

# JAIME EGUIGUREN

## ART & ANTIQUES



### *Biombo with Views of Mexico City*

Unidentified artist  
New Spain (Mexico), 18th century  
Twelve adjoined wooden panels, oil on red makie lacquer  
Overall 170 x 760 cm  
Provenance: Roberto Mergelina, first half of the 18th century, Cadiz (Spain); Eduarda Gil de Ledesma, mid-18th century, Cadiz (Spain); The Counts of Bustillo by direct descent, Seville (Spain); Rodrigo Rivero Lake, Mexico City

The importance of the Manila galleon trade’s role in Hispano-American art and culture was fundamental. New Spain imported all sorts of items, such as furniture, pieces of ivory, porcelain, folding screens, lacquerware and, most of all, the artistic influence that perfected the techniques used in undertaking Novohispanic art. This was the case for the lacquer in the furniture copied in Hispano-America, in particular in Mexico. The technique of mother-of-pearl inlay on paintings was also introduced, leading to the production of fantastic enconchado works. This technique is especially well represented by Juan and Miguel González, who were able to create authentic works of art. Folding screens started to be made in Mexico in the first half of the 17th century, using the aforementioned techniques, and including “makie” imitating Asian lacquer. Makie was a mixture made up of varying mineral, vegetable and animal elements such as tecoxtle (a yellow mineral with a sandy texture), linseed, teziscalte (a white stone that was ground up), insect oils, colored earth, agave and cat hair. These resulted in a paste with which the varying woods were covered and which, once it had hardened, was polished repeatedly and then often painted as is the case for the folding screen we are presenting here.

These Mexican screens were authentic works art, and as such they were exported to Europe and the rest of the Americas. Not only were they sought after across the world due to their “exotic” flavor, but also because of their variety and functionality, serving to divide areas and to decorate rooms, lending them an exquisite touch of beauty.

The earliest known screens were generally executed by anonymous artists, and of those artists that have been identified, none would appear to have been of Asian origin. It is likely that Chinese, Filipino and Japanese artisans were involved in their execution, but the real artists would have been Novohispanic, in many cases “mestizos”. Given the great demand for these pieces of furniture, one may reasonably suppose that the economic circumstances would have encouraged the development of a sizable production industry, and that as such there would have been numerous artists and artisans devoted to their manufacture. A number of artists have been identified for

their skills decorating these screens, including Juan Correa, Miguel Cabrera and José Joaquín Magón. In Mexico City, Oaxaca and Puebla, other artists developed their talents, such as Antonio de Santander, Pedro López de Calderón, Nicolás Correa and Agustín Pino.

This extraordinary screen is made up of wooden panels mounted onto supporting frames, where the crowns of carved gilt wood are separate from the main body. The panels are covered using the Asian “makie” technique, lacquer with a brilliant burnt red color, on top of which a border frieze is applied in a design undeniably originating from Pátzcuaro, serving as a sort of frame. Inside these, we observe two major groups, with cutaways and various perspectives of the streets of Mexico City from the early 18th century. Finally, we find a range of depictions, from the mountains and volcanoes of the valley, and the neighboring villages that now form part of the growing City. The monuments and cutaways of the streets are architecturally well executed, and we can identify buildings and monuments that still exist today, along with others that have sadly not survived the passing of the years.

In the foreground we can make out the ancient inhabitants of the city, each one dressed in accordance with his social standing. We also observe the first halberdiers of the King, with their weapons and attire, which is key to determining the date our folding screen was made. Judging by fashion, we know the scenes took place during the reign of Philip V, Spain’s first Bourbon king. From the background of the pictures, done in red lacquer, we can discern an Asian influence, as well as in the gilt border framing the panels and the birds that adorn the work. According to Marco Dorta, who has carried out in-depth studies of this sort of screen, the initials A.R, which we find on the sacks being carried by mules led by muleteers, may be those of the author of the paintings.

The coloring of the constructions and the streets, and the passersby depicted in this magnificent work, offer us a snapshot of the physiognomy of Mexico City during a key period. The representation may be read on varying levels: majestic edifices rise up in the foreground, where we observe the inhabitants of the city and, as a

sort of backdrop, the outer limits of the valley, starting with two great volcanoes identified with the following inscriptions: “El Volcán” and “El otro Volcán” (“The Volcano” and “The Other Volcano”). The lagoons, canals and irrigation channels surrounding the city extended to the very heart of it, providing access to the freight and foodstuffs needed by the residents. All uses that were made of them are mentioned, including smuggling. We also find the names of the city and its neighboring towns, including San Angel, Texcoco, El Peñón, Coyoacán, Amecameca, Iztapalapa, Chapultepec and several others. We can also make out the names of the Texcoco and Chalma lakes, the city squares, the Alameda avenue, and the arcades that carried water to the stone basins such as the “Salto del Agua”, the sides of which feature the Royal Spanish escutcheon and the eagle and snake.

The figures populating these “*vistas*” are of the most diverse variety. There is a nobleman elegantly dressed in the French style and wearing a three-pointed hat, influenced by the fashion of King Philip V, the halberdiers who made up the armies of the Viceroyalty, cloaked men, beautiful criolla and mestiza women accompanied by their black slaves, the coal merchant and firewood seller, their wares laden onto mules,

cottage cheese sellers, women selling fermented agave, others selling chickens, and wholesalers on the other side of the Palace, linked to the Correo Mayor bridge. All of this serves to provide an important visual record of the customs and habits of the period of the Viceroyalty.

The work also identifies major buildings such as the Royal Palace, the Mariscala, the Cathedral, the churches of San Juan de Dios and the Santa Veracruz, La Piedad, Bethlem de las Mochas, San Antonio Abad, and we can clearly make out the Temple of Guadalupe, with the mysteries along the Calzada roadside, with each doorway featuring a depiction of the eagle devouring the snake, an unequivocal symbol of Mexican lineage with Indian roots.

