



JAIME EGUIGUREN

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Peru
17th century

**WRITING CABINET WITH
DROP-DOWN FRONT**

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Writing Cabinet with Drop-Down Front

Wood, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell

86 x 74cm x 41 cm

86 x 74cm x 52 cm (open)

Provenance: Private collection

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The piece we have before us here is a wooden writing cabinet or secretaire with a drop-down front panel. The latter is secured towards the top of the middle, where there is a lock fitting. With the front panel down, we can see a structure made up of little drawers or compartments arranged on two horizontal levels, to the left and right, on either side of a central recess. The lower section of the piece, which really sets it apart within this genre of writing cabinets with drop-down fronts, comprises a series of drawers arranged on three vertical levels: two smaller drawers on the first and third levels, and one drawer, twice the size of the others, on the central level. Another striking feature, underscoring the uniquely creative nature of this piece, are the two curvilinear side wings from which the supports for the fold-down panel slide out.

In addition to these highly unusual features, another of the cabinet's more interesting characteristics is its ornamentation, as it combines the decoration found on the sides, which are painted to imitate oriental lacquer, with the aesthetic of the front of the piece, which has been executed using an inlay marquetry technique known in the Americas as *enconchado*, which was most widespread in the viceroyalties of Peru and New Spain (Mexico). The outside of the drop-down panel is decorated with a central rectangular section made up of a tortoiseshell plaque with mother-of-pearl inlay, depicting a garland of four-pointed stars and flowers. This central section is surrounded by a thin rectangular wooden frame leading onto a second, larger border, once again featuring tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl inlay with floral garlands throughout. This sort of decoration based on garlands may also be found on the base structure of the front of the piece, contrasting with the undulating lines, full of movement, with inlay decoration, adorning the drawers and wings, presenting an abundance of leaves, flowers and arabesques. Finally, of its unique characteristics, it is worth highlighting the inscription that has been preserved, and which may be found on the back of the cabinet, reading "*Soi De Don Ysidoro Flores*" ("I belong to Don Ysidoro Flores").

Apart from telling us who the owner of this exemplary and previously-unpublished cabinet was, this beautiful inscription acts as a sort of window, to paraphrase Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, onto the social memory of the period. Although, in terms of their storage capacities, writing cabinets or secretaires were intended to make their owners' lives easier, there is also no denying they were devised as status symbols aimed at providing necessary recognition for a social elite that was as privileged as it was select. We can therefore conclude that, beyond its aesthetic and technical history, the study of furniture in the Latin American viceroyalties involves a sociological angle, given these sorts of pieces, as luxury items, provide a reflection of the culture, way of life and even way of thinking of the society that produced and enjoyed them.

We need only consult the documentation from the period, mainly legacies and wills, to realise that these writing cabinets were the most luxurious pieces of furniture of their day. Executed in the most expensive and lavish materials, owning them was synonymous with wealth and power:

"[...] in their execution the best materials were used, and the most modern and innovative techniques of the time. [...] the obsession with collecting things made these cabinets incredibly useful for storing the items their owners had accumulated: precious gemstones, geological samples, shells, manuscripts, coins, medals [...]. In terms of value, the splendour of these cabinets put them on the same level as their contents"¹.

1 BENNETT OATES, P. (1984): *Historia dibujada del mueble occidental*, Madrid: Hermann Blume, p.82.

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Fig. 3 Writing cabinet on table: wood, Mexican lacquer, and gilding. Silver drawer pulls, ca.1750, Hispanic Society of America

writing cabinets used to store items were popular back in Spain, the definition of its lines and compositional elements (the lower section with drawers, the curvilinear wings and the greater width of the drop-down panel) take us back to Asia once more, specifically to China. Both in terms of line and composition, this model was widespread in China, and though there are few known surviving pieces with this sort of aesthetic in the viceroyalties, their existence is evidenced by both our piece and the lacquered New Spanish writing cabinet with its Chinoiseries preserved in the Hispanic Society of America. (Fig. 3)

The writing cabinet we are examining here was probably made in Lima or in one of Peru's coastal regions in the last third of the 17th century, and commissioned, as we saw from the inscription, by Don Ysidoro Flores, one of the first members of a family who, having travelled from Spain to Quito (Viceroyalty of Peru, 1542-1717) in about 1650, reaped the rewards of his efforts, leaving his heirs a status that would result in them becoming the Marquises of Miraflores in 1753².

In short, to do this fascinating work justice we need to approach it from three different angles: in terms of technique, as an example of the virtuosity and assimilation of local artisans; from a historical perspective, as testimony to the extensive exchange of ideas, tastes and products helping to consolidate viceregal society, and which by extension are a reflection of its multiculturalism; and finally, from a sociological point of view, as a reflection of the aspiration and success of Don Ysidoro Flores, a Spanish colonial settler who found his fortune in the Americas.

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² BÜSCHGES, C. (1999) "Linaje, patrimonio y prestigio. La nobleza titulada de la ciudad de Quito en el siglo XVIII" *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, Vol LVI, no. 1, p. 124

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While their function meant they were preferably kept in libraries or studies, these writing cabinets were also often found in places where visitors could see them, such as living rooms or bedrooms, as they were also intended to demonstrate their owners' wealth and refined taste, at all times a reflection of the foreign influences deemed superior to the native ones.

As such, in the Latin American viceroyalties, these pieces of furniture were used to express the status and aspirations of a burgeoning society that looked to imperial Spanish tastes and the aesthetics of the refined and advanced Asian society for its own recognition. And these are the aspirations we can observe in this beautiful writing cabinet, following a model that was popular back in the mother country, but whose forms and decoration undeniably drew on Oriental tradition.

As is the case with our cabinet, the most popular form of decoration was tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl inlay on a wooden base. Decorative furniture and boxes with tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl inlay from the Portuguese colonies in India, or the Philippines, Japan and China, were among some of the most highly-coveted items sent to the Americas on the Manila Galleons, serving as inspiration for the interior decoration of the homes of the major Criollo families, whose material legacy, honouring their aspirations of recognition and prominence, is on display today in the most important museums and collections across the world. (Figs. 1 & 2)



Fig. 1 “Enconchado” trunk: wood, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, 17th century, Jaime Eguiguren Collection



Fig. 2 Box: wood, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, circa 1700, Hispanic Society of America

Furthermore, in addition to the huge quantity of exotic and luxury items that left their mark as they sailed the Pacific-Atlantic trade route, we know that a considerable number of Oriental artisans settled in the Viceroyalties of both New Spain and Peru, and our conclusion is that it was in the latter that our beautiful writing cabinet was executed some time prior to 1700.

All of these contrasting influences and styles meant that pieces of Asian origin found their surfaces being covered in tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl from the Peruvian Amazon and Caribbean. This gradually gave rise to an aesthetic which, despite being markedly “mestizo”, bears an undeniably local, autochthonous and viceregal stamp.

But beyond our cabinet's decorative inlay technique, which as commented earlier draws on an Oriental aesthetic, what really makes this Peruvian piece stand out is its approach to form. Although such

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