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ART & ANTIQUES

**Frame with Painting and
Mirror**

Peruvian Viceroyalty, Potosí
Bolivia, ca. 1780



Frame with Painting and Mirror

Peruvian Viceroyalty, Potosí (Bolivia), ca. 1780

Chased and repoussé silver featuring openwork; with wooden structure

Height 133.5 cm, width 122.8 cm

Provenance: Private collection

Cristina Esteras Martín

This is a vertical rectangular-shaped frame, presenting a markedly convex profile. The middle of each of the four sides is decorated with an oval cartouche with dissymmetric repoussé outline. Further similar motifs are to be found at the corners, this time superimposed. In addition, there is a sort of ribbon moulding, arranged in loops that compartmentalise the surface of the frame into sections. Above the frame we find three rocaile motifs surrounding a semi-circular arch housing a piece of glass with a mirror finish depicting the Coronation of the Virgin Mary³⁸³ by the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost). Along the upper half of the two lateral sides of the frame we also find two wings of wavy rocaile, again featuring repoussé silver with openwork. Both the painting and the frame are mounted on a wooden support structure in order to lend consistency to the pieces.

The great richness of the silver mines of the Americas, and particularly those located in the Peruvian Viceroyalty (the most important of which were in the Cerro de Potosí) (Fig. 1), meant that silverwork could be used to decorate both churches and homes, with the metal used to fashion all sorts of pieces intended to meet the needs of both religious and non-religious worlds. The inclusion, in this frame, of a religious painting as well as a mirror might lead to confusion regarding its true purpose, as using a mirror to occupy the largest section invites one to posit that this was its primary function, whereas it is the painting at the top that gives us a more accurate indication; namely that the work was originally meant to include two paintings, the existing “Coronation of the Virgin” along with another, larger, painting that was at some point replaced by the mirror. Said painting would probably have featured some other subject from the Marian iconography, perhaps the “Immaculate Conception” or the “Dormition of the Mother of God”,³⁸⁴ so we can conclude that the frame was intended to house two devotional paintings.

With regard to the surviving scene, the “Coronation”, one extremely interesting point is the *verre églomisé*³⁸⁵ technique used in its execution, which

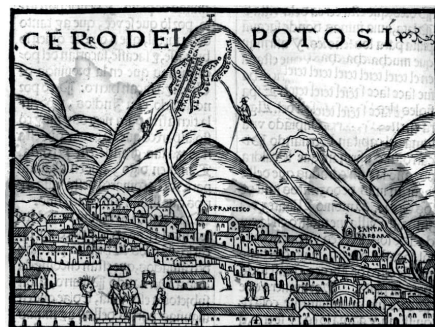


Fig. 1 Pedro Cieza de León, *Cerro del Potosí*, 1553; engraving



Fig. 2 El Greco, *The coronation of the Virgin*, ca. 1592; oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid

as far as we know was unusual among Peruvian painters from the Viceroyalty. What we have here is a painting that is markedly popular in certain aspects (such as the clouds on which the figures rest), but which also shows a clear preoccupation for said figures, following a triangular composition reminiscent, for example, of that employed by El Greco in the Prado's painting of “The Coronation of the Virgin” (Fig. 2). Our painting would appear to be the work of an artist from Potosí, perhaps one of the later followers of Gaspar Miguel de Berrio.³⁸⁶

With regards to the silverwork, this is of a decidedly Rococo style, and characterised by the peculiar helicoidal or spiralling movement of the mollusc shells we have identified in other known pieces, such as a Maté cup from the Museo Isaac Fernández Blanco in Buenos Aires, or in the sacarium from the Nelly Arrieta and Carlos Blaquier collection in the same city.³⁸⁷ These works, and others we have unveiled on various occasions, present a *fattura* and visual decoration that serve as a distinctive seal, leading us to conclude that they came out of Potosí, the most important silver-mining centre in the Viceroyalty, whose silver workshops were up to the job of meeting the huge Argentine demands of an extremely opulent population.³⁸⁸

Although this may well need to be modified slightly in the future, we would date the piece to some point around the 1780s, as it was at this time that said style of pieces really became popular among the master silversmiths of Potosí, and when rocaile adopted the so-called “butterfly” model. This rocaile design³⁸⁹ is specific to Potosí, and we can see it both towards the bottom of the frame from the Museo Isaac Fernández Blanco (Fig. 3) as well as on the top of a coca or herb box (*coquera* or *hierbera*) from a private collection in Argentina.³⁹⁰

The sheer structural scale of the frame, combined with its meticulous craftsmanship and the motifs in the worked silver, not to mention the original *églomisé* painting, bear testimony to the singular nature of this highly attractive piece, which once again goes to show that the Rococo silverwork of Potosí is, of all those found in Peru, the most creative, and graced with the greatest character and personality.



Fig. 3 Silver frame, Potosí (Peruvian Viceroyalty), ca. 1780. Museo Isaac Fernández Blanco, Buenos Aires

