

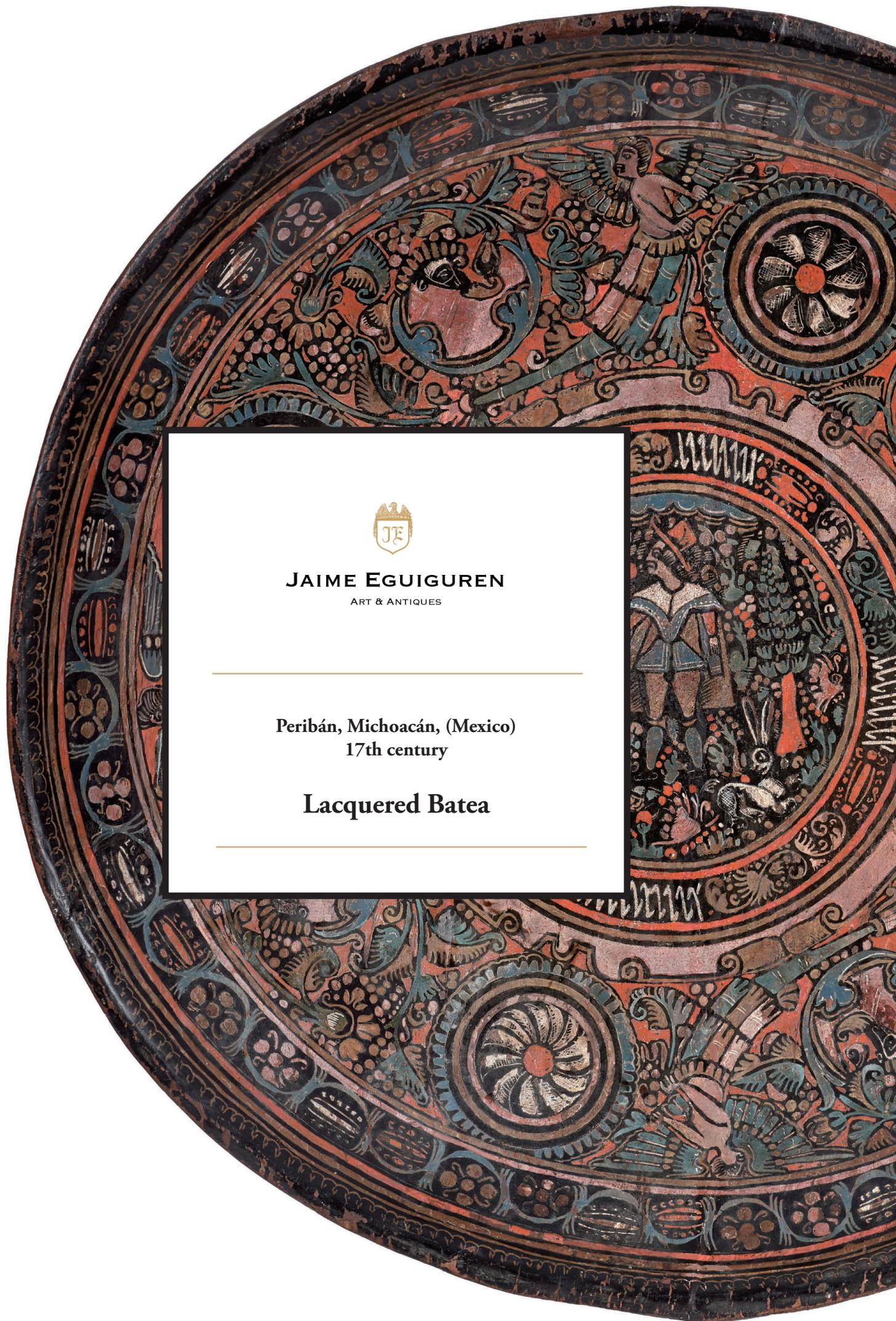


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Peribán, Michoacán, (Mexico)
17th century

Lacquered Batea



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Anonymous Artist

Peribán, Michoacán, Mexico, 17th century

Lacquered wood

57 x 57 cm

Provenance: Private Collection, France

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Lacquered bateas constitute one of the most characteristic objects within the sumptuous arts produced in the region of Michoacán during the viceregal period. These are large wooden bowls or trays, generally circular in form with gently flaring sides, whose surfaces were carefully decorated using complex lacquer and polychrome techniques. These works developed primarily within the Purépecha cultural sphere and reflect the continuity of ancient Indigenous technical traditions adapted to the artistic context of New Spain.

The technique employed derives directly from pre-Hispanic procedures used to decorate jícaras (vessels made from gourds). As described by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in the Florentine Codex, such surfaces were polished and burnished before being decorated through incisions or scraping that created ornamental motifs prior to the application of pigments and natural varnishes. Over time, these procedures were applied to wooden objects as well, giving rise to a lacquer tradition of extraordinary sophistication.

During the seventeenth century a decorative method described by chroniclers as “pintura de Peribán” became firmly established. This process was characterized by what scholars now refer to as the cut-and-fill technique. In this method the artisan first drew the design on the surface, then hollowed out certain areas using punches or small metal tools, and finally filled the recessed spaces with lacquers of different colors, which were subsequently polished to achieve a smooth and luminous surface.

Although these works are traditionally known as “Peribán bateas,” their production was not limited exclusively to that locality. Various studies have demonstrated that manufacture extended to several towns in the region, including Uruapan, Pátzcuaro, Tancítaro, Zacán, and San Juan Parangaricutiro, where Purépecha artisans specialized in both woodworking and lacquer decoration. In some cases, the wooden structure may have been produced in forested areas such as Tancítaro and later transported to other centers where the lacquer decoration was applied.

Bateas served a variety of functions within the domestic and ceremonial life of New Spain. Some were used in household contexts to serve fruit or food, while others possessed a clearly representational or ceremonial character, functioning as prestige objects displayed in elite interiors or during religious festivities and public celebrations. Their large scale, complex decoration, and brilliant lacquered surfaces made them visually striking objects.

From a stylistic standpoint, seventeenth-century bateas display a notable ornamental syncretism. Indigenous artisans incorporated decorative repertoires derived from European Renaissance and Mannerist prints—such as mascarons, harpies, sirens, garlands, scrolls, and cartouches—which they reinterpreted according to their own artistic sensibilities. These motifs were combined with animals, plants, and geometric forms drawn from the natural environment of Mesoamerica, creating a hybrid decorative language that constitutes one of the most distinctive manifestations of early viceregal art.

The present example adopts the characteristic form of large New Spanish bateas, with a broad circular profile and gently flaring sides carved from a single block of wood. The interior surface forms the principal decorative field and is organized through a rigorously radial composition, structured in several concentric registers that order the complex ornamentation.

At the center of the composition appears a circular medallion that serves as the visual nucleus of the design (Fig. 1). Contrary to what might initially be suggested, this space does not contain a heraldic shield but rather a figurative narrative scene. At its center stands an elegantly dressed male figure whose attire reflects clear influences from seventeenth-century European fashion as interpreted by the local artisan. The figure wears a wide-brimmed hat, a short coat with skirted tails, fitted breeches, and stockings, and stands in a frontal pose that emphasizes his prominence within the scene.

The figure is surrounded by a rich array of fauna and vegetation, forming a small idealized landscape. In the background a building can be discerned, likely representing his house or residence, rendered in simplified architectural form. The scene is further animated by animals placed around the central figure: in

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Fig. 1 Lacquered Batea, Peribán, Michoacán, Mexico, 17th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques



Fig. 2 Lacquered Batea (detail), Peribán, Michoacán, Mexico, 17th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

the lower left appears what seems to be a long-tailed feline, depicted in a calm attitude, while in the lower right one clearly observes a viscacha, a rodent native to the Andean regions of South America. The presence of this animal is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests the incorporation of symbolic or identity-based elements drawn from the natural environment of the Americas into the composition.

This central scene is framed by a richly ornamented circular cartouche that separates the medallion from the surrounding decorative program. From this focal point unfolds a decoration organized into successive concentric rings, each carefully structured to maintain a precise visual balance. These concentric registers organize the complex ornamentation of the batea, guiding the viewer's eye from the narrative center toward the peripheral decorative elements while reinforcing the overall radial structure of the composition.

The first register surrounding the medallion consists of a circular band decorated with geometric and linear motifs, which serves as a transition between the central scene and the principal ornamental field. Beyond this area appears the most elaborate decorative register of the piece, where circular cartouches with floral rosettes alternate with winged hybrid figures reminiscent of sirens or fantastic creatures, integrated within a dense network of vegetal scrolls. These figures possess stylized bodies with extended wings and limbs that merge with foliage, yet lack clearly feminine

attributes, placing them within the fantastic repertory characteristic of European Mannerist ornament rather than naturalistic representation (Fig. 2).

The rosettes act as visual points of balance within the composition, while the hybrid figures participate in the flowing movement of the vegetal scrollwork that traverses the decorative field. Stems, leaves, and flowers extend outward from the principal elements following the ornamental principle of *horror vacui*, characteristic of seventeenth-century decorative arts, whereby the entire surface is filled with interconnected motifs forming a continuous ornamental network.

The composition culminates at the outer rim, where a broad circular frieze presents a rhythmic sequence of small vegetal and geometric motifs arranged within regular compartments. This peripheral frame reinforces the radial structure of the decoration and acts as a visual boundary that contains the exuberant ornamentation of the interior.

Chromatically, the batea combines reddish tones, ochres, blacks, and bluish greens, creating a vibrant contrast that enhances the incised decoration and underscores the richness of the design. The result is a densely decorated yet carefully balanced surface in which each element contributes to a complex ornamental system revealing both the technical skill of the artisan and his familiarity with seventeenth-century decorative repertoires.

Beyond its ornamental richness, the batea stands out for its remarkable state of preservation, a circumstance rarely encountered in objects of this type. Seventeenth-century lacquered bateas, having been

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used in both domestic and ceremonial contexts, often exhibit significant losses of polychromy, abrasions, or deterioration caused by prolonged use and environmental conditions. In the present example, however, the original decoration remains exceptionally well preserved, allowing the complexity of the design and the refinement of the technique to be clearly appreciated.

The polychromy retains a notable chromatic vitality, particularly in the reddish, bluish-green, and black tones that structure the decorative ensemble. Likewise, the delicate incised work and the careful polishing of the surface remain clearly legible, making it possible to understand the cut-and-fill technique characteristic of these New Spanish lacquers with unusual clarity.

The reverse of the batea (Fig. 3), although more restrained than the interior surface, also presents a carefully conceived ornamental program, demonstrating that the object was intended as a fully finished work rather than merely a functional container. The decoration is organized through a radial structure centered on a stylized vegetal motif arranged in the form of an eight-pointed star. This central element, composed of elongated leaves finely patterned with diagonal incisions, creates a dynamic composition that radiates outward from the center, evoking both floral and solar imagery.

Around this nucleus unfolds a secondary decorative register consisting of small vegetal motifs and incised scrolls distributed rhythmically across the circular field. These elements, executed through delicate incision on the dark lacquer ground, follow the same ornamental logic that governs the decoration of the interior surface.

The peripheral area of the reverse is defined by concentric ornamental bands in which small vegetal forms and oval motifs—resembling seeds or fruits—are repeated continuously along the rim. This frieze reinforces the circular character of the object and establishes a clear formal dialogue with the decorative registers of the obverse.

Unlike the richly colored interior, the reverse decoration relies primarily on the contrast between the dark lacquer ground and the incised lines revealing the warm tone of the underlying surface, creating an elegant graphic effect. Although wear caused by use and time is visible in certain areas, particularly near the center, the design remains fully legible and preserves the precision of the original drawing.

The presence of such elaborate decoration on the reverse confirms that the batea was conceived as an object of considerable artistic value, in which even the less visible surfaces received careful ornamental attention. This comprehensive treatment of the surface reflects the high level of sophistication achieved by lacquer workshops in Michoacán during the seventeenth century and their ability to combine utilitarian function with refined decorative artistry.

From an artistic standpoint, the batea reveals the remarkable mastery of the Indigenous artisan who executed it. The complex radial organization, the precision of the drawing, and the harmonious integration of European Mannerist motifs with decorative elements drawn from the Mesoamerican environment demonstrate a high degree of technical and conceptual sophistication. Each element—from the central figurative scene to the fantastic figures, rosettes, and vegetal scrolls—forms part of a perfectly balanced ornamental system.



Fig. 3 Lacquered Batea, Peribán, Michoacán, Mexico, 17th century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

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Taken together, both for the quality of its execution and for its exceptional state of preservation, this batea may be considered an outstanding example of seventeenth-century lacquer production in Michoacán, bearing witness to the refinement achieved by Indigenous workshops in the region and to the cultural richness of early New Spanish art. Its preservation allows the technical complexity and formal beauty of a craft tradition that represents one of the most distinctive expressions of the artistic heritage of colonial Mexico to be appreciated with rare clarity.

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