

MFA, Boston Acquires Cuban Chest for Art of the Americas Wing

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

I'd wager that for most readers the term "Americana" has a fairly narrow meaning. It's the word we all customarily use to define such things as New England-made high chests and schoolgirl samplers. But it isn't as simple as that. Not to single out Boston, but given the city's pride in its Colonial past and stubborn retention of its 19th-century moniker "Hub of the Universe," it's easy for Bostonians to overlook some basic facts. For example, Peru was conquered by the Spanish in 1532, nearly 100 years before the Pilgrims landed here. And the University of San Marcos was founded in Lima in 1551, 85 years before Harvard got established, making it the oldest university in the Western Hemisphere.

As a curator for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), Dennis Carr, reminded me in a conversation a while ago, "The cities of Latin America were much larger than the cities in any of the Anglo colonies in North America. Mexico City was the largest. Lima; Potosi, Bolivia; Havana; these were all bigger than Colonial Boston, New York, or Philadelphia [were] at the same time."

Carr was trained at Winterthur to be a traditional "Americanist." A decade ago, as a doctoral candidate at Yale, he worked on a major study of Colonial furniture-making in Rhode Island under the tutelage of noted furniture historian and Yale University Art Gallery curator Patricia E. Kane. But at Yale he also studied with Mary E. Miller, a renowned pre-Columbian art expert. Since then, he told me, he has "become increasingly interested in the arts of Latin America as a way of studying the cross currents of artistic influence across the Americas." And as the Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture in the MFA's Art of the Americas department, Carr was instrumental in the museum's acquisition last year of a spectacular 18th-century Cuban mahogany *cómoda* (chest).

The *cómoda* entered the collection on February 27, 2013, and was installed in a gallery in the Art of the Americas wing by the year's end. The acquisition is exemplary of a welcome new museum trend in the United States that gives long overdue attention to Latin Americana, reflecting the reality that the term "Americana" should encompass the arts of North America, Central America, South America, and all the countries of the Caribbean.

So, should museum-goers expect to see that curators have started acquiring Latin American arts by the container load? Once again, it isn't as simple as that. For example, how the *cómoda* came to be acquired by the MFA is a story of serendipity after a protracted search.

"A chest like this is something I have been looking for on behalf of the museum for a number of years," said Carr, who has been at the MFA since 2007. An example made of Cuban mahogany actually in Cuba would be perfect for display in the Art of the Americas wing, he had long thought, especially given its strong holdings of New England furniture of the 18th century, so much of which was made from mahogany imported from the Caribbean.

However, as collectors of Latin Americana know, beyond the walls of institutions in places like Cuba itself, such pieces, museum-quality or otherwise, are scarce and becoming increasingly expensive. Those were the two main reasons why Carr's search had been unsuccessful until September 2012. While spending "a magical month" in Madrid with his wife and son, he visited the antiques shop of a friend. The previous summer, a colleague had sent him a grainy photo of a Cuban chest that wasn't yet on the market, although Carr had wished it were. "When I walked into the shop in Madrid,"

Carr recounted, "there it was—not just any Cuban chest, but the very same one. It was an amazing moment."

Immediately he sent photos to his Boston colleagues and just as immediately they expressed their enthusiasm and excitement. Phone calls subsequently took place. Everyone was convinced that this was "The One." Asked how many photos, how many calls it took, Carr laughed. "It didn't take many because it was so apparent that it was a magnificent object. And fortunately, our director, Malcolm Rogers, and other MFA curators were already on their way to Spain to work on an upcoming Goya exhibition and were able to see the chest in person. So it was perfect timing for this to work out."

Nor did any great fundraising effort need to be mounted. While declining to name its price for publication, Carr would say it was "quite modest, especially when compared to a contemporary, and, I should add, much smaller, Newport chest of drawers, which could cost in the millions."

The MFA's chest was likely made for use in a household; similar ones were made for churches. They were intended both for the local market and for export, and several are known with 18th-century histories of having been exported to countries in South America. As stated on the MFA's Web site, the MFA's chest came from Argentina by way of Portugal, where it had been in a private collection for years.

The versions of this chest used in churches, for storing such items as priests' vestments, are called *cómodas de sacristía* (sacristy chests)—a sacristy being rooms behind the altar where priests get ready for Mass.

"Sometimes you see them as one giant piece of furniture, five or six in a row, all combined into one piece," said Carr, who has traveled extensively throughout South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. In the 1961 edition of Wallace Nutting's *Furniture Treasury*, he noted, there is a photo of a sacristy chest found in the cathedral in Havana. "I would tip my hat to Nutting," Carr said, "for realizing the interest of these Cuban pieces early on."

The MFA's chest was made in two parts, probably for easier movement in a household or for shipping. "It is a tremendously heavy object," said Carr. "The mahogany is very dense. It took four of our strongest art handlers just to put it in place in the gallery."

Remarkably, no restoration was required beforehand. "We have done very little besides cleaning and lightly polishing the silver hardware," said Carr. "I would say that minor restoration had been done to it in the past, but nothing really visible, all on structural components inside the case."

Besides the chest's virtuosic, baroque carving and its overall stature—compared to a typical New England chest, it is oversized at 45 7/8" x 68 1/2" x 35 1/16"—the original silver hardware completes this picture of beauty. Of that silver, Carr explained, "Havana was the port where the Spanish treasure fleets from Mexico and South America gathered, then sailed back home to Spain, bringing vast amounts of silver from the New World. This trade in silver fueled the Spanish empire for centuries. That may explain why so much silver was available for the handles and hardware." From studying period inventories, Carr was aware that these chests did sometimes have them,

but few survive today. That's why his discovery of this chest was all the more special. Indeed, even the iron locks on the inside of the chest are sheathed in silver.

Literally days after Carr showed me the MFA's chest, I experienced my own moment of serendipity related to it. I happened to be in Los Angeles, where I happened to go to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where I happened to wander into a gallery where there happened to be another Cuban-made 18th-century mahogany *cómoda*. That one is on loan from a private foundation, the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection), based in New York City and Caracas, Carr later told me. "There are others in private collections, but they are rare in the United States, and the two that you have now seen are, as far as I know, the only two in institutional collections."

LACMA's was a nice piece but not as ornate as the MFA's, and it has brass hardware. It convinced me that Carr had truly found a gem in Madrid. False modesty would not be in order here, and Carr did not engage in it. "Ours is certainly

among the grandest and most elegant examples of this type of furniture I have ever seen," he said.

The MFA displays its Cuban chest with other works from colonial Latin America. Some have been generously lent by the Cisneros collection. Others have been newly acquired over the last seven years. Hanging above the chest is one of these—a 1754 oil on canvas portrait of Don Manuel Jose Rubio y Salinas, Archbishop of Mexico, by Miguel Cabrera. When Cabrera painted it, he was the leading artist in Mexico, comparable to Boston's John Singleton Copley, whose works at the MFA are plentiful. Until the MFA bought this Cabrera in 2008 for an undisclosed sum from Madrid-based dealer Manuel Piñanes Garcia-Olias, the MFA had no Mexican paintings at all.

Cabrera painted other portraits of the same subject. They were distributed as a sign of respect and authority to various religious institutions, including churches, hospitals, and convents. The MFA's example has an inscription indicating it was executed for a convent. Other surviving examples include one in the National Museum of the Viceroyalty in Tepotzotlán, one in the Chapter Hall of the Parish of Santa Prisca in Taxco, and four in the National Cathedral in Mexico City. This is the only one in an institution in the United States.

A second piece of Latin Americana recently acquired by the MFA is an extremely important 17th-century Mexican *escritorio* (writing cabinet), made in Villa Alta de San Ildefonso, Oaxaca. It came from a private collection in France and sold at auction before being acquired by the MFA from dealer Carlton Hobbs of New York City in 2010, in time for the museum to premiere it at the opening of the Art of the Americas wing that fall.

The *escritorio* has inlaid panels, incised designs, and a bird's-eye view of Villa Alta de San Ildefonso, a rare view of this town in the 17th century. It also shows the indigenous barrio, or neighborhood, of Analco, where indigenous Mexicans made this elaborate furniture. The inside of the *escritorio* has complex European designs, indicating that the indigenous artists were able to adapt high-style European iconography that was probably circulating in New Spain as engraved prints.

"Before I came to the museum, our collection tended toward just the

provincial arts of Latin America," said Carr. "I felt strongly that we needed to show the grandeur of the major urban and artistic centers of Latin America." The *escritorio*, the chest, and the portrait certainly fit that bill. "The *escritorio* is also important in that it shows the mixing of indigenous and European cultures that so characterizes the art of colonial Latin America. It is a fascinating object."

Earlier than any of those pieces is a third major acquisition by the MFA. It is a rare 16th-century silver-gilt chalice with paten from Guatemala. Its description on the museum's Web site says it was in a private collection in Greenwich, Connecticut, by the mid-1930s. On February 4, 1981, it sold at Christie's in New York City to Jacques Kugel of Paris. In 1982 or 1983, it was sold by Kugel to a private collector in Lisbon. On October 30, 2008, it was sold at Sotheby's in Paris to Timothy Phillips of Boston. In 2011, Phillips, who is an MFA trustee, made it a year-end gift to the museum.

"This chalice is among the earliest surviving silver from the Americas made by European artists," Carr said. "It is well over a hundred years earlier than the silver made here in New England by the Anglo settlers, for which the MFA's collection is so well known."

Besides actively collecting Latin American art, a number of major United States museums have lately been mounting significant exhibits. In 2004, for example, the Denver Art Museum showed *Painting a New World: Mexican Art and Life, 1521-1821*. It was said to have been the largest exhibit of Mexican colonial painting ever assembled outside of Mexico. In 2006, the Philadelphia Museum of Art mounted *Tesoros/Treasures/Tesouros: The Arts in Latin America, 1492-1820*. It was hailed by the *New York Times* in a review by Roberta Smith as a presentation of "a sprawling period of almost unimaginable artistic production" and "an exceptional, extravagant exercise in the eternal flux and cross-fertilization of cultures."

More recently, at the end of 2013, *Behind Closed Doors: Art in the Spanish American Home, 1492-1898* opened at the Brooklyn Museum. The traveling show went on to the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History. It is currently at the New Orleans Museum of Art, where it will remain until September 21, 2014. Its final stop will be the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, where it is scheduled to be on view from October 24, 2014, through January 11, 2015.

In late summer and fall 2015, the MFA will open its own Latin American show. A first of its kind at the Boston institution, it's called *Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia*. Like the others mentioned above, it focuses on art produced across the colonial Americas, but it has a unique twist. It will examine the impact of the Asia trade in such diverse places as Lima, Quebec, Mexico City, and Boston.

"I think of *Made in the Americas* as a natural way to build upon the Art of the Americas wing," said Carr, the exhibition's organizer. In fact, he was in Madrid doing research for it when he discovered the Cuban chest. "Within decades after the discovery and conquest of the Americas, there was direct trade between Asia and the Americas. It was the first time the world was truly interconnected. Direct trade between the Philippines and Mexico started in 1573 and lasted for an astonishing nearly 250 years. It's a story few people know, and it will be told through an incredible group of 'global' objects." In summary, said Carr, "It really is a show about the first age of globalization."

For more information, see the MFA's Web site (www.mfa.org).



Portrait of Don Manuel Jose Rubio y Salinas, Archbishop of Mexico by Miguel Cabrera (1695-1768), 1754, 71 5/8" x 49 3/16", oil on canvas. Charles H. Bayley Picture and Painting Fund. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

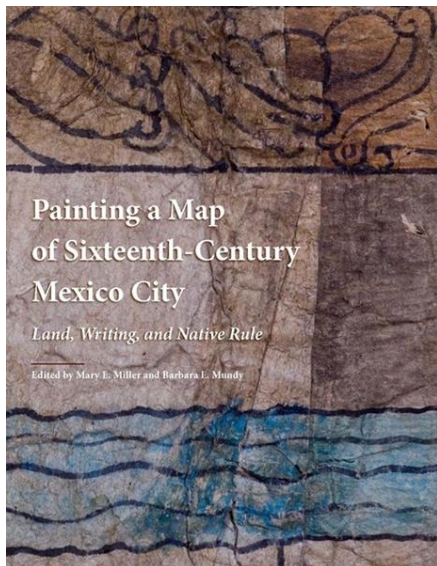


Watson and the Shark, John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), 1778, 72 1/4" x 90 3/8", oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Mrs. George von Lengerke Meyer. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

This painting, acquired by the MFA in 1889, is in a gallery near the one where the Cuban chest is on display. As Dennis Carr likes to point out, this is Havana in 1749, at about the time the chest was being made. "It depicts a scene in the harbor where a fourteen-year-old English cabin boy, Brook Watson, was attacked by a shark and rescued by his shipmates," he said. "And in the background is a rare and pretty spectacular vista of the old city of Havana and Morro Castle, which survives today. Copley never went to Havana, and I assume he was using prints of Havana. Havana was briefly occupied by the British in 1762 for about a year." The MFA Web site says further that *Watson and the Shark* was the first large-scale history painting that Copley executed. It also notes that the rescue was ultimately successful, but only after the boy lost the lower part of his right leg. Watson went on to become a prosperous merchant and hold numerous important political posts in London.



Dennis Carr, the Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the William J. Fitzgerald Gallery with the Cuban chest of drawers (*cómoda*), 1750-1800, 45 7/8" x 68 1/2" x 35 1/16", mahogany, Spanish cedar (*Cedrela odorata*), and silver hardware. Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund. Displayed on the chest is a silver-gilt basin, Cuzco, Peru, 1675-1700, on loan from a private collection. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Painting a Map of Sixteenth-Century Mexico City: Land, Writing, and Native Rule, edited by Mary E. Miller and Barbara E. Mundy, with essays contributed by Dennis Carr and others. Published by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, distributed by Yale University Press. The book is available at bookstores or through the Web site (<http://yalebooks.com>).

Carr said his interest in Latin Americana began with a seminar paper he wrote on the early 16th-century manuscript map that is the book's subject. "It is a very rare map," Carr said. "It was created by a community of Nahuatl-speaking artists and dates to around 1565, which makes it not only one of the earliest maps of Mexico City but one of the earliest major indigenous maps of the New World. That project started me down the road of thinking more broadly about the Americas. A piece like the Cuban chest brings all of my interests together."



The MFA's Cuban chest. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Chalice and paten, Antigua, Guatemala, circa 1560, silver-gilt. The chalice is 11 1/8" x 7 1/2" and weighs 3.08 lbs. The paten is 6 1/16" x 1/8". Gift of Thomas Jr., Kathleen, Daniel, Claire, Ann, and Timothy Phillips in memory of Thomas and Clare Phillips. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Escritorio (writing desk), Villa Alta de San Ildefonso, Oaxaca, Mexico, circa 1671, 41 5/16" x 24 13/16" x 17 1/4", linaloe, granadillo, cedar, with marquetry and filled engraving. Museum purchase with funds donated anonymously, William Francis Warden Fund, American Decorative Arts Deaccession Fund, Arthur Tracy Cabot Fund, Edwin E. Jack Fund,

and by exchange from a Gift of Harold Whitworth Pierce, Gift of Miss Ellen Graves, Mr. Samuel Cabot and Mrs. Roger Ernst in memory of their father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Edmund P. Graves, Gift of Mary W. Bartol, John W. Bartol, and Abigail W. Clark, William E. Nickerson Fund, Gift of Mrs. Henry Lyman, Bequest of Barbara Boylston Bean, Charles Amos Cummings Fund, Gift of Mrs. Charles L. Bybee, Bequest of Dudley Leavitt Pickman, Gift of Henry G. E. Payson, and from funds donated by Mrs. Walter Hunnewell in memory of Walter Hunnewell. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



260. SHAPED FRONT, BRACKET FOOT, MAHOGANY, RANGE OF DRAWERS. 18TH CENTURY. PICTURE AND DATA FROM WILLIAM B. GOODWIN.

The statement has been made that this great piece, which is in the cathedral at Havana, may possibly have suggested a block front as made in Newport. The block front is not found in England, but some have thought its inspiration was Dutch. The blocking here is definite at each end of the drawer, but there is an added curve each side of a central flat section. Townsend was doing cabinet making in 1725. John Goddard, the great father of the block front, was his son-in-law, and apprentice. Townsend may have visited the West Indies, for mahogany.

Wallace Nutting, *Furniture Treasury*, 2 vols., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961, figure 260. The caption says, "Shaped Front, Bracket Foot, Mahogany, Range of Drawers. 18th Century. Picture and Data from William B. Goodwin."

