

JAIME EGUIGUREN ART & ANTIQUES



Hierbera (Herb Box)

Moxos or Chiquitos (Bolivia), c. 1760
Cocobolo wood, iron fixtures
17.5 x 23 x 21.5 cm
Provenance: Private collection

Hierberas, being little herb boxes or containers, emerged in the colonial era to meet the need to keep and store not just the *paraguayan herb* with which *mate* (an infusion drunk through special tubes or *bombillas*) was prepared, but also sugar, cloves and cinnamon. These last two were extremely expensive in the Viceroyalty period, so the boxes almost always featured a lock to carefully secure the prized herbs. *Mate* herbal infusions were highly appreciated by the upper echelons of colonial Andean society, which developed a series of objects for their consumption: *mates* (cups), *bombillas* (tubes or straws) and *pavas de hornillo* (kettles). The materials used to manufacture these items depended on the social class of their owners. These materials included cocobolo wood with inlay work in a variety of fruit tree woods. They were designed as chests or boxes in a variety of shapes, and soon became part of colonial furnishings.¹⁴

Our box is carved in cocobolo wood. The lid takes the form of a Rococo-style scallop shell, which defines the shape of the bottom half of the piece: undulating with a curved front and straight back. Two small iron hinges at the back link the bottom half and the lid, which is convex in shape. Its ornamentation includes concave radial gadroons of different sizes, alternating between smooth and decorated ones giving rise to a surface of great dynamism. Four of the decorated gadroons present foliate decoration and plant scrollwork, elements in a late Baroque or Rococo style, culminating at the front in the beautiful heads of winged cherubim. Meanwhile, the gadroons are interspersed by thin, sprig-shaped divides. The gadroons on the lid all radiate out from a central motif in the back. This motif features a wonderful winged cherub surrounded by decorative Rococo elements in the form of a scallop shell adorned with Andean plant scrollwork, gadrooning, and floral borders. Meanwhile, carved borders with decorative edging, festoons and pearling delicately run along the outer rim of this *coquera* or coca plant box.

The undulating sides of the bottom half are adorned with a wide carved section featuring plant scrollwork, making up interesting and sumptuous borders imitating intricate foliage. The front boasts an iron lock in the shape of a fleuron, delicately cast and chased, to the sides of which we observe the aforementioned border which, made up of stylized plant scrollwork, takes the form of medallions with interlacing birds of attractive plumage, flowers and fruits, these being typical Andean motifs. The box sits on smooth, spherical wooden feet. The small latch fitting joined to the lock is also made of iron, and includes delicate chasing and sgrafitto work.

As mentioned earlier, in colonial society *hierberas* were used to store *mate*, sugar, cinnamon, cloves and so on, and as such would sometimes include a variety of inner compartments. When several separations exist, they would be used to store herbal leaves, sugar cubes and other elements involved in preparing this popular infusion.

Silver *Hierberas* were manufactured in the Upper Peru region, whereas those made in cocobolo wood came from the missions in Moxos and Chiquitos (Figs. 1 and 2),¹⁵ where the Jesuits taught the peoples to carve in wood and a number of other artisan skills, including the manufacture of musical instruments or the carvings and reliefs intended to decorate altarpieces and opulent church interiors. *Hierbera* from Moxos and Chiquitos are characterized by their exquisite and original carving, and were exported across the Peruvian Viceroyalty where they were greatly prized by the viceregal Andean society. On their way to the western Andes they had to pass through Cochabamba and Potosí, which encouraged the integration of ornamental motifs prominent in the lowlands and the *Altiplano*, as can be observed in the different flowers and birds that decorate our exquisite *hierbera*.

V.V.I.



Fig. 1 Herb Box, Moxos or Chiquitos, 18th century, carved cocobolo wood, silver fixtures. Museo de Arte Hispanoamericano Isaac Fernández Blanco, Buenos Aires (Argentina)



Fig. 2 Herb Box, Moxos or Chiquitos, 18th century, carved cocobolo wood, polychrome, silver fixtures and details. Museo de Arte Hispanoamericano Isaac Fernández Blanco, Buenos Aires (Argentina)