



JAIME EGUIGUREN

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1673-1687

“CHAROLA” PLATTER

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Silver: turned, cast, repoussé and trimmed with “picado de lustre” punchwork.

Measurements: 50.5 cm long by 34.8 cm wide and 5 cm high

Marks: male head over an M between crowned columns; eagle on a prickly pear and FVENTE; plus another mark: between crowned columns, a male head over a P (this initial is unclear). No zigzag assay gouge

Marks of ownership engraved on the back: a symbol (some kind of poker, located in the middle) and the letters MLIR (or MILR) at the end of the shorter axis.

Weight: 1.799kg



Dra. Cristina Esteras Martín

This piece features an oval basin with mixtilinear profile, and a wide, flat outer border featuring two large, indented openings on the longer sides, the rest made up of straight edges alternating with concave gaps (numbering ten), symmetrically arranged throughout. There is also a prominent moulding along the edges. The shallow inner basin slopes gently down to the bottom from a moulded lip at the top. The entire piece is covered by naturalistic decorative motifs, most prominent among which are undulating-sided scallop shells with radiating grooves. There are four big concave ones arranged around the sides of the basin, and another four smaller ones making up a sort of quatrefoil on the very bottom. Further decorative motifs include winding plant stalks with little four-petalled flowers and enormous flat leaves distributed across the entire surface, both the basin and the flat outer border. The decoration has been executed using delicate repoussé work and, to highlight the motifs, the free surfaces feature “picado de lustre” punchwork.

Pieces matching the design of this work have been categorised with a range of names aimed at describing their possible functions. As such, what in English would be commonly called a serving “tray”, “basin”, “dish” or “platter” have been called “azafates”, “charolas”, “fuentes”, “bandejas”, “bacías”, “sangradores” and even “palanganas”, but on this occasion we think the most suitable term would be “charola”¹ (or possibly “azafate”), not just because that is how they are called in Mexico (where this one is from, as we shall be seeing shortly), but because its abundant Baroque decoration and the shallowness of the basin are a fairly clear indication that it was not used as a barber’s basin (bacía)², bloodletting bowl (sangrador)³, or wash bowl (palangana)⁴, but as a serving tray for a wide range of products. These pieces were very popular household goods among the wealthy classes in the Baroque period.

They could be executed in highly-contrasting materials, both in metal (silver and brass), ceramics and even in wood. In the case of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico), they were even decorated with lacquer or Mexican “maque”, while in Peru they often featured Pasto varnish⁵.

In Spain, a large number of pieces were made following this structural model, with its uneven, mixtilinear edges in a large number of artistic centres, so we can find unadorned examples in the likes of

¹ In Mexico and Bolivia: a vessel for serving things. Synonymous with other terms used for trays and platters: *bandeja*, *fuelle* or *azafate*. The latter could also be used here.

² These tend not to be ornately decorated. Being intended for personal hygiene, they did often have wide openings in the sides, which fitted around the user’s neck.

³ Those said to have this function were categorised as such on the basis of the two openings opposite each other across the shorter axis. One was supposedly intended to fit around the user’s arm, while the other served as a sort of handhold.

⁴ These had much deeper basins, as can be observed in the painting *Vanitas* attributed to the circle of Tomás Yepes, from the Ruiz-Giménez collection (in the auction at *Alcalá Subastas*, 8 and 9 October 2003, lot no. 61).

⁵ A piece presenting these characteristics is preserved in Madrid’s Museo de América (inv. no. 12242, listed as 17th century).

Granada, Cordoba, Madrid, Valladolid, Soria⁶ and Talavera de la Reina⁷, to name just a few. Not being marked, it is almost impossible to attribute specific origins for these pieces, such as the ones preserved in the parish church Nuestra Señora de la Granada, in Llerena (Badajoz) or in the church of Nuestra Señora de la Peña de Francia in Puerto de la Cruz, (Tenerife). Others were also made in neighbouring Portugal (in Lisbon and Porto), and of course in the Spanish Americas, with marked pieces from both Peru⁸ and Mexico City still preserved today, as we will be seeing shortly.

The fact that our “charola” is Mexican is borne out by its markings, three of which appear twice on the short side edges. The one relating to location is found between two crowned columns where there is a male head seen in profile on top of the letter M (referring to Mexico City). The one that tells us that the “quinto” royal tax had been paid on the work features an eagle, its wings unfurled, on top of a prickly pear. The third and last one is a rectangular cartouche containing the following legend: FVENTE (with a V rather than a U), the mark belonging to Juan de la Fuente⁹.

In addition to these three marks, there is a fourth one (which is hard to make out on both of the occasions it appears close to the larger indented apertures), where one can identify a head turned to its left on top of an initial that might be a P, arranged between two columns, both topped by a four-pointed crown rather like a fleur-de-lis. This variation does not match any of the stamps used in Mexico City, but does tally with one used in the silversmith workshops of San Luis Potosí¹⁰.

Considering this dual marking (Mexico City and San Luis Potosí), we can only wonder in which of the two silversmith centres the piece was actually made, taking into account the fact that both marks were common in more or less the last quarter of the 17th century and, as such, would seem contemporary, especially as we know that Juan de la Fuente, whose mark the piece bears, was active between approximately 1673 and 1687¹¹, and that the pieces from Potosí we studied in 1992 date from about 1690¹². In the light of the above, it seems the piece can be reliably dated to between 1673 and 1687, but when it comes to determining whether it was made in Mexico City or in San Luis Potosí, there is an element of doubt. Saying that, we would argue it probably came from a workshop in the capital, and that due to some unknown circumstance it was then also marked in a silversmith workshop in Potosí, as another “charola” exists (presenting the same structure and ornamentation) in the Basilica of Nuestra Señora del Pino in Teror (Gran Canaria), whose markings leave no doubt as to its origin in Mexico City¹³. In addition, there is another piece presenting the same structural and decorative characteristics

6 Examples previously mentioned by Esteras Martín, Cristina in *La platería de la Colección Várez Fisa. Obras escogidas. Siglos XV-XVIII*, Madrid, 2000, p. 227 and in *La Colección Alorda-Derksen. Platería de los siglos XIV-XVIII (Obras escogidas)*. Barcelona-London, 2005, p. 193.

7 Auctioned at Alcalá Subastas, 8-9 May 2002, lot 218.

8 See piece no. 34 from the Colección Alorda-Derksen in Esteras Martín, Cristina: *La Colección Alorda-Derksen...., op. cit.* p. no. 34.

9 In Esteras Martín, Cristina: *Marcas de platería Hispanoamérica. Siglos XVI-XX*, Madrid, Ediciones Tuero, 1992, no. 63-65, p. 24.

10 Ibidem, no 83-83^a.

11 Heredia Moreno, Carmen: “Sobre los ensayadores de la Caja Real de México en el siglo XIX y otros cargos anejos”, in *Estudios de Platería, San Eloy 2010* (coord. Jesús Rivas Carmona), Universidad de Murcia, 2019, p. 274.

12 In Esteras Martín: *Marcas de platería...., op. cit.*, no. 83-83^a.

13 This piece was first written about by Hernández Perera, Jesús: *Orfebrería en Canarias*. Madrid, 1955, p. 189, fig. 66; it was subsequently studied by Jesús Pérez Morera, who identified its markings (in *La Casa indiana. Platería doméstica y artes decorativas en La Laguna*. Catalogue from exhibition held in the Casa de los Capitanes. Ayuntamiento de San Cristóbal de La Laguna, 2017, fig. 39).

housed in the Pérez Ascanio collection in La Orotava (Tenerife)¹⁴, which allows us to establish not only that Mexico City was the origin for all of these works, but also that our “charola” is the oldest known Baroque exemplar of this type and, as such, the head of the series (for the moment, at least) of this model and ornamentation.

In addition, on the back it presents two marks that do not belong to standard silverware markings, but instead refer to its former owners. One of these, a shallow engraving using a burin, seems to depict a chimney poker¹⁵, while the other one traces out the letters MLIR (or MILR).

If we also consider the ornamental repertoire, with its naturalist motifs, largely made up of scallop shells among vegetation (with windy stalks, leaves and little quatrefoil flowers), we also find ourselves back at the silversmith workshops of Mexico, where a large number of known and previously-unpublished pieces featured similar motifs, to the extent that it became something of a calling card for works in New Spain. You only need to compare and contrast a pair of platters with feet from a private collection¹⁶, and a round tray from the old Spanish collection of Antonio Caverio¹⁷ (both pieces also marked by *Juan de la Fuente*) with another round piece also in private hands which was executed in Guadalajara (Mexico)¹⁸, and an oval tray from the Cathedral of Caracas (Venezuela)¹⁹, not to mention a type of drinking vessel known as a “bernegal” preserved in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London²⁰.

The result is a highly unusual work in terms of the technique by which it was executed and the choice and skilful arrangement of the decoration, with its balanced symmetry. It offers a visual experience that borders on the pictorial, with it being worth noting, for their originality, the shells on the flat outer border, whose valves lead us to posit they might be depictions of the *Pecten tigris* mollusc. The piece’s considerable size (they tend to be smaller) and generous weight, added to its markings, make this a really exceptional and outstanding exemplar.

14 It is not marked, but it is considered as being from Mexico and dated to 1700 (Pérez Morera: *La Casa indiana...*, op. cit., fig. 38).

15 On account of resembling a long and thin utensil such as those one would use to move embers and stir up a fire.¹⁶ See Esteras Martín, Cristina: “El Oro y la Plata americanos, del valor económico a la expresión artística”, *El Oro y la plata de las Indias en la época de los Austrias*, Madrid, Fundación ICO, 1999, p. 407, cat. no. 220).

16 See Esteras Martín, Cristina: “El Oro y la Plata americanos, del valor económico a la expresión artística”, *El Oro y la plata de las Indias en la época de los Austrias*, Madrid, Fundación ICO, 1999, p. 407, cat. no. 220).

17 In Eguiguren *Arte de Hispanoamérica: Highlights of Hispanic American Silver & Equestrian Silver in the River Plate*. Buenos Aires, 2017, no. 7, pp. 22 and 23.

18 A photo of the piece along with its punchmarks appears in Fernández, A., Munoa, R. and Rabasco, J.: *Enciclopedia de la plata española y virreinal americana* Madrid, 1984, no. 1688, p. 521.

19 See Duarte, Carlos F.: *Catálogo de obras artísticas mexicanas en Venezuela, periodo hispánico*. Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998, p. 172, cat. no. 8. He claims it is marked by Diego González de la Cueva, but as he does not include said marks we do not know if they relate to him or to Nicolás.

20 This piece was uncovered by Charles Oman, although he erroneously claimed it originated from Alcalá de Henares (Spain) (in *The Golden Age of Hispanic Silver 1400-1665*. London, 1968, no. 163, fig. 261), whereas it is actually a Mexican piece dating from prior to 1673, as demonstrated by Cristina Esteras Martín in “Sobre bernegales mexicanos del siglo XVI”. *Estudios de Platería. San Eloy 2004*. Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2004, pp. 156-158, Plate 4.

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