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Pasto (Colombia)  
17th century

**Barniz de Pasto Box**

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Pasto (Colombia)

17th century

**Barniz de Pasto Box**

Wood, polychrome lacquer and silver

17 x 24 x 11,7 cm

Provenance: Private collection, Canada

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*José M. Eguiguren M.*

## **The Barniz de Pasto: History and Background**

Barniz de Pasto is a decorative and ceremonial craft technique whose roots date back to the pre-Hispanic period. The Pastos and Quillasingas peoples used a translucent green resin known as mopa-mopa, extracted from the buds of the leaves of the *mopa-mopa* tree (*Elaegia pastoensis*), native to the tropical forests of the mountains of southwestern Colombia. After preparing this pre-Hispanic resin, it was used to coat and embellish a variety of objects, reaching its greatest splendor during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the city that gave it its name, San Juan de Pasto, in southwestern Colombia. This practice forms part of one of the three Indigenous traditions that stood out in the arts of the American colonial period, alongside textile production in southern Peru and pre-Hispanic featherwork in Mexico.

It is one of the pre-Hispanic artisanal traditions that endured and achieved a prominent place in the arts of the Hispanic-American viceregal period, like the textiles of ancient Peru and, in Mexico, featherwork and the lacquers of Michoacán.<sup>1</sup>

Barniz de Pasto represents a fundamental component of the culture and identity of the Pasto region and of Colombia as a whole. Its significance was recognized by UNESCO in 2020, when it was declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. During the colonial period, this craft became one of the most important products of the region and was exported to various parts of the Americas and Europe. The technique was notably refined in the eighteenth century thanks to the introduction of new materials and methods, such as the use of pigments and the application of thinner layers. Workshops and guilds of artisans specializing in the craft were subsequently established.

*“This production generated a highly significant dynamic among the various manufactures, since most local production was consumed in these lands; specialized sectors emerged for the manufacture of different products, as well as for their local commercialization and export. The trades related to the Barniz de Pasto technique were primarily carpentry and cabinetmaking; the barniceros or resin gatherers in Putumayo and Caquetá; merchants of gold and silver leaf; and those who supplied painters’ workshops with different colors and pigments. In addition, there were blacksmiths, locksmiths, and silversmiths dedicated to producing the metal fittings for desks and fine boxes. It thus constituted an entire productive, economic, and commercial chain that articulated trades, materials, products, and clients.”<sup>2</sup>*

The Barniz de Pasto technique consists of applying layers of mopa-mopa resin to wooden surfaces, generally cedar or walnut. The resin is extracted from the bark of the mopa-mopa tree, which grows in Colombia’s Andean region. This process requires great care and skill, since the resin must be applied in very thin layers and then polished to achieve a brilliant finish. At the end of the seventeenth century, the use of metal foils interleaved between the resin layers was introduced, significantly enriching the aesthetic of the works.

Over time, the technique has evolved in terms of materials, processes, and designs. Among the most significant changes are the introduction of new pigments and materials, the application of finer and more uniform layers, the creation of more complex and detailed designs, and the adaptation of the technique to new supports, such as wood and metal.

Barniz de Pasto is characterized by its colorful designs, which reflect the rich culture and traditions

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1 Álvarez-White, María Cecilia. 2023. p. XXIII.

2 Gómez Jurado Garzón, A. J. Pág. 114.

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of the region. The most common motifs include floral patterns rendered in a stylized and vibrant manner, with intricate petals and leaves. Animals—such as birds, lions, and eagles—are another frequent motif, represented either realistically or stylized, with bright, contrasting colors. Geometric designs, such as spirals and fretwork, are used to create patterns and textures. Some Barniz de Pasto pieces depict scenes of everyday life, such as hunting or dancing.

The cultural history of Barniz de Pasto is notable for its capacity to fuse cultures. This fusion stems from the intercultural relationships and Hispanic-American *mestizaje* that arose from local traditions, European influence, and exchanges with the East facilitated by the Manila Galleon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These new maritime routes, controlled by Spaniards and Portuguese, expanded trade and encouraged the transfer of foreign influences into American decorative arts.

## The New World and Eastern Influences

The new maritime routes discovered and exploited by Spaniards and Portuguese fostered the expansion of trade, the exchange of numerous products, and, as a direct consequence, the foreign influences received by the decorative arts—such as Japanese *Namba* art, Indo-Portuguese prints, and Chinese lacquers, among others. According to María Cecilia Álvarez-White, in Colombia *Barniz de Pasto* expresses, with its own distinctive identity, certain elements of Eastern culture. Among these are the saturation of ornamentation, the brilliance of surfaces, and the introduction of natural elements.<sup>3</sup>

The incorporation of Eastern elements in *Barniz de Pasto* is manifested in ornamental density, surface sheen, and the inclusion of vegetal and animal motifs. As Álvarez-White notes, this technique embodies characteristics of Eastern culture, such as the use of natural elements within its designs.

The influence of the East on *Barniz de Pasto* is a fascinating subject that reflects the rich history of cultural and commercial exchange between Latin America and Asia. During the viceregal period, the region of Pasto was an important commercial and cultural center within the Viceroyalty of New Granada (present-day Colombia). The city of Pasto lay along a key route connecting Latin America with Asia through the Manila Galleon, which linked Acapulco (Mexico) with Manila (the Philippines). Through this route, artistic and cultural influences from China, Japan, and other Asian countries reached Pasto, and these are reflected in *Barniz de Pasto*.

## Conclusion

In Colombia, *Barniz de Pasto* expressed, with a distinctive identity, several elements of Eastern culture, broadly including the saturation of ornamentation, the dense and intricate character of compositions, the brilliance of decorated surfaces, the geometric organization of pictorial space, the depiction of various imaginary and mythical animals, and the inclusion of vegetal elements—such as a tree trunk resting upon schematic mounds, from whose branches hang large idealized flowers—alongside others of Eastern origin, such as peonies and carnations.<sup>4</sup>

The social and cultural dynamics of the town of Pasto allowed Eastern and Spanish influences to merge with Indigenous knowledge, initiating a gradual process of hybridization in objects decorated with *Barniz de Pasto*. This influence from the Far East stands as a clear example of the rich history of cultural and commercial exchange between Latin America and Asia. The integration of intricate and colorful Asian elements—*chinoiserie*—into the design, technique, and materials of *Barniz de Pasto* gave rise to a unique and characteristic regional style, underscoring the importance of this tradition in Colombian history and culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Álvarez-White, María Cecilia, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

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## Description

The box has a rectangular structure with a vaulted lid. The surface of all its sides is covered with a vermilion-red lacquer ground displaying iridescent reflections. The interior of the box is painted with a matte terracotta-colored lacquer. The palette of lacquers includes vermilion red, green, blue, brown, black, silver, and gold.

Each face is framed by a wide band of dark-toned lacquer (on the domed lid, another band divides it into two sections), enhanced with geometric flowers made of silver leaf, each with four lozenge-shaped petals. The field of each section is composed of a rich design of undulating branches with leaves, flowers, and fruits, some of them of considerable size. On the various faces appear repeated large conical forms with rounded fronts that represent lotus seed heads containing lotus seeds—an iconographic element of Far Eastern influence.

Among these ramified sections are included animal figures: birds of varied designs, some difficult to classify. Interspersed among them are animals alluding to stylized felines—jaguars and pumas—a long-tailed simian, rabbits, and probably a deer. Given the highly stylized nature of these figures, in certain cases a precise zoological or botanical identification cannot be established.

Particularly noteworthy on the left face is the figure of a bird with a human head. This representation corresponds, in Chinese mythology, to Gou Mang:

“Gōu Máng 句芒, in Chinese mythology, is an assistant spirit (shén 神) or official (sī 司) of Emperor Tai Hao 太皞 (Fú Xī 伏羲). Gōu Máng had the body of a bird but the face of a human, and his legs rode upon two dragons. Tai Hao and Gou Mang governed Spring and the region of the East.”<sup>5</sup>

A distinctive feature of the design of the scenes on each face is that the figures display no form of symmetry.

The box is fitted with a pair of silver hinges in the shape of leaves, and on the front face there is an additional silver fitting that serves as the clasp.

<sup>5</sup> ChinaKnowledge.de An Encyclopaedia on Chinese History, Literature and Art. <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Myth/personsgoumang.html> Gou Mang 句 and: 東方句芒, 鳥身人面, 乘兩龍。In: <https://ctext.org/shan-hai-jing/hai-wai-dong-jing/zh>

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## Analysis of the Animal Figures



### Front Face

A mounted hunter is depicted spearing his prey with a lance.

To the right appears a golden-headed quetzal (*Pharomachrus auriceps*), and below it a black-furred feline, probably a jaguarundi (*Puma yagouaroundi*).

To the left is a jaguar (*Panthera onca*). Flanking it is a pair of birds with long beaks and tails, likely alluding to the squirrel cuckoo (*Piaya cayana*), known locally as *tingazú*.



### Back Face

On the right, a walking puma (*Puma concolor concolor*).

At the center, a deer—probably a young specimen—possibly referring to the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

On the left, a rampant lion (*Panthera leo*).

Below, on the left, appears an owl, likely the striped owl (*Asio clamator*).

At the center, another owl, possibly the short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*).

Finally, in the upper right corner, a long-tailed bird whose classification cannot be confidently determined.

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Right Face

A large leaping rabbit, probably the Santa Marta cottontail (*Sylvilagus sanctaemartae*).  
Within the arch above, another walking puma (*Puma concolor concolor*).



Left Face

A large bird with a crowned human head, identifiable as *Gou Mang* (句芒).  
Within the arch, a walking puma (\**Puma concolor concolor*\*).

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Lid, Front Section

On the right, a macaw.

On the left, a simian figure, probably referring to the brown spider monkey (*Ateles hybridus*).  
To the right, a bird with a curved beak and long tail, possibly a cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*).



Lid, Rear Section

At the center, a lion (*Panthera leo*).

On the right, an unidentified long-tailed bird.

On the left, a large bird with a long, bifurcated tail, possibly a fork-tailed flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*).

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## Conclusion

In Colombia, *barniz de Pasto* expresses, with a distinctive identity, several elements of Eastern culture, broadly characterized by the saturation of ornamentation, the density of compositions, the brilliance of decorated surfaces, the geometric organization of pictorial space, the depiction of imaginary and mythical animals, and the inclusion of vegetal elements such as a tree trunk resting upon schematic mounds, from whose branches hang enormous idealized flowers, alongside others of Oriental origin, such as peonies and carnations.<sup>1</sup>

The social and cultural dynamics of the town of Pasto enabled Eastern and Spanish influences to merge with Indigenous knowledge, initiating a gradual process of hybridization in objects decorated with *barniz de Pasto*.

When this early *barniz de Pasto* box is compared with numerous catalogued examples in both museums and private collections, the exceptional quality of its execution and the richness of its design become immediately apparent. Although small in format, the piece stands out for the refined result achieved by the artist, constituting a beautiful example of the decorative arts of the former Kingdom of New Granada, present-day Colombia.

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<sup>1</sup> Idem.











