



Barniz de Pasto Portable Writing Desk (Escritorillo)

Pasto, Colombia, mid-18th century

Mopa-mopa (*Elaegia pastoensis* Mora) resin and silver leaf on Spanish cedar

20.5cm high, 37cm long, 25.5cm wide

Stock no.: A5860

Provenance: US private collection

This portable writing desk (*escritorillo*) is decorated with colourful *barniz de Pasto*, a lacquer derived from the resin of the *Elaegia pastonensis* tree, known as *mopa-mopa*, which is used in the Andean region of South America, particularly Pasto and Quito. Unlike other natural resins used for lacquering, mopa mopa is insoluble. Artisans chew the resin to soften it, and then knead in pigments. The resin is stretched into thin layers and cut into intricate shapes. The pieces of resin are layered onto an organic material, chiefly wood or gourd, and without the need for any additional adhesive.¹

When the Spanish arrived in Pasto in the first half of the 16th century, the indigenous population already used mopa-mopa to decorate beads, which are the only pre-Columbian pieces to survive to today.² Spanish rule, however, fundamentally changed the appearance of barniz de Pasto. European forms favoured by colonial administrators, such as coffers and drop-front portable writing desks like the current example, were commissioned. The technique of *barniz brillante*, which involved adding layers of silver foil between layers of resin to give a luminous appearance, likely derived from the Spanish practice of *estofado*. As near-identical figures are repeated across multiple objects, it seems likely that the *barnizadores* shared reference images. When commissioning *barniz de Pasto* objects, clients, often from Europe, would provide books and engravings to copy, thus introducing European decorative motifs to the craftsmen.³ Of fundamental importance was the influence of Asian lacquer, which arrived in South America via the Spanish-controlled Manila Galleon trading route. The glossy black Ryukyu lacquer and motifs, patterns, and borders of Namban lacquer, helped to shape the appearance of barniz de Pasto.⁴

On the back of the *escritorillo* is an indigenous woman, apparently from the Amazon, dressed in a short, feathered skirt and a feathered crown. She is barefoot, hunting a jaguar. Her appearance contrasts with that of the two pairs of Spanish figures, wearing hats, shoes, and breeches, pictured on the lid and front side. A similar portable writing desk in a private collection has an indigenous man, depicted similarly

with feathered clothing, and a Spanish figure holding a sword.⁵ A casket in a Bogotá private collection ('*arca del emblema jesuita*') shows an indigenous person with a very similar feathered skirt and headdress, hunting a wild boar on the other side of a tree. Like in the present example, the skin is left in the background shade.⁶

Various creatures – real and mythical – adorn the casket. A wild boar on the inside of the lid provides an excellent example of the technique of excising tiny details from the resin sheet to create the texture of hair. Very similar depictions of boars appear on a writing desk in a Mexican private collection and on a casket in a Bogotá private collection.⁷ The numerous birds are orioles (*Icteridae*), which also appear on an octagonal tray in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (accession no. [1262-1855](#)). This tray, made in the Viceroyalty of Peru between 1650 and 1750, also shares squirrels, monkeys, deer, and dogs, scampering about swirling vines.⁸ The large, colourful flowers on the V&A tray, possibly peonies and passion flowers, hint at what the faded areas on the lid of our box may once have looked like. On the inside of the lid is a pair of birds with human heads, a creature which appears on other barniz de Pasto objects, such as a casket in the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin (accession no. [2018.351](#)). Creatures from Andean mythology were popular amongst European clients, as they seemed to amplify the European idea of being classical heroes in an inhospitable land.⁹ Barniz de pasto provides a unique record of Andean mythology, as images of mythical creatures do not feature in any surviving murals or paintings.¹⁰

[1] Newman, R.; Kaplan, E.; Derrick, M. 'Mopa Mopa: Scientific Analysis and History of an Unusual South American Resin Used by the Inka and Artisans in Pasto, Colombia'. *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 54.3 (2015). pp. 123-148.

For photographs of contemporary Colombian craftsmen making barniz de Pasto, see 'Colombia Artesanal: Barniz de Pasto, un proceso inspirador', *Artesanías de Colombia*, 23/04/2021. Retrieved online via https://artesaniasdecolombia.com.co/PortalAC/Noticia/colombia-artesanal-barniz-de-pasto-un-proceso-inspirador_14722 on 01/11/2024.

[2] Álvarez-White, María Cecilia. 'El barniz de Pasto: Reflejo de la naturaleza', *Naturaleza & Paisaje: IX Encuentro internacional sobre barroco* (2019), pp. 339-346; 340.

[3] De la Mata, Ana Zabía. 'New Contributions Regarding the Barniz de Pasto Collection at the Museo de América, Madrid'. *Heritage* 7 (2024), pp. 667-682; 669.

[4] Kawamura, Yayoi. 'The Art of Barniz de Pasto and Its Appropriation of Other Cultures', *Heritage* 6 (2023), pp. 3292-3306; 3294, 3295.

[5] See 'Escritorillo de la Virgen de la Merced', Álvarez-White, María Cecilia. *El Barniz de Pasto: Secretos y Revelaciones*. Bogotá: University of the Andes/ Ediciones Uniandes, 2023. Pp. 88, 93, figs 4.2 and 4.5.

[6] See Álvarez-White (2023), pp. 251, 253, figs 7.62, 7.64.

[7] See Álvarez White (2019), *Op. Cit.* p. 344, fig. 7, and Del Pilar López Pérez, María. 'Imágenes y tradición a través de los objetos recubiertos con barniz de Pasto. Una aproximación a su interpretación', *Anales del Museo de América* 28 (2020). Pp. 127-146; p. 133, fig. 4.

[8] For more examples of animals on barniz de Pasto, see María del Pilar López Pérez. 'Reflections on the Forms and Arrangements of the Surface Images in the Art of Barniz de Pasto, from the 16th to the 19th century.' *Heritage* 6.7 (2023). pp. 5424-5441.

[9] Paniagua Pérez, J. 'Animales y mitos clásicos en Indias', *Humanismo y pervivencia del mundo clásico. Homenaje al profesor Juan Gil*. Instituto de Estudios Humanísticos, 2015, vol. 2. Pp 753-775,

p. 768.

[10] Álvarez-White, María Cecilia. 'Seres míticos en el barniz de pasto colonial', *Barroco: Enigmas & Misterios XI* (2024), pp. 227-234.