

AN EXCEPTIONAL SPANISH COLONIAL VARGUEÑO OR BARGUEÑO, tortoiseshell, ebony, engraved ivory and Colonial hardwood, Spain, late 16th / early 17th century (cabinet)

£25,000



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REF: 11940

Height: 134 cm (52.8")

Width: 94 cm (37")

Depth: 38 cm (15")

Description

An exceptional and unusually richly appointed Spanish vargueño of the highest quality, lavishly inlaid with tortoiseshell and engraved ivory, mounted with ebony mouldings and decorative ironwork, and incorporating an iconographically sophisticated interior programme. The cabinet stands on a characteristic 19th-century turned vargueño stand.

Exterior

The exterior centred by an unusually large and finely forged iron lockplate, retaining its original key. The fall-front secured by original iron catches, the corners reinforced with decorative iron banding. The metalwork is deliberately backed by its original red velvet lining, conceived as a striking chromatic foil to the ironwork and a further expression of luxury and visual theatre. The sides fitted with original iron carrying handles, underscoring the portable function of the form.

Interior

The interior arranged architecturally around a central portico concealing a large drawer, richly inlaid with tortoiseshell and ivory stringing and framed by ebony mouldings and a pair of gilded classical columns. The portico incorporates four finely etched ivory panels. Surmounted by a sculptural dove. Beneath runs a stylised floral and acanthus-leaf frieze. Below an engraved ivory panel depicts the Virgin Mary in prayer within an exoticised landscape, repeated below by the same acanthus frieze, creating a vertical devotional axis at the heart of the cabinet.

Flanking the central section are six drawers to either side, each with tortoiseshell fronts edged with ivory banding and ebony mouldings. Below, on either side, two large drawers cleverly simulate four smaller drawers, with two further small drawers beneath, demonstrating both technical virtuosity and a taste for visual complexity typical of elite vargueños. To either side of the lower register are cupboards fitted with inset engraved ivory panels depicting Saint Lucia, shown holding a palm frond in her right hand, the traditional symbol of Christian martyrdom, representing her triumph of faith over persecution following her execution in AD 304 for refusing to renounce Christianity. Her left hand rests upon a stone tower, an attribute associated with steadfastness, protection, and dominion.

The inclusion of Saint Lucia may also carry a more oblique material reference. By the early modern period, European colonial expansion into the Caribbean had created trade networks through which tortoiseshell entered Europe from islands including Saint Lucia. Spain claimed sovereignty over the island in the early 16th century; early Spanish navigators are believed to have named it Sancta Lucia, and a Vatican globe of the 1520s already records the name, predating French colonisation in 1650-51. While speculative, the association between saint, place, and precious material may have held layered meaning for a learned patron. Research is underway on this.

Materials and Technique

The cabinet is constructed from an as-yet unidentified colonial hardwood, likely imported via Iberian trade routes. The use of tortoiseshell, engraved ivory, and ebony places this vargueño firmly at the very apex of production, intended for an elite and highly educated clientele.

The engraved ivory pan...