

# In search of wisdom

An iconographic programme in a 16th-century  
German bureau with marquetry



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
EDERREN MUSEOA  
MUSEO DE BELLAS  
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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In the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection is a bureau with marquetry boasting an architectural front decorated with small sculptures and drawers [fig. 1]. The piece is particularly interesting for some remarkable interior and outer decorative work and its complex iconographic programme. From a very varied legacy<sup>1</sup>, and unknown to German scholars familiar with this kind of furniture, its quality has attracted the interest of Spanish researchers for years<sup>2</sup>. A Museum initiative has now enabled the piece to be restored and subjected to a thoroughgoing analysis<sup>3</sup> that has brought several highly important details to light, including the fact that it was made in the city of Augsburg in the 1560s and that it is closely linked to the main marquetry door at El Escorial monastery, attributed to cabinet-maker Bartholomew Weisshaupt, active in Augsburg between 1560 and 1580.

As a city with flourishing political, commercial and financial relations with Spain and Italy, Augsburg, located in the intersection of numerous trade routes, was a meeting point for dealers, diplomats and local princes, which meant that the kind of furniture made there was unlikely to be ignored for long: Augsburg soon became an essential benchmark, its influence extending to Innsbruck. Although documentary evidence exists for the production of different types of furniture, including tables, lecterns, chests, bureaux, mural coverings and monumental doors and gates, in which coloured wood marquetry is the common denominator, basically the bureau is the best representative of the concept to which we will need to refer. As the Spanish connection for this kind of furniture has been previously researched and demonstrated at European level<sup>4</sup>, it is relatively easy to follow the thread to establish the right chronological parameters and its formal evolution. In the present case, we are dealing with a box of average size, measuring 82.4 centimetres long by 48.4 high<sup>5</sup>, with a depth of 38.6 centimetres, capable of accommodating a series of drawers and compartments big enough to be considered useful. However, we need to think of such usefulness as purely rhetorical, as none of its "functions" is clear enough for us to be able to judge it a useful, as well as a beautiful, piece of furniture. On the contrary, it would primarily be seen as a luxury item, one of ostentation, wherever it was found.

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1 This piece entered the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection in 1952, thanks to a donation made before her death by Sofia Gil Iturriaga (1863-1949), daughter of Juan Gil, a doctor whose portrait by Esquivel in 1841 (Inv. No.. 69/85) is also part of the same legacy. The bureau must have been acquired by Juan Gil in Madrid in the mid-19th century. My sincere thanks are due to Domingo Vijande for his interest in discovering the provenance of this collection.

2 See Castellanos 1988.

3 It was in a poor state of conservation, largely owing to attacks of wood-eating insects common in northern Spain, but it has been superbly restored at the Arcaz workshop. Restoration work made experimental research possible via Raman spectroscopy, conducted by the Furniture Group of the CSIC's Cultural Heritage network. The Arte-Lab laboratory performed analysis of the coatings and woods employed in the marquetry.

4 With the term *bargueño* popularized in Spain, *escritorio* [bureau] has been claimed for some decades now to be the most accurate term to identify this type of object. Its documentary trajectory and exact translation to other languages are backed up well into the 19th century.

5 To calculate the bureau's total measurements (56.3 x 89.1 x 38.6 cm) the legs and the lateral ironwork are taken into account, even when they are later additions.



1. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Wood, alabaster and iron, 56.3 x 89.1 x 38.6 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 82/1477

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2. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Wood, alabaster and iron, 56.3 x 89.1 x 38.6 cm; 89 x 101.5 x 48.7 cm (table)  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 82/1477; 82/2472 (table)  
Detail with door open



3. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail with extractable central drawer



4. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of lid of extractable central drawer

## A description of the piece of furniture in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

Ten drawers and a central door make up the drawer front of the bureau, originally fitted with a swing flap the inner side of which is now embedded in the desk on which it stands<sup>6</sup>. This desk-top, the top of the bureau and the sides are covered with coloured wood marquetry, following a technique called *Gesägte intarsia*, employed from the mid-16th century in southern Germany, essentially in Augsburg<sup>7</sup>. The same decorative system covers the inner face of the front door, all four surfaces of the inner central niche and the interior of the drawer in the base beneath the central door [figs. 2, 3 and 4]. Once completely withdrawn, this latter feature serves as a particularly luxurious case, with a swing flap also in marquetry, and which could also be used as a lectern, being held up by a hinge open at 45 degrees. To give a greater sensation of wealth, the sides of the box are also plated and bear marquetry with a clear-toned geometric border in maple wood.

An illustration of an architectural ruin can be seen on the inside of the door: two arches of broken ashlar, several piled-up polyhedrons of different shapes with their supports broken up and a glimpse of landscape

6 A cut of approximately a centimetre is clearly visible, made in the lateral and upper planes, where the hinges and lock would have been fitted, an addition of around twenty centimetres also being observable in the plane now in the table and which corresponded to the lock area. The legs and the rest of the table are products of an old, certainly pre-20th century restoration. The back part has also been renewed, which prevents us from knowing whether the piece was recovered in finer wood on the four sides, as was usual.

7 See the definition of this technique in the following section of this essay.

behind two more arches with weed-filled oculi, or circular windows. Above are the two magnificent blades of the hinges and the ball lock, all features gilt and engraved. The rest of the marquetry covering the bureau consists of rolled cylinders, following a pattern made fashionable by the Fontainebleau school, known in Germany as *Beschlagwerk* (strapwork) and in Spain as *labor de cueros recortados*, involving a range of polyhedrons and with branches of green leaves and large flowers, which in the internal planes even spread beyond the frame [fig. 4].

However, the drawer or tray face is not decorated with marquetry, a strictly architectural decoration being preferred there: a large central door, comprising double columns in alabaster that enclose niches and capitals of smooth Attic capped entablature, formed by a central circle and two niches between pilasters, is flanked by two bodies of four drawers. Three orders of alabaster columns give the drawers the appearance of a palatial façade with high pedestals, one main storey with two above, one dintelled and the other boasting arches forming balconies, both with split pediments, an architectural solution taken from Book IV of Serlio's magnum opus<sup>8</sup>, and which was to become a common feature in the front pieces of 16th century Italian and Spanish bureaux. The two laterals repeat the large entablatures to provide space for two narrow sliding trays. Two of the drawers have a double bottom with two small trays set into the back part, with facings and mahogany mouldings and carved boxwood handles, which open the trays by activating a small metal spring- or bolt-like mechanism.

All the spaces formed by arches and lintels are occupied by a figure in alabaster and boxwood relief. Only the upper central circle and the central plinth, broader than the laterals, provide space enough for the inclusion of two alabaster and boxwood figures in each square compartment. All the carving is high quality work, although the alabaster, with the remains of gilt work, is in general superior<sup>9</sup>.

Features in metal, including tiny head-shaped handles, lock and hinges on the inside of the central door, were subjected to exhaustive analysis<sup>10</sup>, which showed that, while the handles and nails were brass, the hinges and lock were fire-gilded iron, and of a quality in accord with the tradition in southern Germany in the mid-16th century.

The woods most used are maple and walnut. Clear maple was essential as a background into which the walnut in all its tones was then inserted, together with wood from fruit trees, particularly pear and plum. Another essential wood is the Hungarian ash, used in all drawer interiors<sup>11</sup>, boxwood being generally employed for figures and capitals. Although exotic woods such as ebony are absent, during restoration work wood from the coconut was observed in the pilasters behind the columns and in friezes and entablatures. Before restoration work, the small black dots of the coconut appeared to have been painted, like the very fine strips of mahogany, especially in the framings. The different tones were obtained by dyeing and toasting the wood. Particularly interesting is the green of some leaves, which does not match any known species and was originally thought to have been obtained using chemical dyes. Recent research showed it to be a type of fungus, *chlorociboria*, which left pigment residues on ordinary poplar wood<sup>12</sup>.

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8 Serlio 1552, Book IV, fol. LVI and LVII.

9 Remains appearing during the recent restoration by Arcaz workshop.

10 Conducted by Ignacio Montero, scientific researcher at the CCHS-CSIC Microlab.

11 Known in Spanish records of the 16th century as "madera de aguas de Alemania" [water woods of Germany], it was hugely successful in Spain and is found in numerous inventory and evaluation documents. The issue was studied by Castellanos 1988, pp. 34-48; Aguiló 1987, p. 333; and Aguiló 1993, pp. 103-105 and 310-319.

12 Blanchette/Wilmering/Baumeister 1992.

## Furniture with mosaic inlay from augsburg: the historic records

What was known in the 15th century as the *intarsia* technique after Italian models was further developed in the *Gesägte intarsia*: "a covering in mosaic form of different formal elements and different woods consisting in a picture composition based on strips of wood of the same thickness stuck together"<sup>13</sup>. This was the procedure employed in Augsburg. The spectrum of colours found in the woods was also achieved in Augsburg, where recipes were developed for artistically colouring thin strips of wood, recipes that were commercialized in what became a lucrative business<sup>14</sup>. That the inhabitants of Augsburg were intensely proud of this work is clear from the records of a craftsmen's council meeting in 1568 at which coloured *intarsia* was given priority over painting, exactly as Vasari had done two centuries before in Florence when praising Benedetto da Maiano<sup>15</sup>.

Research into southern German furniture featuring *intarsia* was begun by Otto von Falke in his work on carvers like Lienhard Stromair<sup>16</sup>. It subsequently flourished from 1950 on thanks to the work of Lise Lotte Möller on the *Wrangelschrank*<sup>17</sup>. Möller showed that, although the art of *intarsia* was dominated by Augsburg, the technique was developed very successfully in other cities in southern Germany and the Tyrol such as Nuremberg, Ulm and Innsbruck. So few signed *intarsia* pieces of furniture, particularly from the earliest period, actually survived that style became the main criterion for identifying a piece of furniture's place of origin. Possibly because of the exceptional quality of the *Wrangelschrank*, Möller came to the surprising conclusion that only a small number of bureaux from the 1560s and 1570s were of sufficient quality to have been made in Augsburg, which means that most of them, particularly *intarsia* furniture from the later years of the century, should be attributed to Tyrolese workshops. Some years later, Dieter Alfter argued against this suggestion, especially in view of the lack of documentary evidence (records of the production of *eingeleigten und gefornierten*, i.e. inlaid and recovered, bureaux) that back it up until well into the 17th century. Consequently, separating centres of production purely on the basis of style is not exactly an easy task<sup>18</sup>.

Early evidence confirms how important this kind of furniture was for Spain throughout the second half of the 16th century. Calvete de Estrella's *Relación* has a description of the room where Charles V dined in his palace in Binche (Belgium) with tapestries of Vertumnus and Pomona: "[...] and whose doors and windows were made from the wood and inlaid work done in Germany with that lustre and nailings and tools and great difference of colours and woods and fine stuccos"<sup>19</sup>. And in his *Comentarios de la pintura*, Felipe de Guevara mentions a range of painted woods, i.e. to "incrusted" and "inlaid" work: "... I wondered for some time if the Romans had had news of that genre of painting worked on wood, using diverse woods; what we call *embutido* and the Italians *commesso di legno*. Today Germany makes writing desks and tables that draw great praise from the public, organizing in them perspectives and various animals and effigies"<sup>20</sup>. He dedicates eight pages to explaining the types of tables brought from Germany and the problem with the varnishes, saying of them that they were *noli me tangere* for this reason. He compares them with a robust table of

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13 Definition by Georg Himmelheber in Himmelheber 1967.

14 Documents from 1593 record that at this time the trade in coloured woods was liberalized, having until then been in the hands of high dignitaries. The regulations of 1550 are collected in Hellwag 1924.

15 Chapter XXXI of the section "On Architecture", states: "...because it soon becomes black and is only an imitation of the painting; it is not longlasting and may be attacked by moth, and the praise it deserves does not offset the time used in its execution" (Vasari 2002, pp. 85-86). The edition used translates the original Italian term *tarli as polilla*, but we believe it is more correct to talk of *carcoma* [woodworm].

16 Falke 1916, p. 121.

17 Möller 1956.

18 Alfter 1986, p. 24.

19 Calvete de Estrella (1552) 2001.

20 Felipe de Guevara. *Comentarios de la pintura*. Edition by Antonio Ponz (1738) collected by Sánchez Cantón 1923-1941, vol. I (1923); Allende-Salazar 1925; Collantes Terán 2000.



Ptolemy, King of Mauritania, and goes so far as to say it should be an example for Spanish assemblers to "stop ranting against the Germans and for them to throw off their boasting, if they have such, about their assembly work"<sup>21</sup>. A little later, in 1584, Antonio Meyting left record of their importance through an agent of the Függer in Madrid, possibly thanks to the work of the ambassador Khevenhüller<sup>22</sup>.

All four leading carvers with work of this kind documented had links with Spain. One was Lienhard Strohmail, several of whose pieces of furniture have survived, including the great wardrobe with the arms of Maximilian II, today in the Hernani Collection (1554)<sup>23</sup>. Another was Bartholomew Weissshaupt, who made "some artistic wardrobes" for Philip II in 1562 that were then sent on to Spain<sup>24</sup>. A third was Hieronymus Fleischer, who in or around 1600 worked on this kind of furniture for the Archduchess Maria of Austria and her daughter Anna, queen of Spain. And finally there was Daniel Kerl, who is known to have sent furniture to the Duke of Alba<sup>25</sup>. Thanks to this abundant inventory information on the presence in Spain of these "German water wood bureaux", reliable calculations put the figure between five and fifteen of these pieces of furniture, including bureaux and coffers, and between five and ten tables, also made of "German water wood", by the leading artists whose work has been the subject of research. This goes to confirm that German furniture was a really important feature of fashion in the second half of the 16th century<sup>26</sup>.

## Intarsia

A painstaking analysis of the bureau's four outer surfaces shows a coherence in the composition that was even copied in detail in the additional piece in the table when the lid or cover was taken off. All four have floral motifs forming bunches of large flowers, roses and carnations, arranged in centres of cartouches, from which hang a few branches with green leaves. The models for the flowers used in these compositions can be found engraved in German design repertoires from the early 16th century, like the ones produced for playing cards by Israel van Meckenem or the ES master<sup>27</sup>. As a central motif the top surface [fig. 5] has a large bouquet and, next to it, a pyramidal polyhedron, while the one on the inside of the front lid (now incorporated into the upper part of the support table) [fig. 6] has a trophy in the centre as a sort of *peltae*, or small shield, inserted in a cartouche, with several birds perched on the fretted rollworked edges. On either side of the tabletop, two cubes placed in different positions allow us to see the circular planes. The trophy motif, profusely used in marble and hard stone Roman table tops in the second half of the 16th century, was quite unusual in German engravings but standard in Flemish ones: Hans Vredeman de Vries included in his 1572 engravings a series of *Panoplia*<sup>28</sup>, one of which is identical to the one used here. The torso also appearing in the engraving, is a feature repeated several times in other furniture from the same milieu, like the Wrangelschrank, and the same applies to the trophies, a motif employed in the first plane of the alabaster relief of the central door of the Bilbao bureau.

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21 Ibid.

22 Sánchez Pinilla 1966.

23 Displayed a few years ago in the exhibition *El Real Alcázar de Madrid. Dos siglos de Arquitectura y Coleccionismo en la Corte de los Reyes de España*, coordinated by Fernando Checa (Madrid 1994, p. 285).

24 The documentation on these cabinet makers, in particular records referring to Bartholomew Weissshaupt, was studied and transcribed more than twenty years ago. See Aguiló 1987, p. 333; Aguiló 1993, pp. 103-105 and 433.

25 Von Stetten, quoted by Himmelheber 1967 and Möller 1956.

26 Aguiló 1990, vol. II (Inventories).

27 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 23, pp. 134, 284-285.

28 "Panoplia Sev arma / mentarium ac ornamenta / cum artium ac opificiorum / tum etiam Exuuiarum Mar: / tialium, qua Spolia quoque / alijs appellari consuevere / Iohs Vreedman Vriese inventor / Gerar de. Iode. Excudebat. Anno 1572" The new Hollstein... 1949-, vol. XLVIII, p. 346.



5. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of upper plane



6. Anonymous, German  
Support table of the bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Wood, 48.7 x 101.5 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 82/2472

The two side planes [figs. 7 and 8], with similar floral motifs, are arranged around a centre as a sort of lectern, inside which we glimpse large books and a polyhedron surrounded by two large birds. The four planes are framed by a double border, the inner one with buds and flat discs and the outer one with algae, both motifs taken from the classical world and common in Mannerist engravings, in which owls also appear as guardians above the cartouche<sup>29</sup>. A careful analysis of all the planes reveals the cuts and additions made to the piece in earlier restorations. The same type of marquetry can be seen in the four sides of the central space behind the door, consisting in a single scroll with a prism in the laterals and the floor, and in a garland at the back. In the superb plane of the lower drawer which also serves as lectern or writing desk, the

<sup>29</sup> Berliner 1954, vol. I, plate 196.



7 and 8. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Details of sides

same bouquets are appreciable, here with more green leaves, the large central cartouche containing several prisms, all of exceptional quality and magnificently preserved, including the guilloché border of the sides and back. And it is this plane that might just provide the key to its origins: all its motifs, whether floral, geometric or military, and the system used in the composition are exactly the same as the front panels of two of the doors of El Escorial monastery, the one bearing the date 1567 in the upper part [fig. 9]<sup>30</sup> and the one that was in high prior's cell<sup>31</sup>, works soundly attributed to Bartholomew Weisshaupt, a carver from Augsburg, who between 1559 and 1565 received a pension from King Philip II of Spain as a reward for several works executed<sup>32</sup>. His son Jeremías was entrusted with the task of consolidating the doors in the monastery and there are records of his activity as agent of the ambassador Khevenhüller, as he brought over to Spain, for Philip II, an organ made in Augsburg, which remained in Bilbao for four months<sup>33</sup>, together with several pieces included in a list as being of potential interest to Philip II. Chief among these was the "door of German wood of several colours with columns to the sides and its lintel", which coincides with the door of the Hall of the Ambassadors at El Escorial mentioned previously<sup>34</sup>.

Bureau door and plane models were undoubtedly taken from the work of Lorenz Stöer, the only German treatise writer moved to Augsburg who drew solid geometric bodies<sup>35</sup>. The title of his most famous treatise,

30 Today in the Ambassadors' Room. Möller 1956, pp. 159-161; Rodríguez G. de Ceballos 1977; Aguiló 1987; Aguiló 1993, pp. 103-105, 413 and 433; Checa 1997, pp. 262-265.

31 Inv. no. 10014374.

32 The documents held in the AGS, Consejos y Juntas de Hacienda (legs. 62 and 184), published by Aguiló 1993 (p. 433), were used to justify a small coffer signed by the same carver in 1577 and kept in the reliquary in the monastery of the Descalzas Reales (inv. no. 00612579). See Madrid 1998, p. 677, cat. 292. The difference in the concept and quality between the doors and the coffer makes it hard to accept that they are both by the same hand, particularly given the late dating for the latter.

33 *Korrespondenz von Hans Khevenhüller aus Portugal* (Vienna, Universitätsbibliothek, Ms. II, 409, fol. 137r), cited in Pérez de Tudela/Jordan 2001, appendix A, p. 28, note 23.

34 Checa 1993, p. 171, note 244.

35 They were usually employed as models for silver- and goldsmiths, intarsia and other craftsmen, such as Durer, Rivius, Jamnitzer and Lencker, all active in Nuremberg.



9. Attributed to Bartholomew Weisshaupt (active between 1560 and 1580)  
Door of Hall of Ambassadors, 1567  
Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid  
Inv. no. 10014373



10. Lorenz Stöer (active in the second half of the 16th century)  
Illustrative plate with geometric figures, no. 332, 1564  
Library of the University of Munich, Germany



11. Attributed to Bartholomew Weisshaupt  
(active between 1560 and 1580)  
Door of Hall of Ambassadors, 1567  
Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid  
Detail

*Geometria et Perspectiva*, specifically states they are designs "useful for the carvers in their inlay works"<sup>36</sup>. One of the coloured plates recently found in the library at the University of Munich and attributed to Stöer contains the bodies represented here, both the regular polyhedrons (octahedrons, icosahedron, tetrahedron (pyramid), dodecahedron) and the so-called "irregular solids" (octahedron intersection of tetrahedron or pyramid and hexahedron two cubes [fig. 10]), which are also seen in one of the details on the door at El Escorial [fig. 11].

The only plane showing architectural ruins in the piece of furniture in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum is the one of the interior of the central door [fig. 12]. The use of architectural *vedute* developed in Urbino and Florence in the late 15th century, both as scenographies and as a model for the *intarsia*, passed on to the Fontainebleau school, from where Lise Lotte Möller considers the most decorative models for such representations derived, amplified by appearing in the illustrated books of Jacques Androuet Ducerceau and Leonard Thiry, subsequently used by engravers like Virgil Solis and Lorenz Stöer to make their illustrative plates [fig. 13]<sup>37</sup>. However, it is also true that subsequent research insisted on the close association of these representations with the models from northern Italy, bearing in mind that prestigious carvers like Peter Flötner or the HS master travelled to Italy, as did other masters who imported Italian models<sup>38</sup>, including Hermann Vischer the Younger, who took the drawings of the Coliseum, the Pantheon, the recently finished Farnesina and the Palazzo Giraud-Torlonia with him to Nuremberg. Probably the most popular was the Coliseum, also used by Fra Giovanni di Verona for the *intarsia* of Monteoliveto, although it is no less true that the direct models for this Augsburg furniture come directly from the German prints of Virgil Solis and Stöer, who in his 1567 edition complained of having had to simplify his drawings of polyhedrons so the intarsia craftsmen could copy them. In regard to this, there is evidence of fierce arguments between *intarsia* craftsmen and painters, which had to be settled by the guild authorities of Augsburg, as the painters occasionally usurped the role of the intarsia craftsmen, by painting directly on to the surfaces of the furniture or, in other cases, raising the

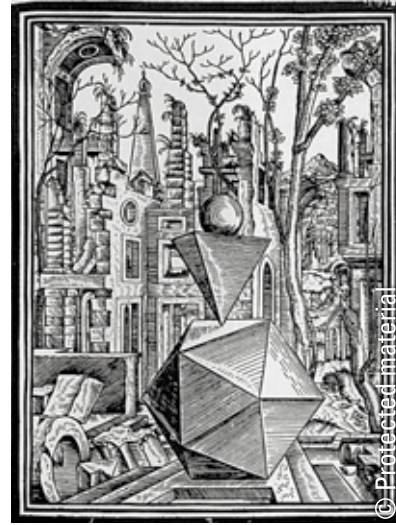
36 *Geometria et Perspectiva*. Hierinn Etliche Zerbrochne Gebew den Schreiner in eingelegter Arbeit dienstlich (Augsburg, 1567).

37 Möller 1956, pp. 67-72.

38 Ganz 1969.



12. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of interior of central door



13. Lorenz Stöer  
(active in the second half of the 16th century)  
Engraving no. 5 of treatise entitled  
*Geometria et Perspectiva*  
Augsburg, 1567

price of the plate illustrations. The painters could multiply the plates and sell them to a number of studios and workshops, which might explain why the engravings normally were not completely reproduced on bureau. The exclusivity demanded by potential buyers was enough to oblige intarsia craftsmen to change and reorganize the models before cutting the wood<sup>39</sup>.

Professor Christopher S. Wood says he sees a certain national sense in Stöer's compositions, closer to the generation prior to Durer, Burgkmair and Cranach, as opposed to the international refinement of Jamnitzer's output. Indeed, he goes so far as to state that the best bureaux of the 1550s have a certain local air about them<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, the presence of the Roman arches in ruins emerging out of the landscape in engravings and intarsia puts him in mind of works by Durer such as *Adoration of the Kings*, from the *Life of the Virgin* series. Small fragments of *vedute* with the same idea were placed on the doors at El Escorial, in the intercolumniation of the main door and on the reverse, while it remains unclear whether the composition of the other two doors<sup>41</sup> should be attributed to Stöer or Weisshaupt or neither.

The architectural distribution of the drawer front, which we may consider "in the Italian mode" or "in the Spanish mode", usually with earlier production dates, is to be found only a few Augsburg bureaux: the one signed by the HS master at the Victoria & Albert Museum [fig. 14], the most "Spanishified" in its distribution, which behind the foldable lid has architectural features, Tuscan pilasters, niches, arches and rustic ashlar surfaces; another smaller one, also at the Victoria & Albert Museum<sup>42</sup>; the Wrangelschrank in Münster [fig. 15] and few others. The latter, with a highly complex iconographic programme expounded by Lise Lotte Möller following the theories of Géza Jászai on *vanitas* and the themes of science and the art of war, has until now been the main benchmark for these pieces of furniture. The simpler drawer front of the first bureau in the Victoria & Albert Museum, resembles to a greater extent the one in Bilbao: small classical architectures

39 Wood 2003, p. 249.

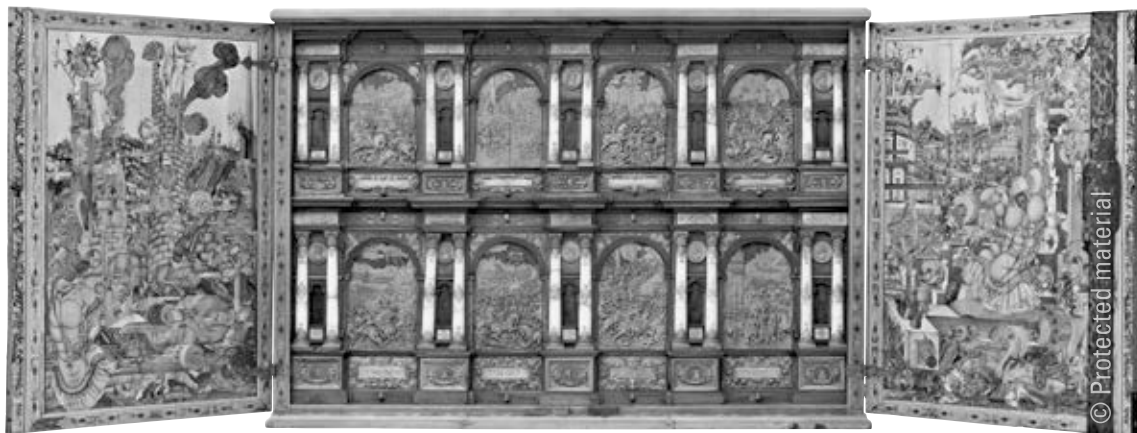
40 Ibid., pp. 235 ff.

41 Inv. nos. 10014261 and 10014262.

42 Inv. no. 27-1869.



14. Attributed to HS master  
Bureau, 1560  
Wood, 59.5 x 96.5 x 42.5 cm  
Victoria & Albert Museum, London  
Inv. no. W.24:1, 3-1931



15. Master of the Hausmarke  
"Wrangelschrank" Bureau, 1566  
Wood, 70 x 101 x 46 cm  
LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte (Westfälisches Landesmuseum), Münster, Germany  
Inv. no. K-605 LM



16. Anonymous, German Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



17. Virgil Solis (c. 1514-1562)  
*Perdix protected by Minerva*  
Engraving from the series of illustrations  
for Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VIII.236-59)  
Albertina, Vienna. Graphische Sammlung



18. Anonymous, German Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail

appear above the doors in large reliefs under an arch, with heroic knights, possibly heroes of the ancient world, and sculptures in the small niches. The upper line has smaller reliefs referring to the five senses. In the other eight the reliefs represent the seven gods of the planets, after Virgil Solis's series of engravings<sup>43</sup>.

In the Bilbao bureau, thirty-seven reliefs (nineteen in alabaster, including the central one, and eighteen in box wood) occupy the edicules formed by the architectural organization, highlighted by alabaster columns, the two materials being used alternately. Furthermore, in the upper line, the pilasters, spandrels and pediments are highlighted with small plaques of the same material. The figures in this line, except the ones in the central background and the two situated in the niches flanking it, are winged standing *putti*, their attributes varying: some bear musical instruments and others books or parchment rolls. In the two central lines, however, ten of the twelve figures and the two situated in the high part of the intercolumniations are female figures, four standing and the rest seated, most in reflective pose. In the lower register, between the column pedestals, six smaller figures are arranged: three females seated and three masculine figures, two of them standing. Only the upper *tondo* and the three reliefs beneath the main scene have two figures each. In the niches of the central body, there are four more *putti* of the same size as those in the laterals and, finally, another two figures placed in the high body directly above the frame, with no architectural backing at all.

The distribution, rather like a palatial façade, where the edicules house the figures inevitably brings the Coliseum in Rome to mind, filtered through representations like the *House of vice and virtue* from Filarete's *Treatise on Architecture* (c. 1465), the *Theatre of Venus* from Poliphilo's *Strife of Love in a Dream* (1499), by Francesco Colonna, and *Latin Theatre by Vitruvius... de latino in vulgare* (1521) by Cesariano, with a central mass that recalls the façade of San Sisto in Piacenza.

All the figures occupying the spaces created, including the niches in the intercolumniations and the small ones between pedestals, are clearly dependent on the series of engravings contemporary to the execution of the intarsia. With a few references to the Italian world, nearly all of them come from the varied sources

<sup>43</sup> Besides rectifying its creation in Ulm and not in Augsburg, Dieter Alfter relates the iconographic programme with the humanist circle of Augsburgian Hieronymus Wolf (1516-1580), who was librarian to Hans Függer and in whose studies the relations between humanist philosophy and evangelical theology had a relevant role (Alfter 1986, p. 26).





19. Anonymous, German Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



20. Georg Pencz (c. 1500-1550)  
*Music*, c. 1541  
Engraving no. 5 from the series *The Liberal Arts*  
The British Museum, London



21. Hans Sebald Beham (1500-1550)  
*Music*, 1531-1550  
Engraving no. 5 from the series *The Liberal Arts*  
The British Museum, London

found in the abundant production in Augsburg and Nuremberg. The artist who carved the reliefs here<sup>44</sup> used different prints to represent them, which makes identifying them correctly a difficult, complex task and more so, as we shall see later, the interpretation of its iconographic programme.

In the central scene, Palas or Minerva, with her shield and armour resting on a rock, extends her left arm (she has lost part of the right arm) over three books placed on a pedestal [fig. 16]. She looks towards the tower located to one side after the print that Virgil Solis used to illustrate the episode of the *Metamorphoses* where the goddess converts Perdix into a partridge after he has been thrown by Daedalus off a high tower [fig. 17]<sup>45</sup>. Both the goddess's stance and the clouds above are very similar to the scene in Solis. The direct reference to the building is undoubtedly one of the most copied scenarios of the time, the Sant'Angelo castle, a model that was also employed in a Tyrolese chest in Nuremberg museum virtually identical to one of the panels of the high choir in the church of San Sisto in Piacenza, both clear benchmarks for many southern German works of intarsia.

The twelve figures on either side of the door represent the Muses and the Arts, the ones on the left surrounding Apollo, who stands at the centre of the lower line, while those to the right cluster around Jupiter, sat among the clouds in a high-backed chair with the thunderbolt in his hand and an eagle at his feet [fig. 18]. Personifications of the liberal arts and the virtues are identifiable amongst the seated figures and the ones immediately above from the prints of the series engraved by Georg Pencz, Virgil Solis and Hans Sebald Beham. The figure of Music is clear, with the author of the relief combining elements from Pencz<sup>46</sup> and Beham<sup>47</sup> [figs. 19, 20 and 21] and the first figure in the second line to the left<sup>48</sup>, which may well have been inspired by the personification of Charity, from the series *The Virtues*

44 Major master gold- and silversmiths worked in Augsburg as did relatively important assemblers like Adolf Daucher or his brother Hans, a sculptor related by marriage to the Holbein. The carving of the figures could well be by the circle involved in the construction of the Italianate chapel of the Függer.

45 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 20, 7.96 (320).

46 The new Hollstein... 1949-, vol. XXXI; The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 16, 114 (356). Georg Pencz was an engraver active in Nuremberg in the 1540s. After a visit to Rome, he engraved the series *Famous Women of Antiquity* (B.7073) and the *Triumphs of Petrarch* (B.117-122), which may have been used for these reliefs.

47 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 15, 125 (164).

48 O'Dell-Franke 1977, e-98.



22. Anonymous, German Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



23. Virgil Solis (c. 1514-1562)  
*Charity*  
Engraving from *The Virtues in Landscapes*  
Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen  
Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin



24. Anonymous, German Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



25. Georg Pencz (c. 1500-1550)  
*Geometry*, c. 1541  
Engraving no. 6 from the series  
*The Liberal Arts*  
The British Museum, London

in *Landscapes* by Virgil Solis [figs. 22 and 23]<sup>49</sup>; also identifiable are Grammar, Geometry [figs. 24 and 25] and Ceres and the Summer [figs. 26 and 27]. Some, which we might interpret as Dialectics or Grammar, like the two flanking Jupiter in the third drawer to the right, do not strictly match with the liberal arts or the standard virtues, having been taken from a small series by Virgil Solis of the four allegorical figures in landscapes, on which Self-Knowledge [figs. 28 and 29]<sup>50</sup>, Peace, Truth and Calumny are personified<sup>51</sup>.

Others are similar to German representations like those of Jost Amman, who worked in the 1560s in Solis's studio. In his *Kunstbüchlin*, published many years later, Amman included several female figures striking elegant poses which, judging by their attributes, could well be related to the ones shown here. This is the case with his series on the liberal arts and the sciences seated<sup>52</sup>, which may have been employed by the author of the carvings under discussion here. This occurs, for instance, with the one considered to be Melancholy [fig. 30], a hand supporting the head<sup>53</sup>, which one might identify with the figure situated between the columns of the door or between the pedestals [figs. 31 and 32] and which is quite close in concept to the representation of the Muse Polyhymnia [fig. 33]; and the *Magnanimitas* in the same series, which holds a heart in one hand and rests the other on a lion<sup>54</sup>, has a similar pose to the one adopted by the female figure holding a lamb and who is courted by a shepherd in the lower central relief on the left. Another personification by Jost Amman, the *Detractio*, deceit, is a woman with a mask [fig. 34]<sup>55</sup>, which might be considered for the central one of the second drawer on the left [fig. 35]. She has the same attributes and the same posture, but in the bureau she holds her hands up to touch the cymbals, while the mask and the tambourine are on the floor, which might mean it is Erato, the muse of dance and deceit [fig. 36].

The other series, the *putti* set in the upper line and intercolumniations [figs. 37 and 38], completes or strengthens the female personifications, some with direct references to engravings: Geometry and Prudence on the extreme left or Rhetoric and Dialectics, on the right, after the prints by Hans Sebald Beham [figs. 39, 40, 41 and 42]<sup>56</sup>.

49 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 19, part 1, 209 (269).

50 With the legend "COGNITIONE- SVI-QVO-ME-DEVS-INSTRVATORO".

51 O'Dell-Franke 1977, e-107, e-10; The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 19, part 1, 220 (270).

52 The new Hollstein... 1949-, book illustrations VI, 146-26.

53 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 20, part 2, 4.65 (368).

54 Ibid., vol. 20, part 2, 4.69 (368).

55 Ibid., vol. 20, part 2, 4.70 (368).

56 Ibid., vol. 15, 126 (164); 130-[III] (167); 123 (164); 122 (164).



26. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



27. Virgil Solis (c. 1514-1562)  
*Peace*  
Engraving from the series  
*The Virtues in Landscapes*  
Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany.  
Graphische Sammlung



28. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



29. Virgil Solis (c. 1514-1562)  
*Self-Knowledge*  
Engraving from the series  
*The Virtues in Landscapes*  
Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany.  
Graphische Sammlung



30. Jost Amman (1539-1591)  
*Woman with a compass representing  
 Geometry (Melancholy)*  
 Engraving from the series *Kunstbüchlin*  
 Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel,  
 Germany



31 and 32. Anonymous, German  
 Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Details



33. *Polyhymnia*, late 2nd century  
 Marble, 159 cm (height)  
 Musei Capitolini, Centrale Montemartini, Rome  
 Inv. no. MC2135

Rather more difficult to identify are the figures of the plinth: three females, two of them seated in thoughtful pose and another with a spindle before a flock of sheep, and three males, a young shepherd and a beggar, for which a reference has been found in a late 15th-century engraving from the school of Ferrara for Tarot cards [figs. 43 and 44]<sup>57</sup>. For the two scenes with two figures under the main relief, only a slight similarity has been found in Solis's prints in different contexts, such as the *Story of Joseph*<sup>58</sup>. And as for the warrior in the two-horse chariot, the closest reference is probably Sadeler's Mars after a lost Martin de Vos drawing [figs. 45 and 46]<sup>59</sup>.

Even in different postures, neither Music nor Astrology leaves much room for doubt as to their attributes, and here they are represented in the two small figures on the armour [figs. 47 and 48]. Judging by their content, these may well be related to some of the representations of Virgil Solis, like the Erato and the Polyhymnia from another of his series of muses, although in the bureau, Astronomy is a *putto* and Music a female figure.

Although the representation of the Muses, typically given a role of generic poetic inspiration, has varied throughout history, as have their names and the number of their specific roles, iconographic attributes permit the identification of the isolated figures with the nine literary genres. In the *Sarcophagus of the muses* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), which once belonged to Cardinal Albani, there are nine ladies of the poetic art, each with a specific attribute and pose, which at the time guaranteed immediate recognition. However, the only unmistakable muse over time has been Urania. Some had already appeared in antique iconography. This is true of Polyhymnia, the formula of poetic and philosophical thought [fig. 33], who would survive as a meditative muse, chin on hand, concentrated, in Durer's *Melancholy*, and which, as noted above, appears in this series on at least two occasions [figs. 31 and 32]<sup>60</sup>. For some of the personifications found here, the references are pretty remote in time, although sources closer to the construction of the furniture must have

57 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 24, part 3, 2408.009.

58 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 19, part 1, 1.13 (316), of the series *Biblische Figuren* (1565); or in the lower part of the print *Clovis, king of France* (O'Dell-Franke 1977, e-15).

59 The Illustrated Bartsch 1978-, vol. 70, part 3, 7001.479.

60 Panofsky and Saxl insist that this print gathers all the attributes that refer to the figures: geometric (Geometry), the book (Grammar), the putto (Rhetoric), the spheres (Astrology), it being a compendium of all the arts (Panofsky/Saxl 1923, p. 144, note 1).



34. Jost Amman (1539-1591)  
*Woman with mask representing Deceit (Detractio)*  
 Engraving from the series *Kunstbüchlin*  
 Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, Germany



35. Anonymous, German  
 Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Detail



36. Anonymous, school of Ferrara  
*Erato XIII*, c. 1465  
 Engraving from the series known as  
*Tarocchi de Mantegna*, 20.4 x 13.5 cm  
 Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany  
 Inv. no. 49245

existed. One of these is Poetry, placed next to Music in the second drawer on the right with two torches lit over her head [fig. 49], the reference being the relief of the *Apotheosis of Homer* discovered in the Appian Way in the mid-17th century, and today in the British Museum [fig. 50], where she is placed between History, offering a sacrifice, and Apollo and Calliope, the latter holding a scroll of a new poem<sup>61</sup>.

Despite not having the importance of the liberal arts throughout the Middle Ages, the Muses once again came to the fore in Italian Humanism. Two iconographic programmes may be considered as forerunners of this set: one in the palazzo of Urbino, with the figures of Apollo and Palas in the doors with marquetry that give onto the salon, and the figures of the liberal arts on the doors over the loggias. The restoration of the symbolic meaning of the Muses was corroborated in the decoration of the temple of Rimini (1450), the figures and bas-reliefs of which, by Agostino di Duccio, were interpreted as secret answers of philosophy. One of the additions there, Architecture personified in Mnemosyne, could be identified with the one we considered here as Geometry [fig. 24], sat before a hill on which stands a temple with columns and triangular pediment. In Malatesta-type reliefs, following the practice of changing the attributes of the muses, some acquire new connotations, which we could suggest for the frontal of this bureau. For instance, Erato, muse of lyric poetry, accompanied by children [fig. 51], is transformed into the divinity of marriage, image that might also come close to our representation of the figure seated on the far left of the second row [fig. 22], which we had previously related with Charity. Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, becomes the secondary deity of plant life and shoots<sup>62</sup> and appears with ears of corn, personification of abundance, and as an allegory of the summer, which means the image of the bureau that we have identified as Ceres [fig. 26] could also refer to this personification of Thalia.

After a review of all the representations, it is clear that the female figures and the winged putti touch on two or three essential points: musical instruments and books are the main attributes of silent, thoughtful figures.

61 Her relation has also been noted with Isis, the Greek Hecuba, goddess of magic, likewise bearer of two torches, but more often shown with three heads.

62 This new iconography was suggested by Giulia Bordignon in relation with the cycle of Leonello d'Este, lord of Ferrara, for whom the humanist Guarino de Verona designed, in 1429, a new interpretation imported from classical culture directly from Constantinople. See Bordignon 2006, pp. 191 ff.



37 and 38. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Details



39, 40, 41 and 42. Hans Sebald Beham (1500-1550)  
*Geometry, Rhetoric, Dialectics and Prudence*  
Engravings nos. 6, 3 and 2 from the series *The Liberal Arts* and engraving no. 2 from the series *The Seven Virtues*  
The British Museum, London



43. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



44. Anonymous, school of Ferrara  
*Blind beggar with dog*  
Engraving, 225 x 110 cm (paper);  
216 x 104 cm (print)  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris



45. Anonymous, German  
Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



46. Johann Sadeler the Elder (1550-1600), after lost  
drawing by Martin de Vos (1532-1603)  
*Mars*, 1585  
Engraving, 215 x 245 cm  
The British Museum, London

Music, books, instruments of knowledge and the reflexive attitudes of the figures are constant themes of the illustrations circulating from the late Middle Ages throughout Europe.

The complete iconographic programme must have been easy to recognize anywhere in Europe. Many bureaux with small plaques, from Nuremberg and Augsburg alike, had the complete series of engravings, like the ones by Peter Flötner on some occasions, images of the Virtues and the Arts being repeated, with no particular distinction between them. That is why it is not unusual to find generic references to the "Arts". Amongst the Spanish inventories quoted above<sup>63</sup>, one entry made a really striking impression: in the one for the *donna* Juana, in 1575, number 18 is "another bureau assembled from different woods from Germany, has the Virtues and the Liberal Arts in alabaster all over it and other gilded things, has nine drawers, it opens with the two doors, with a box into which it fits, covered on the outside in black leather, and on the inside with green fabric, with gold locks and keys, valued at 10.000 rs."<sup>64</sup>. The temptation to propose this provenance is great, and one would only have to remember that, instead of a folding board, the one that is now in the tabletop could be from the back part<sup>65</sup>, and the doors removed.

63 See note 24.

64 Pérez Pastor 1910-1926, vols. XI-XII (1914), pp. 315-380, collected in Aguiló 1990, vol. II, p. 502, note 21, inventory no. 17.

65 Many examples of German bureaux support the thesis that it was recovered in wood and bore intarsia on all four faces.



47 and 48. Anonymous, German Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Details



49. Anonymous, German Bureau, c. 1560-1570  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



50. *Apotheosis of Homer*  
Relief discovered mid-17th century on Appian Way  
The British Museum, London  
Detail

One of the first hypotheses was that the bureau was made for a woman, together with the possible representation of Biblical "strong women" alongside the virtues and the arts, another typical humanist interpretation that exemplifies the power and the virtue of the *alma poesis*, or of the arts in general, the argument being supported in reference to the gods.

One misses the presence of explicatory features in the bureau, signs or scrolls with *motto*, of the sort that do appear on furniture we associate with this one. I actually believe that two small plaques may well have been placed under the two *putti* (the one with phylacteries and the one bearing a jug) which frame the upper *tondo*, underneath which one can make out small holes. This detail could have helped towards a better understanding of the programme or even the representation in the central *tondo*.

In the Minerva as goddess of wisdom in the central scene virtue predominates as a classical example for the Christian world. Her sword (now lost), symbol of power, is associated with heroic virtue, while the books allude to intelligence and the contemplative life. The representation of Jupiter seated on a throne as judge, with the thunderbolt in his hand does not differ overmuch from the one of the twelve sons of Jacob by the engraver de Coornhert after Hemskerck in the series *The Twelve Patriarchs*, from 1550. He is there as protec-





51. Agostino de Duccio (1418-1481)  
*Erato*, 1451-1455  
 Malatesta temple, Rimini, Italy

tor of Theology and Philosophy, as the planet-god of all scholars<sup>66</sup>. He is also depicted this way in the bureau now in the Victoria & Albert Museum mentioned above.

To explain the composition of the lower part of the piece of furniture, we should go back to *Poliphilo's Strife of Love in a Dream*, to the *House of Virtue and Vice*, taking the floors of virtue for the teaching of the sciences. The patio given over to vice would be the equivalent in the bureau of the spaces between the pedestals, which I identified with human labour, shepherding, begging, etc. If there Logic initiated the ascent of Knowledge, terminating with Astrology, here it is Wisdom that centres the composition, leaving the personifications of Astronomy and Music as secure values for the upper body.

The figure of the warrior in his two-horse chariot at the centre of the lower line inferior under the door with the central scene of Philosophy may be one of the key points of the bureau, together with the upper *tondo*.

Following Santiago Sebastián in the theory set out by Ficino in his commentary on Plato's *Banquet* (1469), Palas or Minerva fulfils the mission of drawing the soul away from earthly delights and take it to the heights of pure intelligence, fighting against Venus, who represents voluptuousness and against Mars and his violence, as she is the victorious chastity who maintains the spiritual quality of love and also represents the gift of contemplation<sup>67</sup>. This would explain the presence of the god conquered by Wisdom, accompanied by the Arts. Another rather less clear interpretation could be to identify it with the figure of Hippolytus, a virtuous being, lover of poetry and hunting, who, rejecting the advances of Phaedra, is crushed by his chariot dashed against the rocks and who achieves immortality by being converted into a constellation<sup>68</sup>, as a sort of voyage the heroes have to come through to achieve immortality. This would also explain the beautiful scene in the central *tondo*, in which a young man offers a seated damsel a crown of flowers, as a symbol of the immortality of the Christian soul, in an approach to the myth of Eros and Psyche. However, I have not been able to find the exact reference, either in the ancient world or in the Renaissance. I have also been

<sup>66</sup> Like an engraving of Georg Pencz, in Geisberg 1974, vol. II, 147.

<sup>67</sup> Sebastián 1978, pp. 162 ff.

<sup>68</sup> López Monteagudo 1998 and López Monteagudo 1999.

unable to identify the young man with the god of love, as he is closer to the Mercury who presents the cup of ambrosia to Psyche as he appears in the representations of Francesco de Giorgio or of the Siena nuptial *cassoni* produced in the second half of the 15th century<sup>69</sup>, but the sources consulted suggest an allusion to Study or Friendship, whose fruits are always agreeable, very possibly based on the emblem of Vaenius "lucundum Spiran Odorem", published in 1615 in the *Amoris Divinis Emblemata*. This theory would fit the two young men placed on either side, one without any attribute or symbol and the other with a jug, also in another engraving of the same series that says "they have things well arranged", which would further back up the central idea that, without being well disposed, study cannot bring its rewards. So, with study and by practising the various disciplines one may develop the virtues, ensuring that Wisdom, the greatest of them all, is capable of overcoming war and the passions in the lower section.

Finally, by applying a narrative sense to the scenes of the plinth, reading them from left to right, from the studious young woman, the amorous flirtation impeded by the warrior god, time or the farewell of the young man at the other end, one might consider it plausible as a representation of conquest of earthly delights thanks to Wisdom, aided by the Muses and the Arts, until the reward of knowledge is achieved through reading. All this becomes visible only when this fine piece of furniture is opened: the outer part, like the inside, demonstrates the importance of the knowledge acquired through books<sup>70</sup>.

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69 Vertova 1979.

70 This article is part of the research project "La ebanistería en el Monasterio de El Escorial. Siglos XVI y XVII" [Cabinet making at El Escorial Monastery: 16th and 17th centuries] directed by Luis Ramón-Laca y Menéndez de Lúcarca (Ref: HAR2008-02605/ARTE).

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