



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

Upper Peru

ca. 1780

WRITING DESK



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Cedar wood, painted in oil with purpurin gilding. Iron hinges, lock and key

56 x 64 x 34 cm

Provenance: Private Collection, Argentina

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This writing desk is composed of a rectangular box standing on four feet. The drop-down front panel reveals a front that combines nine drawers and a little door, distributed over four horizontal levels. The drawers are decorated with palmette and fluted molding enclosing “c” and “s”-shaped plant motif struts, their gilding standing out against a red background. The knob on six of the drawers simulates a flower bud. The central door includes two pillars with shafts wreathed in gilt vegetation, supporting a trilobate arch festooned on the intrados and with spiral and radial ornamentation on the spandrels. The front panel boasts a knob among colorful painted bouquets, motifs that also adorn the inside of the drop-down front and external side panels.

The unusual quality of this piece lies, however, in the outside face of the drop-down front panel. The border that surrounds the dual scene exhibits profuse Rococo decorations, with rocaille, sea mollusk shells, flowers, struts and bows being prominent features; the voluptuousness of the curved line and delicate elegance of the pastel tones dominate these motifs. (Figs. 1 and 2)

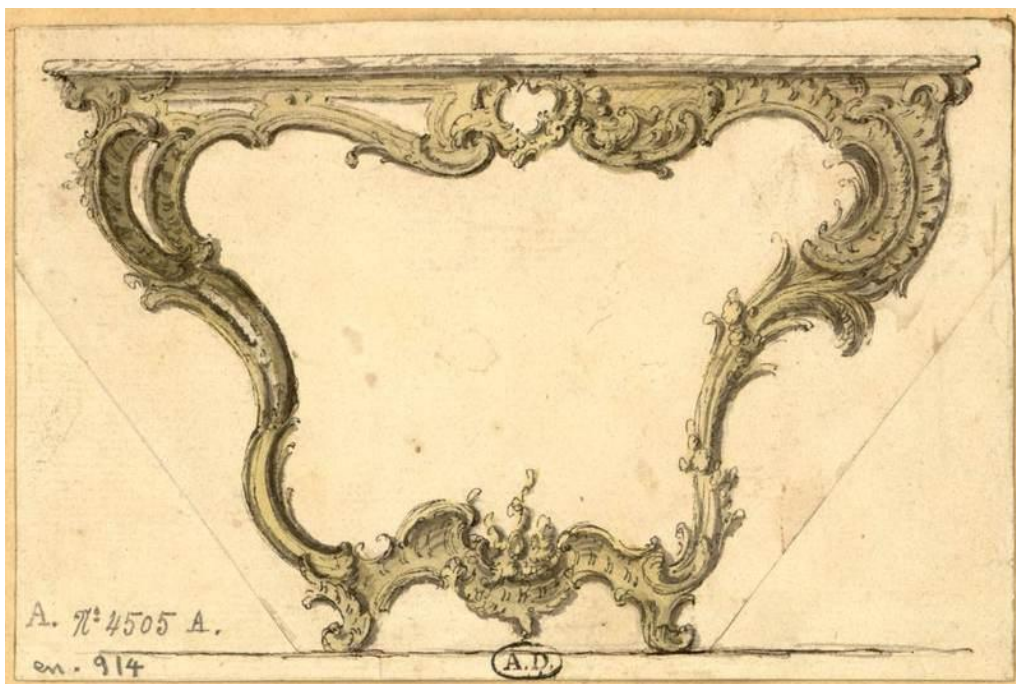


Fig. 1: Nicolas Pineau, *Side table design*, ca. 1740. Paris, Museum of Decorative Arts.



Fig. 2: Writing desk, ca. 1780, Peru. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.

Oblivious to the main action and inserted within a lush landscape, a hunter is resting next to his dogs, playing music; a melody listened to by a country girl standing behind him, holding a basket filled with flowers or wild fruits. The death of Louis XIV of France in 1715, and with it the personification of absolutism, encouraged noblemen to claw back their influence and individuality, which, until then, had centered on the monarch. At a time when tradition had started to wane, Rococo painting opposed academic doctrine: it abandoned the representation of topics that underlined power and patriotic grandeur, opting instead for smaller formats intended for private contemplation, showcasing the carefree mentality of the elites, whose life revolved around the pursuit of happiness, beauty, grace, enjoyment and sensual pleasure, excluding all rhetoric and drama. The classic myths of Arcadia and the noble savage, that is to say, the harmonious merging of man and nature which originated it, inspired

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pastoral views of rural environments in which aristocrats and the high bourgeoisie played the role of idle shepherds and farmers, youths with pearly skin, opulently dressed, their heroism based on bright conversation and amorous conquests. The pinnacle of this illusion was expressed in the village that Marie Antoinette had built for her in Versailles in 1783, which included a windmill, vegetable gardens, cow sheds, a farm, dovecote, a lake in which to fish, etc.(Fig. 3)



Fig. 3: François Boucher, *A pastoral summer*, 1749, London, Wallace Collection.

It is as such that the bouquets scattered all over the writing desk, consciously laid out to appear simple and wild, are as artful as the hunter and farmer.(Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: Writing Desk (Painting on the inside of the desk's drop-down front panel. The hinges and body of the lock are also visible), ca. 1780, Peru. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.

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Fig. 5a: Writing desk (Left-side panel), ca. 1780, Peru. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.



Fig. 5b: Writing desk (Right-side panel), ca. 1780, Peru. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.



Fig. 6a: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Happy Accidents of the Swing or The Swing*, 1767. Londres, Wallace Collection.



Fig. 6b: Jean-Antoine Watteau, *The Indiscretion*, 1717. Paris, Louvre.

In the main scene, a family, distinguished judging by their attire, gathers around a table set outdoors, as if this was a *fête champêtre* (garden party). The young woman, however, is sobbing in the arms of her lover, while the priest scolds them, holding the Holy Book. Dumbfounded, an older lady, probably the young woman's mother, puts her hand to her head. If the *genre galante* is a courtly invitation to eroticism, this painting could be interpreted as having a moral overtone, as a warning against the grave danger of giving in to the provocations of love.

The writing desk (also known by the controversial term *bargueño*, a neologism coined in the 19th century) constitutes the most characteristic piece in Spanish furniture from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, always forming part of a set with a credenza or commode which served as support. Just like the example being analyzed here, it served three purposes: the storage of documents and small objects, support for writing and as an ornament demonstrating its owner's prestige, always linked to the wealthy classes. The 18th century witnessed the emergence of smaller writing desks than seen previously, born out of a quest for intimacy and domestic comfort, in reaction to the solemnity of the system and rigid etiquette finally associated with the *Ancien Régime*.

Having set out these notions, we will now go on to establish the links between this writing desk and others that appeared in the same historical and cultural context.

The great similarity between the writing desk studied here and this filing cabinet or 'papelera' (a name it received on account of not having a drop-down front) is undeniable: the distribution of the door and drawers, the intricate carving of the drawers, which stands out over the reddish background, the knobs inserted in flowers, the composition of the door within an arch, the bouquets painted on it and the exterior of the box, etc. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 7: Polychrome, carved cocobolo wood 'papelera'.
High Peru, early 18th century, Rosario (Argentina), Province

This Spanish walnut writing desk was built in the first half of the 17th century, and its exterior was painted in the third quarter of the 18th century using Rococo motifs similar to those found on the drop-down front panel of the writing desk studied here: rocaille, sea mollusk shells, "c" and "s"-shaped struts, scrollwork, etc. (**Fig. 8**)



Fig. 8: Walnut writing desk, 18th century, Spain.

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This writing desk, with an upper lid and drop-down front panel, was built in Michoacán (Mexico) circa 1750. The plant motifs sprouting over the entire surface are painted and lacquered using the Mexican *maque* technique, the palette reduced to the same tones as those found on the writing desk studied in these pages: green, blue, yellow and red. (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9: *Two-lidded writing desk*, ca. 1750, Mexico.

Although the shape is different here, this 18th century colonial writing desk is painted in a similar fashion: the front panel features a painting of an elegant couple who are gallantly looking at each other, while bouquets of wild flowers decorate the remainder of the body of the desk and the front panels on the drawers. Pastel tones dominate the composition. (Figs. 10, 10a and 10b)



Fig. 10: *Writing desk*, painted wood, 18th century, Cuzco.

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Figs. 10a and 10b: *Writing desk (detail: side and drawers), painted wood, 18th century, Cuzco.*



The pictorial decoration of this type of furniture was often inspired by European works. Just as the writing desk studied here was inspired by the *style galant* of Fragonard, Watteau and Boucher, the allegories from the Americas (top lid) and from Europe (drop-down front panel) seen in this example were based on a series of engravings by Julius Goltzius from drawings by Maarten de Vos (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11: *Two-lidded writing desk painted in oil.* Exterior in embossed and polychrome leather, 18th century, Buenos Aires, Isaac Fernández Blanco Museum.

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The allegorical and mythological scenes depicted on the casing and double door of this “papelera” combine to generate an assimilation of specific Eastern aesthetic features and Rococo ornamentations present, for instance, in the elements that make up the borders and in its palette of colors (**Fig. 12**).



Fig. 12: Pine wood 'papelera' with maque lacquer and wrought iron fittings, New Spain (Pátzcuaro, Michoacán), 18th century, Mexico City, Franz Maver Museum.

Using the pre-Hispanic *maque* technique, this Mexican writing desk from 1750 imitates the Asian lacquers that had been arriving in the Americas for 250 years by means of the Manila Galleons. *Chinoiserie*, a decorative style most popular during the Rococo period, is seen here in gold and red, standing out against a black background. (**Figs. 13, 13a and 13b**)



Fig. 13: Mexican writing desk, ca. 1750, Mexico.

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Figs. 13a and 13b: Mexican writing desk (the interior combines drawers of different sizes and a door), ca. 1750, Mexico.

The drop-down front panel and drawers of this 18th century Colombian writing desk showcase an urban landscape with mother-of-pearl and bone inlay, in contrast with the drawers' interior where simple flowers have been painted. The front panels on the door and two deep drawers simulate an arch over gold pillars. On this occasion, the interior of the drop-down front panel lends this piece of furniture an additional, leisure-oriented purpose, serving as a chess board. (Figs. 14a and 14b)



Figs.14a and 14b: Colombian writing desk with nacre and bone inlays, 18th century, New Spain (Pátzcuaro, Michoacán), 18th century, Mexico City, Franz Mayer Museum.



Writing desk, ca. 1780, Peru. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.

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