

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Silver Filigree Casket

Made for the Iberian and South American markets

The Philippines, 17th century

21 cm high, 25 cm wide, 16 cm deep

Provenance: From the collection of a prominent Belgian princely family

Stock No.: A5286

This large silver filigree casket is formed from a rectangular box set on ball-shaped feet and a trilobed, fluted lid. It has two scalloped handles on the sides and a similar handle on top. It has a large lock plate in the form of a European escutcheon in the form of a double-headed eagle, a common design for objects made for the Iberian and South American markets.

The filigree decoration consists of rectangular panels, separated by serpentine borders, which are filled with four kidney-shaped elements each set in two-fold symmetry. In accordance with the characteristic stylistic features of filigree from the Philippines, thick square-section wires are used for the main motifs, with flattened twisted wires used to fill the background. The weight is also a characteristic feature of this production, contrasting with lightweight pieces made later in India.¹ Although the source for the shape of the lid is hard to identify, the overall shape of the casket, with its bracket socle, is certainly Chinese in origin, resembling small chests for storing documents and valuables set with flat lids known as xiaoxiang and seal boxes with bevelled or canted lids known as yinxia.² While large caskets similarly made for export in the Philippines exist in public and private collections, the presence of applied gilt silver elements, such as those on the present example, is less frequent.

The fine silver filigree design of this casket is typical of the Philippines, albeit made according to

Chinese techniques and style probably by Chinese or mestizo craftsmen working in Manila. Similar pieces were recovered from the shipwreck of the Manila galleon, *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, which sank on 20 September 1638 off the Mariana Islands while bound for Acapulco, Mexico.³ The ‘treasure’, found, duly recorded and studied but unfortunately poorly known, contains several pieces of gold filigree of the highest artistic and technical merits, undoubtedly transported as a commodity and all produced for export. The recurrent features in the filigree jewellery found there, while indicating the same workshop, do not enable us to determine their exact origin. Similar pieces brought from Guangzhou (Canton) in Guangdong province, Quanzhou or Fuzhou in Fujian province, were made in southern China or Manila, the likely production centre of our piece. The stylistic features present in these valuable pieces are serpentine friezes; friezes decorated with ‘s’ motifs with coiled ends forming an ‘o’, which is deemed quintessentially Chinese; and pentagonal rosettes formed of wire with a granule at the centre, an exclusive feature of Chinese-style filigree. Such features as seen on the present casket, alongside its shape and the double-headed eagle on the lock, help us to identify its centre of production with the Philippines. Similarly shaped caskets, with identical decoration, together with other objects identified with certainty with this production centre, have recently been published, including a perfume flask made from a carved pili nut (*Canarium ovatum*), a species indigenous to the Philippine archipelago, with silver filigree mounts similar in design to those occurring on the present casket.⁴ According to its carved inscription, the flask was commissioned by Don Baltasar Ruiz de Escalona, Treasurer Judge of the Royal Treasury of the Philippines who died in Manila in 1658.

¹. See Crespo, H. M. *Jewels from the India Run* (cat.), Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2015., p. 135

². See Crespo, H. M. *India in Portugal: A Time of Artistic Confluence* (cat.), Porto: Bluebook, 2021. p. 15

³. Chadour, A. B. ‘The gold jewelry from the Nuestra Señora de la Concepción’, in Mathers, W. M., Parker H. S. and Copus, K. (eds.). *Archaeological Report. The Recovery of the Manila Galleon Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, Sutton: Pacific Sea Resources, 1990, pp. 133–395.

⁴. See Crespo, H. M. *Choices*, Lisbon: AR-PAB, 2016., pp. 366–381, cat. 32