



### Vessel

Pasto (Colombia), 17th century  
Carved wood with barniz de pasto  
19×10×9.5 cm  
Provenance: Private collection

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This beautiful bowl is a lobed vessel made of carved cedarwood, profusely decorated using the exquisite Pasto Varnish (*Barniz de Pasto*) technique. The outer surface is decorated in accordance with the *horror vacui* style so popular in European Baroque works. It has been executed with a rich and varied palette, where the layers of *mapa mapa* resin alternate with gold and silver leaf, lending the surface a beautiful iridescent colouring that emanates a golden glow. The decoration is arranged into three horizontal bands or registers, with the middle one being the most sumptuously ornate. It presents a dense floral design throughout. The central register features a pattern with a range of alternating motifs. On each of the wide and narrow sides we can observe a bird with open wings and a sharp beak, its talons resting on a branch with a flower looking like a carnation at the end of it, all framed by phytomorphic scrollwork in varying colours and with several layers of *mapa mapa* resin, alternating with glorious gold leaf. The bird motif alternates with depictions of squirrels standing on their hind legs, appearing to be revelling in the fragrance of a great fleur-de-lis towering



the intense sense of movement typical of the *horror vacui* style.

The sumptuous and exquisite decoration of the beautiful bowl we are presenting here would indicate that it was part of the household furnishings of some member of the colonial elite, and would have been used to hold liquids, either fresh water or some other beverage.

### THE ART OF BARNIZ DE PASTO

The decorative arts were a fabulous field for experimentation in the colonial Americas. The fantastical artistic imagination of the pre-Columbian peoples was combined with European tradition and Oriental influences. The indigenous artists and artisans from the Hispanic world had a creative genius, and produced beautiful objects in gold, silver and ceramics, as well as extremely high-standard textiles from camelid fibres. From the 16th to the 18th centuries, during the colonial period, indigenous artists continued to draw on their roots, traditions and artistic techniques, but now equipped with new cultural baggage picked up from European arts. As Mitchell A. Coddling explains in his vision of decorative arts in Latin America,<sup>36</sup> out of all this cultural heritage hybrid artforms emerged; the indigenous techniques adapted to European ones. European designs were introduced into indigenous arts and Asian forms and motifs were reinterpreted by both European and native artists. This gave rise to extraordinary decorative artworks.

Drawing inspiration from the Asian porcelain and lacquerware arriving from Spain and from the Orient on the Manila galleons, Colombian artists from the Pasto region perfected a pre-Hispanic lacquer technique known as *Barniz de Pasto* (Pasto varnish), adding both silver and gold leaf to the thin coats of resin obtained from a tree known in the indigenous language as *mapa mapa*. These layers of resin, silver and gold were applied to different types of cedar wood furniture based on European models, for both religious and civil purposes: boxes, chests, little desks, 'jicara' drinking cups, trays and bowls were all in high demand among the wealthy classes and the Spanish nobility. As mentioned earlier, Asian lacquerware, silks, porcelain and new materials such as mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell served as a source of inspiration for the creation of new motifs.

Hispano-American decorative arts followed the models of the main European stylistic movements from the Renaissance to Neoclassicism, but each region left its own personal stamp, both in the techniques and in the motifs and materials used. During the colonial period, two independent regional *mapa mapa* resin traditions developed: one in the area of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, related to the lacquer used on *lincan keros* (drinking vessels), and the other, which developed in Pasto, characterized by using motifs from Andean flora and fauna combined with European subjects and others of Asian influence. The *Barniz de Pasto* technique reached its height in Pasto,

Colombia, and in Quito in the 17th and 18th centuries, as both cities were closely linked, with Pasto belonging to the diocese and regional government (Audientia) of Quito.

The aforementioned coats of lacquer were obtained from a resin covering the flowers and leaves of a tree called *mapa mapa* in the indigenous language, and which in 1977 was identified by the botanist Eduardo Mora Osejo.<sup>37</sup> The scientific name for the tree is *Elaeagia Pastensis* Mora. It is native to the tropical forests of the mountains of the south-east of Colombia, near the river Mocoa in the region of Putumayo. It grows to a height of about two or three meters, and is characterized by the abundant resin covering the buds at the ends of the branches, including flowers and fruit. It is thought that the pre-Hispanic peoples used the resin extracted from this tree, because beads coated with it have been found in the funerary monuments of Pasto natives.

The process for obtaining the purified resin involves several stages. The locals, inhabitants of Sibundoy and Mocoa, two towns in Colombia, would collect the fruit and flowers covered in the resin and form it into balls or blocks which they would then hand over to artisans or tradesmen. It was they who established a commercial route delivering the raw material to the artisans in Pasto. Firstly, the entire block is boiled to remove any impurities, leaves or pieces of bark. Once the resin has been purified, it is chewed, kneaded and stretched to obtain thin, transparent sheets. This process can be repeated several times if necessary. The next step is to color the thin sheets with mineral and organic dyes, kneading the resin once more until a very fine layer is obtained. Once this has been achieved, the different motifs are cut and applied to the reheated pieces. The resulting lacquer produces a shiny, resistant and impermeable surface.

There were numerous members of religious orders, travellers, chroniclers, botanists and naturalists who visited Pasto, leaving detailed accounts of the varying stages in this technique. Of these, Fríar Pedro Simón in 1623, Fríar Juan de Santa Gertrudis in 1757 and the Jesuit Father Juan de Velasco in 1789 all mentioned and described the manufacture and use of *Barniz de Pasto*, in addition to the naturalists Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa who visited the region in around 1740, mentioning the benefits and beauty of the technique.

Alexander von Humboldt visited Pasto in 1801, and he recorded the manufacture and trade of Pasto varnish, identifying the use of a number of colouring agents: indigo diluted in water for blue, pure indigo for black, amarant for red, blue diluted with ground local saffron root for green, lead oxide for white and local saffron (*Escobedia Scabifolia*) on silver leaf for gold.

The figures being depicted were cut into the middle of the sheet of resin at its thinnest point, and these were then alternated in the varying compositions, with layers sometimes superimposed to create relief designs.

In 17th-century pieces, very fine threads of black or white varnish were used to outline figures or to add details, also using thin crisscrossing lines to obtain effects of shadow and volume. The motifs used in the 17th century: flowers, leaves, hunting scenes, both real animals and mythological creatures, drew inspiration from 16th-century European sources, such as engravings, drawings and illuminated manuscripts, combined with Andean artistic imagery.

The second half of the 17th century and the 18th century saw an eclectic explosion of motifs taken from European, indigenous and Asian sources. It is as such that we observe monkeys, Andean animals, peonies and carnations from Chinese ceramics and textiles, geometrical motifs from *zambano* lacquerware, tropical flora and fauna, the two-headed eagle of the House of Habsburg, heraldic devices and mythological and religious subjects.