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SPANISH ESCRITORIO (“WRITING DESK”)

Spain, 16th-17th century

55cm high, 100cm wide and 40cm deep

Stock no.: A4366

Characteristic of sixteenth century Mudéjar furniture, this rectangular writing cabinet, popularly known as a *vargueño*, is made of walnut and richly decorated with numerous devices of geometrical ornament with inlaid coloured wood and bone which together form stunning floral motifs and with borders composed of stars, triangles, spheres and squares. Intended to be used as furniture for travellers, there is an iron lock plate with its original key to keep precious items secure. The door opens downwards to serve as a writing desk and reveals thirteen fitted drawers of varying sizes which are also profusely decorated with geometric designs in floral motifs highlighted in bone and coloured wood. The top exterior of the door presents, among the geometrical decorations, an architectural structure similar to the façade of a castle. *Vargueños* with open stands are almost always associated either with a modern stand or a marriage of different pieces and in this case, the *vargueño* has a late nineteenth century stand. Perhaps amongst the most distinctive pieces of Spanish furniture, cabinets in this form were originally known as *escritorio* (“writing desk”) in the sixteenth century, rather than by the more common name, *vargueño*, which was introduced in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This change of name came about supposedly because such cabinets were made in the town of Vargas in the province of Toledo during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such practical pieces later rested on trestle stands of the same width but were not connected to the cabinet itself. Moreover, they were usually Mudéjar ornaments, as is evident by the combination of Western European and Islamic motifs.

Further Literature:

María Paz Aguiló Alonso. 1993. *El mueble en España, Siglos XVI-XVII*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.

Colum Hourihane. 2012. “Spain, V: Furniture”. In *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture*, Volume 2, edited by Colum Hourihane, pp. 612-37. Oxford: Oxford University Press.