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Mexico, Tonalá

Circa 1650

**BÚCARO- BERNEGAL
(DRINKING VESSEL)**

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Búcaro- Bernegal (Drinking vessel)

Earthenware, red burnished pot, incise, punched and stamped decoration. Red slip, one fire, bisque.
Diameter: 14 cm; Height: 7cm

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A Bernegal is a cup with wide mouth to drink liquids or also could be a liquid container, mainly water or wine. This drinking cup was a very popular shape in Spain made in many materials, gold and silver and very special earthenware in Islas Canarias.

The drinking cup, Bernegal or Búcaro has a wide open mouth and an undulated rim with two round handles. The body shows an incised, punched and stamped decoration depicting leaves and flowers in a very geometrical and elegant way. The vessel has probably been covered by a red slip and burnished later with only one fire.

Burnished Pottery of Tonalá

Before the arrival of the Spanish to the New World, almost all regions of the Americas had their own significant pottery-making traditions, and production continued to prosper throughout the colonial period. While some native pottery traditions remained unaffected by the Conquest, many assimilated the advantages offered by some of the tools used by the European potters, together with the new decorative motifs they introduced.

Tonalá

Tonalá is a town in Western Mexico, seven miles from Guadalajara. The burnished pottery of Tonalá is an expression of an ancient identity dating back to pre-Hispanic times. We know of its antiquity thanks to the accounts of travelers and surviving inventories. This pottery was much appreciated by the Spaniards and Criollos living in New Spain. It reached Europe together with other merchandise sent from the New World to satisfy the tastes of the European elites.

Pre-Hispanic Times – Pottery from the Tumbas de Tiro

Sedentary pottery-producing cultures have existed since at least 400 AD. The burnishing technique appears from this period in semi-spherical basins or elegant, slender-necked vases. Some of these pieces

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are monochromatic. Burnishing is a finishing technique that gives a shine to the clay, making it more attractive as well as making it waterproof, by closing the pores. The earliest known pieces were found in the Tumbas de Tiro as part of the grave goods. Little is known about settlements and ceramics in the region after this period. However, colonial sources and historical studies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries describe a significant community in Tonalá just before the Conquest. Around the year 700 AD the cultures who created the Tumbas de Tiro suffered from the arrival of new migrant groups; this did not represent the end of the occidental cultures in Mexico, but they did undergo changes, represented in a more utilitarian type of pottery.

The Arrival of the Spaniards – The Viceroyalty of New Spain

It is believed that the first Spaniards to reach Tonalá were Franciscans, but it was the Augustinian monks who arrived in 1573 who perfected the technique. With both their diet and their beliefs, the Spaniards transformed life for the Indigenous peoples. The funerary use of burnished pottery disappeared with the prohibition of funeral customs and idolatrous worship. The uses of the pottery were restricted to those it still retains today: as a recipient for water—for which it is now renowned thanks to the aroma and freshness it confers on the water—and as an ornament, for civil rather than religious purposes, appreciated for its pleasant texture, attractive form and decoration. Hence, the pottery of Tonalá was already prized by the inhabitants of the region around Guadalajara in the sixteenth century. Spaniards and Criollos accepted the burnished earthenware. This was the first step to selling it across the territory of New Spain and from there to Europe.

Vases from Tonalá were known in Spain as *búcaros de Indias* or Indian vases and were sought after for their fine workmanship and fragrant clay, together with the aroma they imparted to the water stored within. The water also remained fresh, and as it evaporated it humidified and perfumed homes in the dry climate of Madrid. It became a fashion for people—above all women—to consume tiny fragments of the earthenware, or to rub pieces on their bare skin. It was believed that Tonalá clay had culinary and medicinal properties and that it improved the complexion. This custom was known as *bucarofagia* or pot-eating.

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The popularity of *búcaros de Indias* is well documented both in the literature and in still-lives from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Painters such as Van der Hamen, Juan Bautista Espinosa and Antonio de Pereda depicted pots from Tonalá in their work, while in Diego de Velázquez's *Las Meninas* a small red clay pot appears in the center of the composition, offered to Princess Margarita on a silver tray by lady-in-waiting María Agustina Sarmiento. All this reflects the growing European taste for collecting ceramics from the New World as early as the first quarter of the seventeenth century. The most important collections of these objects include those of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de' Medici, the Aldobrandini family from Florence, and the Duchess of Alba, from Seville. Of all of these, the largest and best-known collection was assembled by the Spanish noble Doña Catalina Vélez de Guevara, niece and wife of Don Íñigo Velez de Guevara, Count of Oñate and Viceroy of Naples from 1648 to 1653, under the reign of Philip III. This collection was expanded by her descendants, who donated it to the Museum of Archeology of Madrid in 1884. Later it was passed on to the Museum of the Americas in Madrid upon its foundation in 1941.

Earthenware recipients produced in Tonalá also appear in numerous Casta paintings from New Spain. Letters written by Florentine scholar Lorenzo Magalotti (1637- 1712) are the most important source of information on the various related traditions. In eighteenth-century European texts, the earthenware was known as "Guadalajara clay," even though the Colonial-period workshops were located in the town of Tonalá.



Types of Tonalá Pottery

The pottery of Tonalá can be grouped into three general categories:

Red, polychromatic, and black.

Burnished red vases appear to be the earliest of the three, with examples depicted in Spanish still lifes from as early as 1624.



Fig. 1 Buccaro vase with incisions and handles. Tonalá, Mexico, between 1600- 1700.
Unpainted earthenware dimpled ceramic, burnished. London, Victoria&Albert Museum.

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Fig. 2 Juan Van der Hammen,
Still Life with Crockery and
Cakes. c. 1627.
Oil on canvas, 77 x 100 cm,
Museo Thyssen- Bornemisza



Fig. 3 Juan Bautista Espinosa,
Still Life with Dead Bird, 1651.
Oil on panel, 23 x 30 cm,
Madrid, Museo del Prado

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Fig. 4 Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez, *Las Meninas* or *The Family of Philip IV*, 1656- 1657.
Oil on canvas, 318 x 276 cm.
Madrid, Museo del Prado



Fig. 5 (Detail) Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez, *Las Meninas* or *The Family of Philip IV*, 1656- 1657.
Oil on canvas, 318 x 276 cm.
Madrid, Museo del Prado

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Fig. 6 Buenaventura José Guiol, Mexico 1777. *De Loba e Indio nace Zambaigo* (Of She-Wolf and American Indian male born Zambaigo). Number 10 of the series. Oil on canvas, 62.3 x 55.2cm, Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques.

These paintings reveal the variety of forms and decorations that were produced and sent to Spain in this period. The forms ranged from pots, vases, pitchers and bottles to elaborate vessels with capricious and extravagant forms. Their decorations are characterized by striated walls, concentric rings and sunken or relief decorations. Another early type of red burnished pots is characterized by incised, punched and stamped decoration.

In the late seventeenth century the potters of Tonalá began to finish the vases with a white or red slip painted by hand and embellished with floral and abstract motifs in red, orange, blue and manganese. This type of pot is mentioned in the inventory of the Countess of Oñate in 1685 as “colored” and began to appear in Spanish and Mexican still life paintings in the early eighteenth century. These dates suggest that this style of vase began to be produced in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and continued until the late eighteenth century. The most popular polychromatic form was without doubt the double-handled pitcher, which according to Magalotti was used for drinking water.

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The forms were manufactured using molds sometimes in two parts that were then joined. The handles, together with the relief decoration, were made separately with molds and applied once the two parts had been joined and while the clay was still wet. Two groups can be distinguished based on the tone of the engobe: cream, red or mixed engobe background. Against this background the complex decorations are applied, which may include exotic birds, double-headed eagles, relief figures, and a profusion of plant and animal motifs created with slips and oxides. The earlier Tonalá earthenware has a simpler and monochromatic decoration as we mentioned before composed by incisions and stamping depicting simple and geometrical motifs.

Technical Aspects – Manufacturing the Burnished Pottery of Tonalá

The industry was dominated by artists of Indigenous descent. The town of Tonalá prided itself in the fact that every house had its own workshop and men, women and children alike all worked on the production process. Mexican historian José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez (1737-1799) offers the earliest known technical account of the earthenware pots of Tonalá in his 1792 article published in the *Gazeta de la Literatura*.

The clay was extracted from the San Andrés mines near Guadalajara. In Tonalá there have always been two clays that acquire consistency and plasticity when blended: “stiff clay,” which is sticky, and “soft clay,” which is dusty; the former is red, yellow or gray in color while the latter is white. Each family of potters prepared their own clays and blended them to achieve a good paste. For pigments they used a clay called *barniz de Sayula* and manganese, iron and other minerals. After grinding the clays, they are mixed and stored. When it is time to prepare the clay for use, water is added and it is then left to rest. It is then kneaded before use to remove the air and achieve the smoothness required. For the molding, a pellet or tortilla shape is prepared which is applied to the mold. In Tonalá, mushroom-shaped molds of pre-Hispanic origin were used, as well as convex molds, and later vertical molds were used. The first molds were made of clay, and later of plaster. Using a piece of the same clay called a *tistal* they beat the paste to fit it to the mold, before shaping the other pieces such as handles and necks using the coil method. The piece is also beaten with a wooden paddle to adjust its thickness. Once the pieces have dried in the sun, they are smoothed with a river stone and the vases are then painted with engobe, prepared with different clays which are ground and dissolved in water. For pigments, as well as oxides of manganese and iron, local colored clays are used. To begin the decoration, the pot is submerged in an slip called *barniz de Sayula* which gives it a cream-colored

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background. The steps needed to create the polychrome effect of traditional earthenware are known as “*palmar*” and “*sombrear*.” *Palmar* referred to painting plant and animal motifs in black and red, and *sombrear* referred to outlining figures in black or white. The brushes are made with dog or fox hair. Once the slip is dry, the piece is burnished. The area of the pot to be burnished is dampened with a *sopo* and then it is burnished with a hard stone. A piece of pyrite or a dog or wolf’s tooth set into a clay support may also be used. The burnished colors take on their full intensity with the firing. This is done at a temperature of 400° to 650° C (750 to 1200° F). The brick kilns are cylindrical, 3-5 feet in diameter, and sunk 24 inches into the ground. The pieces are piled up to 24-28 inches above ground level. Firing is uncovered, and lasts 2 to 3 hours. The pieces are fired once, unlike the glazed or tin-glazed pottery introduced by the Spanish. Once the pieces have been fired, additional gold or silver coloring may be added. Fig or mulberry sap was used as a mordant to apply the gold.

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