Saint Augustine. The winged heart on fire might be a sign of this, as the most recognizable attribute of the saint is precisely a flaming heart, because from his prolific written work a whole philosophy of the heart can be derived, where the heart is deemed as the essential core of man, joining body and soul. In fact, the order's motto is *anima una et cor unum in Deum* ("one heart and one soul in God") and its emblem represents a heart in flames lying on a book, pierced by the arrow of charity.

Emblem studies also point toward this pious interpretation. For Cesare Ripa, author of the famous book *Iconologia* (Rome: 1593), the allegory of Charity is a woman holding in her right hand a burning heart while with her left hand she embraces a child, meaning the emotion produced in it by the love of God and the compassion for His creatures. Juan de Horozco y Covarrubias, in turn, explains in his *Emblemas morales* (Segovia: Juan de la Cuesta, 1589) that a winged heart above ecclesiastical symbols should be understood as the Church's obligation to watch over the faithful.

The presence of the heart along with the three papal symbols might refer to a religious order of canon law, that is, directly under the Pope, which must however work in communion with the bishops of the dioceses where it operates. The Order of Saint Augustine meets this description: it is a mendicant order established by Innocent IV in 1244 for the purpose of unifying a number of eremite communities that emerged under St Augustine's monastic experience and his fourth-century Rule. Later, by the mid-thirteenth century, Alexander IV freed it from the bishops' jurisdiction. Popes have shown a great deal of deference to the Order of Saint Augustine throughout history. In 1490, Innocent VIII granted all its churches similar indulgences to those that could be gained from praying Stations in Rome. In the late thirteenth century it was ruled that the sacristan of the Apostolic Palace should always be an Augustinian friar, whose duties also included being the guardian of the tabernacle, the Pope's confessor and his librarian, a mission ensured in perpetuity by Alexander VI through a bull promulgated in 1497.



Fig. 8 Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Saint Augustine in Ecstasy*, ca. 1664-1667, private collection.

Inscription in the top left-hand corner: "INQUIETUM EST COR MEUM DONEC PERVENIAT AD TE" (my heart will be restless until it rests in you).

Finally, the religious subject matter portrayed could hint that the original owner's name might have been Ildefonso, Alfonso or Alonso, derived from the same Germanic root. The commission to make such extraordinary piece as this one places it in connection with a wealthy family of the Mexican society at the time.

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