

# THE ARTS OF THE MANILA GALLEON

*Silk, lacquer and enconchado*



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GALLERY

At the dawn of the early modern period, the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, which blocked European access to the Asian market, had far-reaching consequences. Castile and Portugal, both maritime powers by nature, abandoned the Mediterranean world and launched themselves into the Atlantic Ocean, beginning a competition to discover new routes to reach the “Indies.” This effort led to the establishment of a new global order that can be described as the first globalization of the world. The traditional overland route linking Europe to East Asia—the so-called Silk Road, once traveled by Marco Polo—was replaced by a Portuguese maritime route, with key outposts in Goa, Malacca, and Macao.

The Castilians, for their part, set out in the opposite direction with the same goal of reaching the Indies. In doing so, they encountered the American continent and, beyond it, the Pacific Ocean, which they soon learned to cross and navigate back. From that moment, Manila became a Spanish city. Thus, East Asia and the Iberian Peninsula became connected: on the one hand, through the Portuguese territories of the Estado da Índia; and on the other, through the Spanish American viceroyalties, through which both people and goods began to move in significant volume on a global scale<sup>1</sup>.

Spices from Southeast Asia caused a frenzy in Europe, and the most highly prized Asian product since Roman times—silk—began circulating through the markets of both Europe and the Americas. Chinese blue-and-white porcelain was more easily transported aboard ships. Lacquerware objects, especially those from Japan, decorated with gold powder and mother-of-pearl, emerged as another coveted commodity among the privileged classes in both Europe and the Americas. By the seventeenth century, the secret Portuguese maritime routes were discovered by the Dutch and the English, two additional naval powers that soon competed with the Portuguese. Meanwhile, the Spanish worked to consolidate their exclusive navigation route linking Spain, the Americas, and Asia through great effort and daring feats. The famed Manila Galleon, active from 1565 to 1815, was responsible for transporting luxury goods from East Asia—silk, lacquerware, porcelain, embroidered textiles, folding screens, and other exotic objects—to Acapulco and Mexico City, with further branches to Lima, Cuzco, and Potosí, and ultimately to Seville.

Of the two routes, the Spanish one had more profound and complex consequences, as it intersected with the rising colonial society in the Americas—one that had its own interests and demands, and, above all, its own supply of silver to fuel international trade. The Spanish Crown sought to control trade with Asia to prevent the outflow of silver, but these efforts proved futile in the face of an increasingly powerful merchant class in

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<sup>1</sup> Rafael Valladares, *Castilla y Portugal en Asia (1580–1680): declive imperial y adaptación* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001); Alfredo Morales Martínez, ed., *Filipinas, puerta de Oriente: de Legazpi a Malaspina* (Madrid-Barcelona: Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior-Lunweg, 2003); María Alfonso Mola and Carlos Martínez Shaw, *Oriente en Palacio: tesoros asiáticos en las colecciones reales españolas* (Madrid: Patrimonio Nacional, 2003); Jay A. Levenson et al., *Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Century* (Lisbon: Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 2009); Rafael López Guzmán, ed., *El Tornaviaje. Arte iberoamericano en España* (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2021).



The Manila shawl—a square silk textile with fringes, embroidered with silk threads depicting floral imagery, birds, mythical creatures, and *chinoiserie* scenes and cosmologies—was produced in Canton (China) to the taste and specifications of Hispanic America and Spain. It carries with it a kind of mystical aura. As an object of contemplation, it has touched the soul of millions—particularly in Spain—who revere it, dance with it, wear it, and pass it down from generation to generation.

There is mystery in its exquisite embroidery, whose delicate and sometimes minuscule stitches create dazzling, intricate landscapes with no visible reverse—the images are identical on both sides of the silk.

Its origins also remain an enigma: its age, the precise historical moment when it first appeared, or the point at which it ceased to be merely a luxurious textile and became a defining element of women's dress in the viceroyalties of New Spain, Peru, New Granada, the Río de la Plata, and the Kingdom of Spain itself.

Its evolution and transformation are likewise unclear: Did the earliest shawls begin with timid embroidery in the corners, as some scholars suggest? Or, as children of the seventeenth century, were they born fully adorned in the opulent horror vacui style of the time? Are the Manila shawls related to Mexican huipiles or the shawls of the Peruvian tapadas? Were they always square, or were they originally rectangular like a stole? Were they born with fringes, or—as legend has it—were the fringes added later in Spain?

These are questions that still await answers. For although the Manila shawl is stitched into the heart of Spanish and Hispano-American tradition, serious research on the subject is still scarce. Today, in a single trunk, one may find: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artworks, fine examples of antique craftsmanship, and beloved family pieces of varying quality—all living side by side.

Where historians do agree (a rare occurrence) is that Manila shawls were part of the cargo transported aboard the Manila Galleon—that legendary ship which, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, carried between 300 and 800 tons of merchandise between the ports of Manila and Acapulco. Within its freight manifests, the shawl consistently occupied a place of importance.

### **The Manila Galleon: The First Globalization**

In 1565, the Augustinian friar and cosmographer Andrés de Urdaneta, under the orders of Philip II, led the expedition of the *Nao San Pedro* during which the “tornaviaje” was discovered: the east-to-west return route across the Pacific Ocean, connecting the Philippine archipelago to Acapulco (Mexico).

From that moment, the route of the Manila Galleon—also known as the Acapulco Galleon or *Nao de China*—was established and remained in operation until 1815. Between the territories of the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Philippine Islands, a continuous flow of ideas, people, and

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<sup>27</sup> Aguilera Rojas, J *Manila 1571-1898*, 1998 *Occidente en Oriente* (España: Ed. Ministerio de Fomento), 40.





1. ***Shawl***

Ala de mosca pattern  
18th – 19th century  
Palace scenes of the Tang dynasty  
Embroidered silk  
62.99 × 62.99 in, without fringes



2. ***Shawl***

Late 19th century  
Mother-of-pearl faces, a pagoda with domestic animals, and rural figures  
Embroidered silk  
62.99 × 62.99 in, without fringes



3. ***Shawl***

Cantonese  
Late 19th century  
Embroidered silk  
62.99 × 62.99 in, without fringes



4. ***Shawl***

Modernist, early 20th century  
Peony garden with four birds at the center  
Embroidered silk  
62.99 × 62.99 in, without fringes



5. ***Shawl***

Late 19th century  
Floral motifs, birds and fowl  
Embroidered silk  
62.99 × 62.99 in, without fringes



6. ***Shawl***

Ala de mosca pattern  
Late 19th century  
Ivory faces on both sides  
Embroidered silk  
62.99 × 62.99 in, without fringes



Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the transoceanic circuits established by the Manila Galleon gave rise to a dense network of material and symbolic exchanges between Asia, the Americas, and Europe. These routes facilitated the circulation of images, techniques, and objects—both devotional and secular—that were reconfigured through contact with new materials, aesthetics, and functions, giving rise to hybrid visual repertoires adapted to the cultural contexts in which they operated.

Among the objects that embody this mobility are paintings, folding screens, liturgical furnishings, and also everyday items such as porcelain pieces destined for the viceregal territories, which cannot be analyzed solely through their inscription in European iconographic models or their Asian materiality, but rather must be understood in their hybrid and operative condition as devices of cultural translation. Their visual power does not lie in the fidelity with which they replicate a tradition, but in their capacity to assume new meanings in diverse visual environments, establishing formal and symbolic relationships with the cultures that received them.

The group of works presented here—including devotional paintings, liturgical objects, export porcelain, and ornamental structures of transpacific circulation—offers a particularly clear view of the visual and material displacements that shaped art in the context of the Manila Galleon. Although differing in medium, scale, and function, they all participate in a common logic of formal reformulation: compositions, structures, and ornamental treatments were adapted, reinterpreted, or resignified as they entered new cultural spaces.

The reflection that follows draws on previous studies by Fernando António Baptista Pereira, Ulrike Körber, and Javier Alberto and José Manuel Eguiguren, whose research makes it possible to open a broader reading of the role of image, ornament, and material in the processes of visual translation in the transoceanic Ibero-world. Rather than considering each piece as an isolated case, this chapter proposes to think of the visual languages they carry as part of a visual economy in which painting, lacquer, furniture, sculpture, and porcelain converge in the construction of symbolic repertoires of global reach.

Art does not travel solely as image: it travels as object, as technical form, as functional structure open to reinterpretation. Along this transoceanic circuit emerged all kinds of objects that, when inserted into new cultural spaces, altered their meanings, uses, and visual languages, without losing their symbolic charge or visual efficacy. In the sphere of missionary Catholicism promoted by the religious orders in Asia, many devotional objects were required to move, teach, and adapt to local ritual and aesthetic languages. This operational need shaped both their material supports and their forms: folding screens that mimicked altarpieces, lacquered lecterns with Asian ornamentation, or Marian paintings reinterpreted with materials and codes distinct from those of Europe.

Yet the phenomenon extends beyond the missionary sphere. Through this overseas trade, objects without explicit doctrinal content also circulated—intended for ornament or everyday use, such as utensils and tableware. Among these are porcelain *mancerinas* and other profane objects made of the same material, which clearly combined functional and ornamental value. These are parallel experiences to what occurred with the textiles imported by the West from the East, such as luxurious



Fig. 5





*B*arniz de Pasto is a decorative technique originating in Colombia that has endured to this day. In 2020, it was recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, to promote awareness of its safeguarding and to support the development of a specialized protection plan.

Its origins trace back to the pre-Hispanic period, emerging among the Pasto Indigenous communities located in the southwestern region of the country. However, its greatest development took place following the arrival of the Spaniards, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The raw material used for this technique is obtained from a plant of the species *Elaeagia pastoensis* L. E. Mora, of the Rubiaceae family, which grows wild in the rainforest zone of Mocoa, in the department of Putumayo, located in the southeastern part of the country. The plant is commonly known as mopa-mopa, a name likely of Indigenous origin, whose earliest recorded mention dates to 1748, when explorers Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa referred to it in connection with Eastern lacquerware<sup>42</sup>.

The Indigenous peoples used this resin to create necklace beads<sup>43</sup>, as well as to ornament gourds and ceremonial staffs used by local authorities<sup>44</sup>. It was also applied in the decoration of ceremonial drinking vessels from the Inca colonial period, known as queros, which were carved in wood in low relief and inlaid with pieces of this resin in different colors.

To process the resin, the artisans—known as *barnizadores*, those who practice this craft—subject it to a laborious cleaning process. The mopa-mopa is submerged in hot water to remove impurities and dirt accumulated during harvesting.

Once softened by the heat, the resin becomes malleable and can be stretched by two people to form thin, transparent membranes, which may or may not be dyed with natural pigments. These are then laid over the objects to be decorated. During the colonial period, it was common practice to chew<sup>45</sup> the resin during the cleaning process an ancestral technique that remained in use until the mid-twentieth century, when it was replaced by the use of household grinders.

The membrane is simply applied to the surface with light pressure from the palm and fingers, combined with some heat. No adhesive is required, especially when applied to wooden objects. Once set, a sharp tool is used to cut out shapes and remove the excess. The technique allows for successive layering, in a kind of collage. The final surface of these objects exhibits a distinct satin sheen, characteristic of the resin, which remains intact even with the passage of time.

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<sup>42</sup> Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, *Relación histórica del viaje a la América Meridional hecho de orden de S. Mag. para medir algunos grados de meridiano terrestre, y venir por ellos en conocimiento de la verdadera figura y magnitud de la Tierra, con otras observaciones astronómicas y físicas* (Madrid: Antonio Marín, 1748).

<sup>43</sup> This topic is discussed in detail in María Cecilia Álvarez-White, *El barniz de Pasto. Secretos y revelaciones* (Bogotá: Ediciones UNIANDES, 2023).

<sup>44</sup> See the testimonies of Fray Jerónimo Descobar in 1582, in Hermes Tovar Pinzón, ed., *Relaciones y visitas a los Andes, siglo XVI* (Bogotá: Colección de Historia de la Biblioteca Nacional, Colcultura, 1993), and of Pedro Simón, *Noticias históricas de las conquistas de tierra firme en las Indias Occidentales* (Bogotá: Biblioteca Banco Popular, 1926), vol. 5.

<sup>45</sup> When Alexander von Humboldt visited Pasto in 1801, he recorded this process in his journals. See *Alexander von Humboldt en Colombia: extractos de sus diarios* (Bogotá: Publicismo y Ediciones and Academia Colombiana de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas y Naturales, 1982).



Within the vast territory that made up the Viceroyalty of New Spain, one of the most artistically distinguished communities was that of the Tarascan or Purépecha peoples, whose ingenuity and skill were praised by Spanish chroniclers throughout the viceregal period. Among these chroniclers we may highlight, among others, Bernardino de Sahagún, Jerónimo de Mendieta, and Diego Durán.

For this reason, the missionary friars in charge of the evangelization of the Purépechas sought to support and promote local crafts, including the technique of lacquering, or *maqueado*. The process consisted in applying *maque*—a dense paste made from powdered dolomite, pigments, and fat extracted from the aje insect (axin)—to gourds, jícaras cups, and wooden objects, producing impermeable and highly durable items, which were also notable for their striking aesthetic qualities. Thus, in 1609, Juan de Torquemada wrote that the Purépechas created containers “which, even if left in water for a hundred years, never lose or fade their paint; rather, they age, crack, and chip before they cease to retain their color and varnish<sup>56</sup>.”

Although in the mid-twentieth century it was thought that Mexican *maque* derived from Asian lacquer traditions, due to the visual similarity of the objects produced on either side of the Pacific, it has since been demonstrated that these are entirely distinct traditions, both in materials and techniques<sup>57</sup>. The technical origin of *maque*, in fact, is entirely pre-Hispanic, although the types of furniture to which it was later applied—as well as its themes and decorative motifs—changed significantly after the arrival of the Spaniards and under the influence of Asian goods, including Japanese lacquerware, which began to arrive in large quantities in New Spain from around 1570, when the commercial route of the Manila Galleon became regularized<sup>58</sup>.

The oldest *maque* works identified to date belong to the so-called “Mannerist-Influenced Workshop,” which produced its pieces in the town of Peribán<sup>59</sup>. These are characterized precisely by their use of ornamental motifs typical of the late Renaissance style, such as harpies, sirens, scrollwork, and cartouches. Furthermore, *maque* from Peribán employed a very specific technique known as incrustation, in which the object is completely covered with a layer of *maque*, and once it dries, the ornamental motifs are engraved with punches or burins, lifting the surface in the inner areas of the figures to create cavities into which a second, differently colored layer is inserted—inlaid flush with the surface.

Among the pieces manufactured in early Peribán, the most notable are the bateas—large, round wooden trays richly decorated, whose substantial size suggests they were meant primarily for display in elite households. These objects were highly celebrated in their time, as Fray Matías de Escobar notes<sup>60</sup>, and the best proof of their popularity is the large number of examples found in Spanish inventories, having been imported from Mexico.

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<sup>56</sup> Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Hispánica* (México: Ed. Salvador Chávez, 1943), 488

<sup>57</sup> See Gerardo Murillo, “Los chinos fueron los descubridores de nuestra patria,” *Excelsior*, May 22, 1921; José Guadalupe Zuno, “Las llamadas lacas michoacanas de Uruapan no proceden de las orientales,” *Cuadernos Americanos* no. 11 (1952): 387–388.

<sup>58</sup> Sonia Irene Ocaña Ruiz, *La domesticación de Asia: El arte transpacífico en Nueva España en el siglo XVII* (Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza, 2024), 30–31.

<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Castelló Yturbide argued that these pieces were in fact produced in other towns such as Uruapan and Pátzcuaro, and that Peribán merely served as a commercial center, since traders from the entire region gathered there for Palm Sunday market day. See Teresa Castelló Iturbide, “Maque o laca,” *Artes de México* no. 153 (1972): 39.

<sup>60</sup> Matías de Escobar, *Americana Thebaida* (Mexico City: Imprenta Victoria, 1924 [1729]), 148.



Fig. 1

The Manila Galleon constituted one of the most important trade routes of the early modern world. Between 1565 and 1815, it connected the ports of Manila, in the Philippines, and Acapulco, in New Spain, transporting goods, people, and ideas along a global corridor that linked Asia, the Americas, and Europe. This route was complemented by the Spanish Treasure Fleet, which carried cargo from the Americas to Seville and Cádiz—including many of the treasures now featured in this extraordinary exhibition.

This maritime corridor was decisive in shaping a world economic system and in facilitating the circulation of luxury goods that would transform material life in the Spanish viceroyalties<sup>68</sup>.

The voyage of the galleon was long and perilous, but the rewards were immense. From Manila came Chinese porcelain, Japanese lacquerware, silks, shawls, spices, ivory, and precious stones; from Acapulco departed American silver, the principal driver of global economies. These exchanges went beyond mere commerce: they fostered a rich cultural cross-fertilization. The taste for the exotic—and especially for Asian arts—inspired the creation of new artistic forms in New Spain, including *enconchado* painting and furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell.

The map of the route speaks to the magnitude of this journey, which required crossing the Pacific Ocean over the course of several months. The voyage became a symbol of the first globalization, in which objects were not only commodities, but also carriers of cultural and aesthetic meaning. The arts of the Manila Galleon testify to that early globalization. Thanks to this maritime route, New Spain became a center for the reception, transformation, and redistribution of Asian objects and techniques. *Enconchado* paintings and mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell furniture are examples of how viceregal societies reinterpreted the exotic through their own cultural lens.

These works cannot be understood outside the context of transpacific exchange. The galleon carried not only merchandise but also imaginaries and desires. The iridescence of mother-of-pearl and the translucence of tortoiseshell embody that convergence of worlds: Asia, the Americas, and Europe, united in a single luxurious object<sup>69</sup>.

Today, these pieces are material testimonies to the artistic and cultural dialogue that defined the American Baroque. They speak of a time when the Pacific Ocean was a bridge, not a boundary, and when the arts of the Manila Galleon became a symbol of a global *mestizaje*—a hybrid visual culture beautifully captured in this exhibition.

Shell-Inlaid Paintings in New Spain

### Enconchado painting in New Spain

The *pintura enconchada* or simply *enconchado*—was a genuinely Novohispanic innovation that emerged around the mid-seventeenth century

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<sup>68</sup> Gustavo Curiel, “Tránsito de obras suntuarias a la Nueva España. Reflexiones sobre el comercio transmarítimo”, in *España y Nueva España: sus acciones transmarítimas. Memorias del I Simposio Internacional celebrado en la ciudad de México del 23 al 26 de octubre de 1990* (Ciudad de México: Iberoamericana, Comisión Puebla V Centenario, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Embajada de España, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, Condumex, 1991), 141-170.

<sup>69</sup> Gustavo Curiel, “Consideraciones sobre el comercio de obras suntuarias en la Nueva España de los siglos XVII y XVIII”, en *Regionalización en el Arte: Teoría y Praxis. Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte* (Ciudad de México: Gobierno del Estado de Sinaloa-UNAM-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1992), 126-160.



Fig. 3



Fig. 5





Fig. 6