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ARTS & ANTIQUES

**OUTSTANDING BARNIZ
DE PASTO CASKET**

Colombia, Pasto, circa 1650

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Outstanding Barniz de Pasto Casket

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Wooden lacquered, painted, silvered and gilded

Iron locks

Measurements: 31 x 13 x 20 cm

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The domed wooden lacquered box is rectangular in shape and is decorated throughout with animals, flowers and foliage on a greenish, gold shimmery background with a geometrical border.

The front of the box is decorated with a pair of crowned human heads with winged animal bodies depicting birds amidst a profuse array of leaves and exotic flowers, plant fiber scrolls, bunches of leaves, various species of butterflies with delicately colored wings and petals, carnations and pomegranates.

The back of the box has a amazing unicorn in the center between two storks. The unicorn is looking at one of them, while the birds look at the unicorn with wonder. In the bottom left and right corners are black hybrid pig-like figures surrounded by birds, flowers and butterflies.

The sides have a young green fawns sitting on the ground surrounded by birds of paradise, flowers and colorful butterflies.

The domed lid has the most spectacular exotic winged human head with a winged body and two graceful deer smelling flowers, surrounded by this vibrant scenery of wild flora and fauna, including herons and flamingos. On the sides of the lid are leaping red squirrels.

The lustrous gold effect on this box was created using gold and silver foils which were combined with underneath layers of *mopa mopa* resin. Delicate incisions highlight and emphasize the motifs, adding soft shadows.



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Barniz de Pasto (Portable Desk), circa 1684, wood, silver fittings, Hispanic Society of America in NYC.



Barniz de Pasto (Portable Desk), second half 17th century, Private Collection.

Barniz de Pasto

From the 16th through the 18th century, the indigenous, African, Asian, and European artists and artisans of colonial Latin America created some of the most extraordinary decorative arts ever produced, drawing freely upon the rich artistic traditions and techniques of the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. Hybrid art forms emerged as indigenous media and techniques were adapted to European forms. European designs were incorporated into the indigenous arts, and Asian motifs, techniques, and forms were reinterpreted by both European and indigenous artisans.

In general the decorative arts of colonial Latin America followed the pattern of the major European stylistic movements, from Renaissance to Neoclassical, but regional preferences permitted some styles and motifs to endure long beyond their passing in Europe. For example, 16th-century Renaissance C-scrolls and Mannerist strapwork cartouches remained popular motifs in the arts of the Andes well into the 18th century. The enormous wealth of the viceregal capitals of Mexico City and Lima attracted more artists and artisans, which accounts for the disproportionately large number of decorative arts produced around these centers throughout the colonial period. Taking their inspiration from Asian porcelains and lacquers, Colombian artisans perfected the indigenous *mopa mopa* lacquer technique, which they combined with gold and silver leaf, transforming wooden chests and writings boxes into luxury objects destined for European nobility.

***Mopa Mopa* lacquer technique**

The *mopa mopa* is a translucent greenish resin which is the principal medium for the production of the lacquer objects generally known as *barniz de Pasto* produced in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru from colonial times up to the present day. The pre-Columbian cultures also used it, as beads of *mopa mopa* were discovered in tombs of the Pasto Indians. During the colonial period the Indians from the Sibundoy Valley in Colombia delivered the *mopa mopa* resin in blocks to the lacquer artisans who processed it and colored the resin to apply it to the different objects they produced. The botanical origin of the *mopa mopa* resin was identified in 1977 by the Colombian botanist Luis Eduardo Mora-Osejo. The *mopa mopa* resin is obtained from the *Elaeagia pastoensis* Mora tree, native to the tropical woods of the southwest Colombian mountains, near Mocoa, department of Putumayo.

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Procedure

The transformation of the *mopa mopa* resin blocks into a decorative lacquer was a procedure that began by cleaning it of leaves and dust. Then it was chewed, boiled and melted to make it elastic enough to stretch it into thin layers and laminate into foils. When it was thin enough it, was dyed with organic and mineral colors. It was stretched again until very thin layers were obtained. Then from the center of the foils the motifs were cut and were applied with heat to the wooden objects. This lacquer was permanent, impermeable and resistant to organic solvents.

During the colonial times, there were two independent traditions related to the *mopa mopa* lacquer: one related to the Andean culture of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, applied to the *queros* and the other one done in Pasto, and in Quito more related to European and Asiatic motifs and subjects.

The first reference of the production of *mopa mopa* lacquer objects dates from 1666, but it was already widely known in Europe, where the objects created using this technique were much sought after and were already part of large important collections. During the 18th century, many explorers and botanists who traveled to Latin America visited Pasto and described this procedure. The famous naturalist Alexander von Humboldt visited Pasto in 1801 and registered in his diary many details regarding the history, manufacture and trade of the Pasto lacquer. He also identified the organic colors used for dyeing the layers.

What distinguished the artisans from Pasto from the indigenous tradition was the technique known as “*barniz brillante*”. It was named as such because it combined the *mopa mopa* lacquer with layers of gold and silver sheets. Different layers were applied combining the motifs and the colors as onion layers to obtain some relief too. On the lacquer, incisions were made to achieve details, in the case of flowers and leaves, nerves and fine details.

During the colonial period, the *barniz de Pasto* lacquer was used in the decoration of many religious or secular objects such as boxes, caskets, coffers, writing desks, frames, barber dishes, dishes, plates. The designs of the 17th century include flowers and real or mythological animals. All these very early motifs clearly show their European origin, such as drawings, etchings, paintings and illuminated manuscripts. In the second half of the 17th century and during the 18th century, the motifs are very eclectic. European, south American and Asian motifs such as squirrels and grapes, very common in the Chinese and Japanese paintings from the 16th century, peonies and carnations from porcelain and Chinese textiles, the bird of paradise, green man or man of the forest, pomegranate flowers from the Andean culture, the double headed Habsburg eagle and European heraldic, mythology and still life paintings, which include a variety of flowers.

Vivian Velar de Irigoyen Art Historian (Universidad de Buenos Aires)

Jaime Eguiguren – Art & Antiques, Research Department

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