



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

ART & ANTIQUES

---

## Domestic Oratory

Guatemala  
late 17th century - early 18th century

---



# JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES



## Domestic Oratory

Guatemala

late 17th century - early 18th century

Wood, tortoiseshell, silver and bone

Height: 79.5 cm, width 52 cm, depth 28 cm

Provenance: Private collection



*Carlos Martinez Costa*

The Manila Galleon (1565-1815) was perhaps the most important trade route of the Modern Age, acting as a bridge between Asia, America and Europe. Ships loaded with precious metals set sail from Acapulco bound for the Philippine capital, bringing back spices and oriental luxury goods. This exchange, in addition to boosting the growth of local economies, influenced the artistic and artisanal production of Latin America, giving rise to pieces with a hybrid aesthetic in which Asian, indigenous and European elements converge in a unique synthesis.

A clear example of this is this extraordinary domestic oratory, a fundamental element of viceregal homes where families prayed daily, (Fig. 1). Religion played a central role in the daily life of many societies, especially those with strong roots in Catholic traditions, as occurred in the communities of the aristocracy and the Creole elites. Prayers and the recitation of the rosary were not only spiritual practices, but also fulfilled a function of social cohesion within the family nucleus, creating an atmosphere of constant devotion.

The fact that the homes of elites had sacred images, altarpieces, and reliquaries also reflects how religion and social status were closely intertwined. These objects not only served for meditation and worship, but were also a means of demonstrating the family's cultural and economic level. Elaborate altarpieces, precious relics, and high-quality images, often created from fine materials such as gilded wood or ivory, represented not only devotion but also access to sophisticated aesthetics, which distinguished these families within society. In this way, the act of devotion was mixed with the demonstration of power and prestige.

The morphology of this altar is reminiscent of classical architecture. The central area is made up of a niche topped by a scallop arch – intended to house the devotional image. This is flanked in strict symmetry by a pair of twinned Solomonic columns, on which rises a wide entablature and a split pediment whose cornices wind into volutes. In the space between the two there is a small oval painted



Fig. 1 Domestic Oratory, Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques



# JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

glass depicting Saint John holding his characteristic cruciform staff, with the *Agnus Dei* at his feet (Fig. 2). (insert cut-out figure of Saint John). Under the predella, there is a wide polygonal base made up of five fronts delimited by mouldings that each frame an oval and convex cabochon. On each side of the central body, there is a vertical panel with a plant-inspired silhouette, like a dust cover. All of this is crowned with a large rectangular canopy that covers the structure, decorated around the perimeter by an undulating moulding with scalloped edges identical to that of the lower part of the base.

Beyond its balanced composition, this oratory stands out for its profuse baroque ornamentation, where tortoiseshell and silver combine to create a rich repertoire of phytomorphic, geometric and figurative motifs. The tortoiseshell, with its reddish and amber veins, covers a large part of the structure, providing a vibrant and translucent background in clear contrast to the metallic shine of the silver.

Both materials had a high symbolic and economic value in the viceregal context, so their use not only responds to an aesthetic desire, but also denotes access to resources directly linked to the transpacific trade of the Manila Galleon. The sumptuousness of these is also evident in their absence in the rear part, responding to a rational strategy of resource optimization. Since the altar was designed to remain attached to a wall, its back part lacked visibility, so it was unnecessary to cover it, concentrating the material wealth in the areas exposed to the spectator. However, on this, the presence of the five bone and tortoiseshell plates embedded in the structure, together with the inscriptions and decorations, is a fascinating example of the fusion between religiosity and the aesthetic taste of the time. The fact that the central plaque clearly reads Ave Maria shows how the centrality of Catholic devotion was maintained, while the side plaques decorated with hunting scenes reflect a clear allusion to the tastes and culture of the elite of the time (Fig. 3).

Hunting, besides being a recreational activity and symbolic of power and nobility, also represented a manifestation of status. Integrating these scenes within a religious context could be interpreted as a way of highlighting the virtue of nobility and, at the same time, of underlining the mastery over nature, an element that was often associated with the



Fig. 2 Domestic Oratory (detail of Saint John), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques



Fig. 3 Domestic Oratory (back), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

idea of "divine protection" or heavenly favor.

This mix of religious and secular elements in the design of the plaques reflects an attempt to balance faith with worldly power, something that was common in artistic representations of the elites, where they sought to demonstrate not only devotion, but also social position and cultural wealth.

In this line, the piece is a tangible testimony to the level of mastery and specialization achieved by the craftsmen who worked on it. Regarding the treatment of tortoiseshell – a material as rigid as it is fragile – it is worth highlighting the technical difficulty presented by the making of the Solomonic columns. Where the precision of the helical carving is combined with the meticulous application and assembly of the different plates on its curved surface. All this in combination with the fine silver garlands, which are harmoniously integrated without altering the continuity of the design. The technical display used in the execution of the arched arch is remarkable (Fig. 4), where the different scallops that make it up generate a *trompe l'oeil* from the application of a finely pierced tortoiseshell shell and show the level of mastery and sophistication in the execution of this object. The scallops with their intricate design, not only serve a decorative function, but create a visual affect that deceives the eye, providing a delicate play of light and shadow that also intensifies the sensation of spatial depth, enhancing the visual richness of the whole. In addition, the work with such complex and delicate details not only had an ornamental purpose but also reflected the connection between religiosity and the technical skill of the artisans, who used these means to enhance not only the religious object, but the visual and emotional experience of those who observed it.

As regards silver, the use of the filigree technique – a technique widely used in the Latin American viceregal period – is notable in the creation of mouldings in the form of interlaced threads and phytomorphic elements. As a result of its delicate work, and in contrast with the tortoiseshell, these details create a subtle effect that enriches a large part of the surface without visually overloading it. It is also used as a resource to frame the areas that house the representations with the greatest symbolic charge and visual weight of the composition, such as various types of flowers, religious motifs and classical ornamentation, all finely executed in engraved silver.

The iconographic programme of the altar is a faithful witness to the syncretism of the viceregal baroque, in which material wealth and decorative exuberance are combined in a symbolic discourse that articulates notions of Christian tradition in dialogue with ornamentation of classical, heraldic or floral origins.

Within this discourse the angels located on the entablature play a fundamental role, since, in addition to reinforcing the sacredness of the devotional space, they lead the viewer's gaze towards the central niche (Fig. 5). Both carry phylacteries with the inscription: AVE MAR <sup>a</sup> the same reference that, as we have mentioned, is embedded on the back of the altar, coinciding with the layout of the niche. This detail,



Fig. 4 Domestic Ortatory (detail), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques



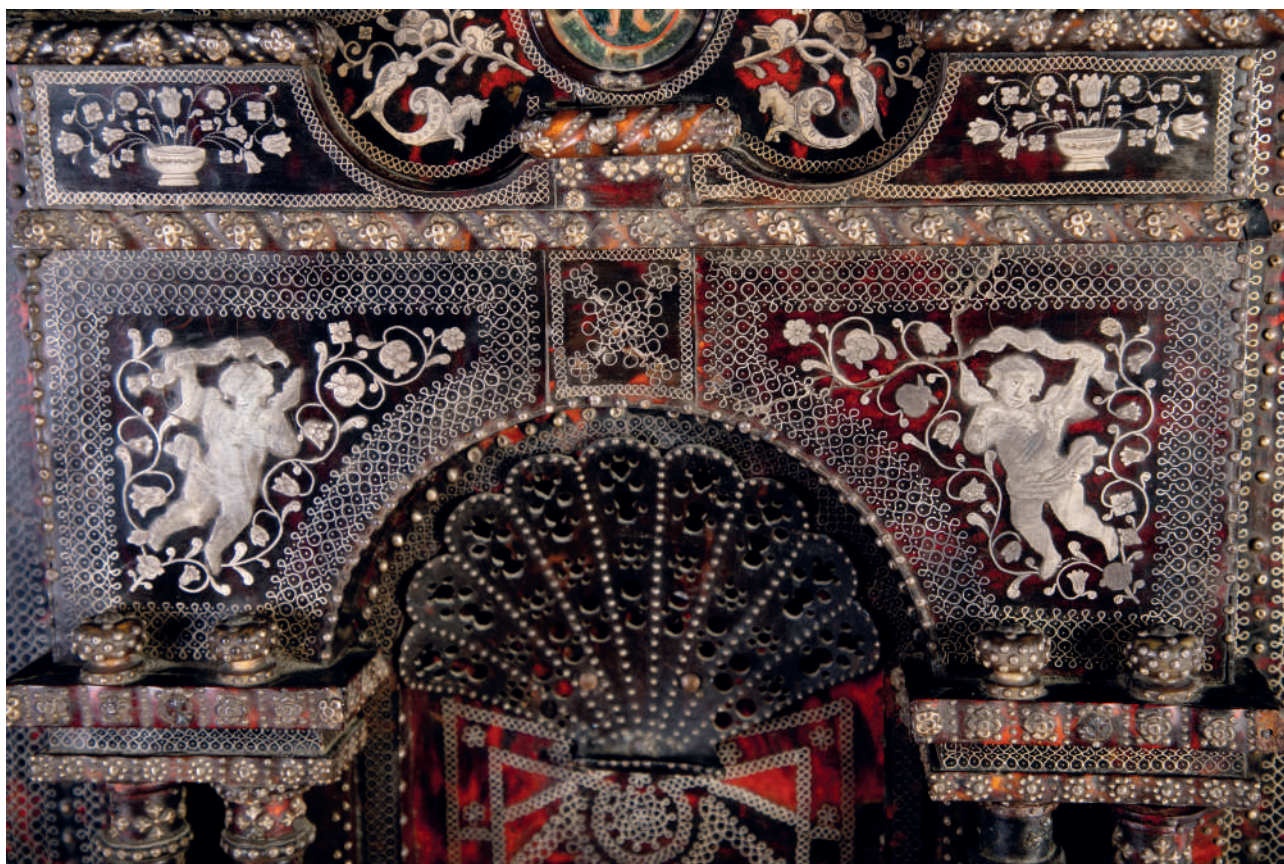


Fig. 5 Domestic Oratory (detail), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques



Fig. 6 Domestic Oratory (detail), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

added to the prominence of the roses and lilies <sup>1</sup>in the decorative program of the canopy, suggests that the image originally intended to occupy this space could have been a Marian representation.

On the other hand, the oratory incorporates a notable number of Renaissance references, especially in the predella, where a central grotesque in the form of a mask stands out, flanked by two double-tailed tritons (Fig. 6). These motifs, whose origin dates back to the decorative repertoires rediscovered in the mural paintings of the Domus Aurea, were widely disseminated in Latin America through architectural

---

1 Verse 2:1 of the Song of Songs: *I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys*, has been interpreted in Christian tradition as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary.



treatises, such as that of Sebastiano Serlio<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 7). Their incorporation shows a process of assimilation and reinterpretation, where the classical ornamental language was adapted to the compositional and aesthetic schemes of the viceregal baroque.

Above the pediment stands a pair of rampant lions, a symbol of power, nobility and protection that guard Saint John. The presence of the lions within the altar could allude to the dominion of the Church and the monarchy over the New World, underlining the relationship between the sacred and the viceregal political order. The scene is complemented by figures of horses, rabbits, floral motifs and scrolls (Fig. 8).

The building is sheltered by a canopy whose interior is wonderfully decorated with floral and geometric motifs, always using the technique of creating the drawings with thin strips of silver embedded in the tortoiseshell (Fig. 9). The central niche, where, with certainty, the religious image was placed, is flanked by four imposing wooden Solomonic columns masterfully covered with tortoiseshell sheets and decorated with intricate inlays of elements made of silver. The entire structure rests on three drawers, which were probably used to store various liturgical elements intended for the prayer of the faithful (Fig. 10).

Finally, it is worth mentioning a piece with similar characteristics preserved in the Lima Art Museum, where it remains pending a detailed study to determine its origin (Fig. 11). Despite this, we can confirm that both come from the same workshop, since they share morphology, techniques, materials and characteristic ornamental language. However, although the MALI work is an extraordinary piece, it is of a slightly lower quality compared to the altar under study, which suggests variations within the workshop's production or possible differences in the orders and recipients.

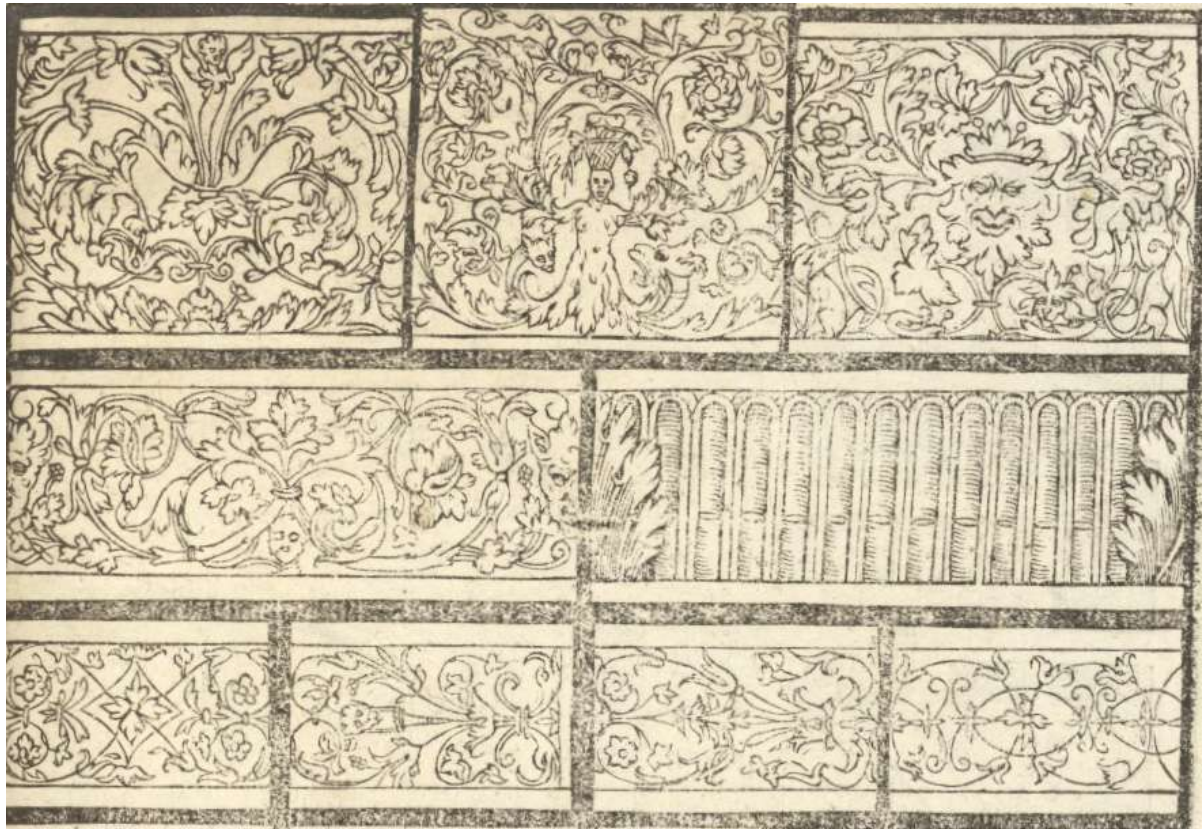


Fig. 7 Sebastiano Serlio (1475- c. 1554). *IV Libro d' Architettura*, 1537, p. 197 (detail).

2 Porras Godoy, Brenda Janeth. *The altarpiece and sculpture in Guatemala, 16th to 19th centuries*, p. 262.



# JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES



Fig. 8 Domestic Oratory (detail), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques



Fig. 9 Domestic Oratory (detail), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques





Fig. 10 Domestic Oratory (detail), Guatemala, late 17th century - early 18th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

The study of viceregal furniture – especially that which combines tortoiseshell and silver – has been a little-explored field within artistic historiography. Thus, this type of goods continues to raise numerous questions regarding production centres, techniques, processes and mobility.

This historiographical gap has meant that the manufacture of this type of furniture has traditionally been attributed indistinctly to Peru, Mexico and even the Philippines. However, recent research<sup>3</sup> places the Captaincy General of Guatemala as a key centre for its manufacture –both religious and secular– and export.

This thesis, which has been thoroughly verified, is based on documentary and material evidence. On the one hand, testamentary inventories from the 18th century have been found in Lima, in which it is explicitly stated that this type of furniture covered in tortoiseshell is of Guatemalan origin. On the other hand, the presence of furniture with these characteristics is evident in Guatemala City itself, for example, through the imposing choir lectern of the Metropolitan Cathedral (Fig. 12) –still preserved today– or the property registers of



Fig. 11 Altarpiece of the Crucifixion. Anonymous, 18th century. Tortoiseshell veneered wood with silver inlays. 69 x 44 x 10 cm. Lima Art Museum, inv. no. V-2.2-0001.

3 Katzew, Ilona (ed.). *Archive of the World: Art and Imagination in Spanish America, 1500-1800: Highlights from LACMA's Collection*.



# JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

the convents of San Francisco and the Recollection.<sup>4</sup> Also worth mentioning, for example, is a lectern of smaller dimensions (Fig. 13), an elaborate cabinet (Fig. 14) or an interesting box with a matching buffet (Fig. 15), all of these pieces preserved at the LACMA.

In this context, it is essential to highlight the importance of Guatemalan viceregal silverwork, which, from the 16th century, reached levels of refinement and sophistication that far surpassed those of other production centers in Latin America. Regarding the use of filigree, it is relevant to highlight that this ornamental technique experienced a notable boom in Guatemala. To date, its presence has been identified mainly in pieces such as chalices and cups, with the silver cup from 1797 being especially notable, which at the time was owned by the first Baron of Cholmeney, and which preserves the marks corresponding to Guatemala City (Fig. 16).<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 12 Choir lectern. Guatemala, last quarter of the 17th-18th century. Tortoiseshell veneered wood with mother-of-pearl inlays and copper and ivory applications. 334 x 127 cm. Metropolitan Cathedral, Guatemala City.



Fig. 13 Lectern. Guatemala (for export market, possibly Peru), 18th century. Tortoiseshell veneered wood with mother-of-pearl, brass, and silver inlays. 33.7 x 36.8 x 23.5 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, inv. no. M.2019.264.3.

4 Katzew, Ilona (ed.). *Archive of the World: Art and Imagination in Spanish America, 1500-1800: Highlights from LACMA's Collection*, p. 282.

5 Esteras Martín, Cristina. *Masterpieces of guatemalan silver and gold sixteenth to nineteenth century. Don Antonio de cabero y Lataillade Collection*. Cat. 30, p. 106.



# JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES



Fig. 14 Cabinet. Guatemala (for export market, possibly Peru), 18th century. Tortoiseshell veneer with mother-of-pearl and ivory inlay. 81.3 × 177.2 × 43.2 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, inv. no. M.2013.130.1.



Fig. 15. Box with matching buffet. Guatemala (for export market, possibly Peru), 18th century. Tortoiseshell veneer with mother-of-pearl and ivory inlay. 50 × 45.7 × 74.5 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, inv. no. M.2009.121ab.



Fig. 16. Cup with salvilla. Guatemala, 1797. Gilt silver and filigree in white silver; molded, turned and cast. 9 x 25.8 cm. Private collection.



Thus, the altar under study presents stylistic and technical elements that point to its Guatemalan origin, placing it between the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, when the manufacture of luxury furniture reached a notable development in the region <sup>6</sup>. The use of tortoiseshell and silver, together with the refined filigree work, demonstrate the artisanal mastery characteristic of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, whose production of luxury furniture supplied both the local market and the Viceroyalty of Peru and formed a dynamic network of influence and prestige. These objects were not only valued for their aesthetic and material quality, but also for their association with the culture and status of those who owned them. The incorporation of these elements within the Guatemalan tradition reinforces its connection with a style that had already gained renown for its elegance and complexity. Lima inventories explicitly mention pieces of Guatemalan origin, which raises the hypothesis that this altar could have been exported following the commercial dynamics of the time. In short, its sophisticated execution and the use of sumptuous materials link it to a well-documented artistic tradition, reinforcing its attribution to Guatemalan workshops within the circuit of exchange of luxury goods in Latin America.

### Bibliography

Martin Esteras, Cristina. *Masterpieces of Guatemalan silver and gold from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century*. Don Antonio de Cabero and Lataillade Collection. Buenos Aires: Editorial Eguiguren, 2016.

Katzew, Ilona (ed.). *Archive of the World: Art and Imagination in Spanish America, 1500-1800: Highlights from LACMA's Collection*. Los Angeles: Delmonico Books and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2022.

Porras Godoy, Brenda Janeth. *The altarpiece and sculpture in Guatemala, 16th to 19th centuries*. Doctoral thesis. Seville: University of Seville, 2015.

---

<sup>6</sup> Katzew, Ilona (ed.). *Archive of the World: Art and Imagination in Spanish America, 1500-1800: Highlights from LACMA's Collection*, p. 281.



