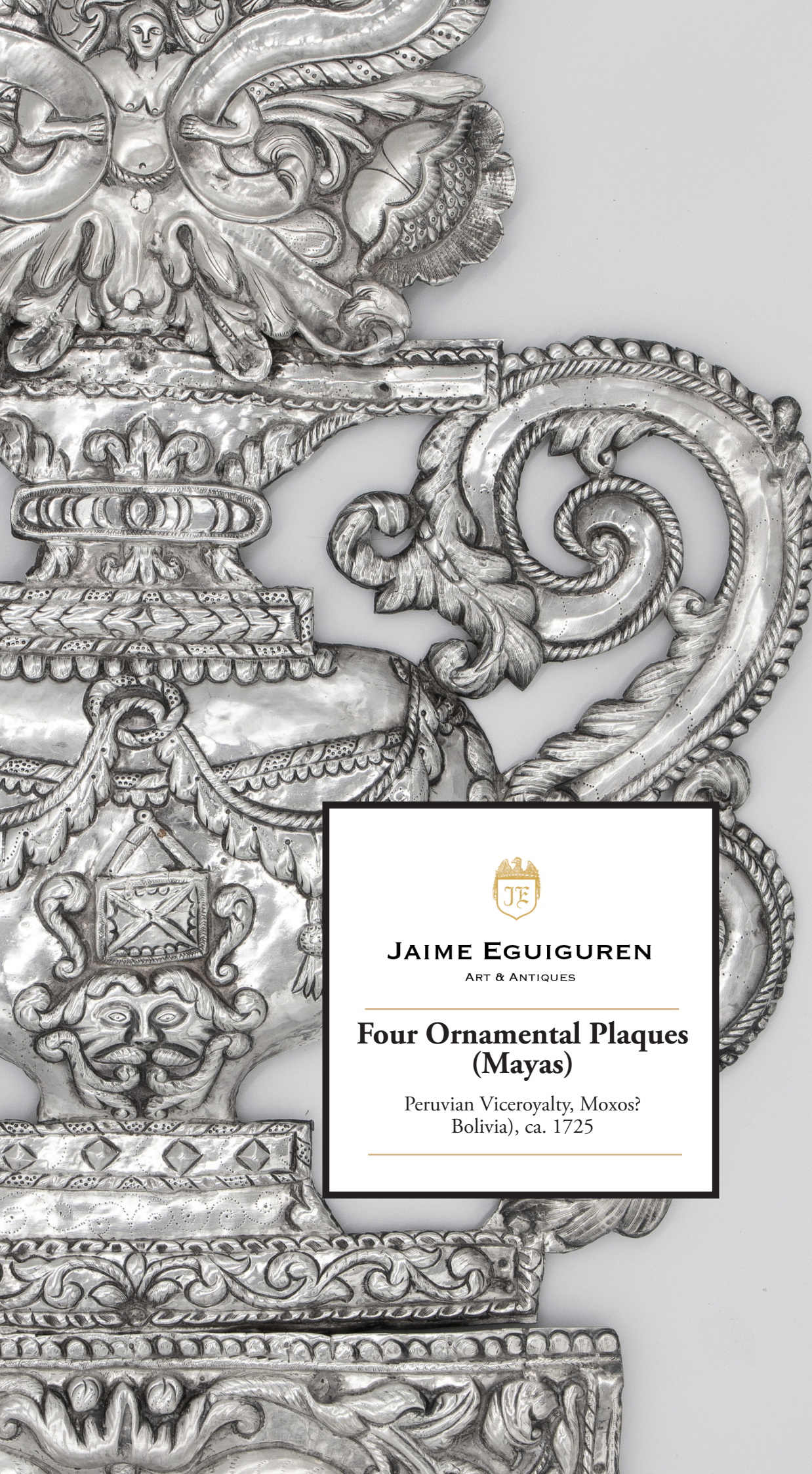




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ART & ANTIQUES

**Four Ornamental Plaques
(Mayas)**

Peruvian Viceroyalty, Moxos?
Bolivia), ca. 1725



Four Ornamental Plaques (*Mayas*)

Peruvian Viceroyalty, Moxos? (Bolivia), ca. 1725

Repoussé and chiselled silver

Height 83 cm; maximum width 42 cm

Weight 2,645 g / 2,380 g / 2,435 g / 2,585 g

Literature: Cristina Esteras Martín, *Platería del Perú Virreinal (1535 – 1825)*, (Madrid – Lima: 1997), 155

Provenance: Private collection

Cristina Esteras Martín

With an oblong shape, these four plaques feature a flower vase resting on a semicircular body decorated with a two-headed eagle surrounded by vegetal motifs and a border festooned with little scallop shells. The spheroid-shaped vase, which stands on a plinth, has a mascarón at the bottom, is adorned with decorative *passementerie* hangings and includes a pair of large vegetal handles on its sides. The upper section features a plaque with undulating edges in the middle of which we find a medallion reading IHS, just above the depiction of a “foliage-man” (Fig. 1) with a wide open skirt of loose leaves. He is holding on to two horns of plenty, on top of which there are two herons. The plaque is crowned by three fleshy flowers in a bunch, with two similar flowers at the bottom. Due to their considerable height, the plaques were reinforced with a metal rod which must have been attached to another wooden structure by which they were secured to the altar steps.

These sets of steps, or *gradas*, were placed on either side of the sacarium in the altars of the Peruvian Viceroyalty,⁴⁶³ and were adorned (thanks to the abundance of silver sourced locally) with decorative plaques depicting floral arrangements emulating the natural vegetation, most often adopting almond-shaped structures and less commonly the form of flower vase we see here. The ornamental motifs would always include stems, leaves and pomegranate flowers, often intertwined with birds (herons) and other peculiar motifs from the Baroque repertory used in the Peruvian high plains, the Bolivian region of Santa Cruz de la Sierra and the Jesuit Missions of Moxos and Chiquitos. It is particularly on account of this ornamentation that they were popularly known as “*mayas*”, from the word for May (when flowers bloom), used as synonymous with “ornamental” or “floral” plaques, by imitating a perennial herbaceous plant.⁴⁶⁴

Two of the motifs chosen for inclusion in the ornamentation are worth particular mention: the “foliage-man”⁴⁶⁵ and the two-headed eagle (Fig. 2),⁴⁶⁶ though that does not mean the rest are less significant or important, as the herons, the “green” mascarón and the naturalist elements underline the Baroque tastes generated in the Altiplano region of Peru and Bolivia, reaching as far as the aforementioned missions of Moxos and Chiquitos. With regard to the two-headed eagle, this is a transposition of the image of the “eucharistic pelican”, a symbol of divine love, visible in the iconography here, depicted with a heart on its breast containing two of its chicks, recalling the Christian tradition by which it would pick at its own breast and use the blood to feed its young.

We first unveiled these four ornamental plaques in 1997,⁴⁶⁷ though there is also an incomplete plaque that is somewhat similar (just the body of the vase) preserved in the Museo Catedralicio of Santa Cruz de la Sierra.⁴⁶⁸ This leads us to suggest they may have been created in the same silver workshop, possibly in San Pedro de Moxos, given most of the silverwork from the Santa Cruz cathedral originated from that mission.⁴⁶⁹ The additional fact that the plaques include the letters IHS (*Jesus Salvador Hominum*) also vouches for their Jesuit origin, given the order was linked with that monogram.

The work of an anonymous artist, these should be classified as utterly Baroque pieces, despite the restrained balance of the relief, and the still-prevailing desire to keep surfaces free of adornment. They date from around 1725, though it is difficult to specify a precise date as we do not know the identity of the artist behind these splendid ornamental plaques.



Fig. 1 *Foliage-man with breasts* (detail), Moxos? (Bolivia, Peruvian Viceroyalty), ca. 1725



Fig. 2 *Two-headed eagle* (detail), Moxos? (Bolivia, Peruvian Viceroyalty), ca. 1725

