



JAIME EGUIGUREN

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Upper Peru (present-day Bolivia), 17th century

Pair of Ornamental Plaques



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Upper Peru (present-day Bolivia), 17th century
Silver in its natural color, cast, repoussé and chased
55 × 35 cm each
Provenance: Private Collection

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These plaques form a pair of ornamental elements of predominantly oval outline. Conceived as a homogeneous pair derived from a single compositional model, they repeat exactly the same ornamental and iconographic program, organized through a composition strictly symmetrical along a vertical axis. The perimeter is not smooth but instead displays an undulating, cut-out contour articulated by projections and recesses that follow the rhythm of the interior decoration, so that the outer profile appears almost to be “drawn” by the ornamental motifs themselves.

At the crown of each plaque appears a large scallop shell motif, open and striated, functioning as the uppermost finial and establishing the highest point of the composition. Immediately below, the decorative field unfolds in superimposed registers governed throughout by axial symmetry.

At the center of the composition stands a slightly projecting oval cartouche or medallion that serves as the visual nucleus of the design. It is framed by vigorous scrolls and curvilinear elements, while secondary cartouches and large vegetal forms are disposed symmetrically on either side. Around the middle register the design incorporates figural motifs—birds and mascarons or heads—integrated into the network of scrolls and foliage, so that figuration and ornament merge into a unified decorative structure.

The silversmith clearly demonstrates a sculptural ambition. Rather than a repoussé sheet executed in low relief, the decoration is rendered in a bold and dramatic high relief with almost fully rounded volumes, sharply defined transitions between planes, and a carefully controlled play of reflections. The craftsman thus constructs a “living” surface in which light breaks across faceted, punched, striated and chased textures. The piece was therefore conceived to be read under raking illumination—such as candlelight—typical of ritual spaces.

These plaques would originally have formed part of the rich ornamental apparatus that characterized the liturgical furnishings of many churches in Upper Peru during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They should be understood not as isolated objects but as elements belonging to larger ensembles of ecclesiastical silver intended to embellish sacred interiors: altar frontals, series of decorative plaques applied to retables or tabernacles, candlesticks, hanging lamps, and other objects associated with the Eucharistic cult. The abundance of such works was largely made possible by the extraordinary availability of silver in the region, above all from the famous Cerro de Potosí, one of the greatest mining centers in the world during the early modern period. This relative accessibility of the metal fostered the development of a silverworking tradition of remarkable formal richness in which local workshops displayed exceptional technical mastery in the service of liturgical magnificence and the Baroque aesthetic characteristic of the viceregal world.

At the center of each plaque appears the most significant element of the iconographic program: an elaborately ornamented oval cartouche containing the emblem of the Society of Jesus. Within it appears the well-known monogram IHS, an abbreviation of the name of Jesus (Jesus Hominum Salvator), surmounted by a cross rising above the horizontal of the H. Beneath the monogram appears a heart from which emerge the three nails of the Passion, a direct reference to the sacrifice of Christ and the redemptive mystery at the core of Jesuit spirituality. This symbolic ensemble succinctly encapsulates the Christological devotion promoted by the order and widely disseminated throughout the missionary territories of the Hispanic world (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Pair of silver plaques (detail), Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

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The cartouche framing the emblem fully reflects the ornamental language of the seventeenth century. Its design is constructed through vigorous scrolls and counter-scrolls that generate a dynamic and profoundly Baroque frame characterized by alternating open curves and vegetal folds that seem to expand outward from the center. This type of cartouche, inherited from Renaissance ornamental repertoires and transformed by Baroque sensibility, proved particularly suited to highlighting religious emblems or devotional inscriptions. In these plaques the deep relief and meticulous chasing further emphasize the visual prominence of the central emblem, which acts as the conceptual and compositional axis around which the entire decorative program unfolds.

Around the central cartouche spreads a complex ornamental repertory dominated by vegetal and animal motifs arranged with strict symmetry along the vertical axis. In the upper section of the composition appears a pair of confronting birds leaning inward to peck at what appear to be open pomegranates, a fruit laden with symbolic significance in Christian tradition. Their slightly arched bodies and the movement of their heads introduce a dynamic accent within the composition (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Pair of silver plaques (detail), Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

In the lower register appears another pair of birds with long tails and curved beaks reminiscent of parrots or tropical birds (Fig. 3). These are depicted in tense, almost acrobatic positions, leaning toward the center while directing their gaze toward the cornucopias held by the hybrid female figures situated at the base of the composition. Both horns of plenty are filled with pomegranates, which merge with the scrolls and vegetal elements structuring the decoration. The entire ornamental field is densely populated with leaves, stems, flowers and fruits rendered in pronounced relief, producing an impression of visual



Fig. 3 Pair of silver plaques (detail), Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

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exuberance that responds to the Baroque principle of *horror vacui*, whereby the surface is entirely filled with decorative motifs that envelop and enhance the central emblem.

The scallop shell crowning the plaque forms the upper termination of the composition and fulfills both a compositional and symbolic function (Fig. 4). Formally, its open and striated profile creates a natural transition between the undulating contour of the object and the vertical axis structuring the decoration. Iconographically, the shell possesses a long tradition in Christian art: associated with water and spiritual rebirth, it became during the Middle Ages a symbol of baptism and the regeneration of the soul. In the Baroque period it was also widely employed as an ornamental motif in retables and liturgical objects, where its form suggested the idea of divine revelation or manifestation. In these plaques the shell placed above the Jesuit emblem visually reinforces the sacred character of the ensemble, functioning as a symbolic frame that culminates and dignifies the iconographic program centered upon the name of Jesus.

In the lower register of both plaques appears a frontal anthropomorphic figure positioned precisely on the vertical axis of the composition (Fig. 5). This is a hybrid being organically integrated into the vegetal framework structuring the ornamental ensemble. The face, with soft and somewhat youthful features, displays large almond-shaped eyes and hair rendered in strands that visually extend into surrounding scrolls and foliage, so that the head appears to emerge from the vegetal forms themselves.

The torso is depicted nude and slender, with two clearly modeled breasts introducing a feminine dimension to the figure. Yet this feminization does not correspond to a naturalistic representation of the human body; rather, it belongs to the ornamental vocabulary of the Baroque, in which arms and limbs gradually transform into vegetal scrolls and the body merges with the flowing movement of leaves, stems and fruits that compose the overall design.

The figure holds in each arm large cornucopias filled with fruit that open laterally following the symmetrical rhythm of the composition. This motif reinforces its allegorical character, since in European iconographic tradition female figures associated with cornucopias commonly represent fertility and the abundance of nature. Within the context of viceregal Andean silverwork, this image acquires a particular resonance: it is a hybrid figure—half human and half vegetal—symbolically embodying the fecundity of the natural world.



Fig. 4 Pair of silver plaques (detail), Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques



Fig. 5 Pair of silver plaques (detail), Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

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Thus the presence of breasts, together with the horns of plenty and the integration of the body into the surrounding foliage, suggests a female personification of fertile nature, reinterpreted within the ornamental vocabulary of Baroque Upper Peru. Positioned at the base of the composition, this figure appears to support both visually and symbolically the proliferation of fruits, birds and vegetal motifs that rise toward the center of the plaques, where the Christological emblem structures the iconographic program of the ensemble.

Taken as a whole, these plaques represent an outstanding example of the high level attained by viceregal silverwork in Upper Peru during the seventeenth century. The extraordinary richness of their design is matched by a highly refined technical execution visible in the depth of the relief, the precision of the chasing, and the meticulous rendering of vegetal, animal and figural details covering the entire surface. The silversmith demonstrates complete mastery of the Baroque ornamental language, organizing a complex and densely populated composition without ever sacrificing the clarity of the central axis or the visual hierarchy that guides the viewer's gaze toward the Jesuit emblem. Each element—from scrolls and fruits to birds and hybrid figures—is harmoniously integrated into a decorative structure of remarkable balance and dynamism.

All of this suggests the hand of a master craftsman of considerable skill, likely trained within the artistic milieu of Upper Peru, where numerous silversmiths—many of them of mestizo origin—developed extraordinary technical expertise in the service of religious institutions. Within this context, workshops associated with the Society of Jesus played a crucial role in the transmission of models, techniques and iconographic programs, contributing decisively to the development of a silverworking tradition of remarkable aesthetic sophistication. The quality of execution, the richness of the ornamental repertory and the coherence of the iconographic program place these plaques among the finest known examples of this type of production, reflecting both the mastery of the silversmith who created them and the high degree of refinement achieved by Andean viceregal art.

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