



JAIME EGUIGUREN

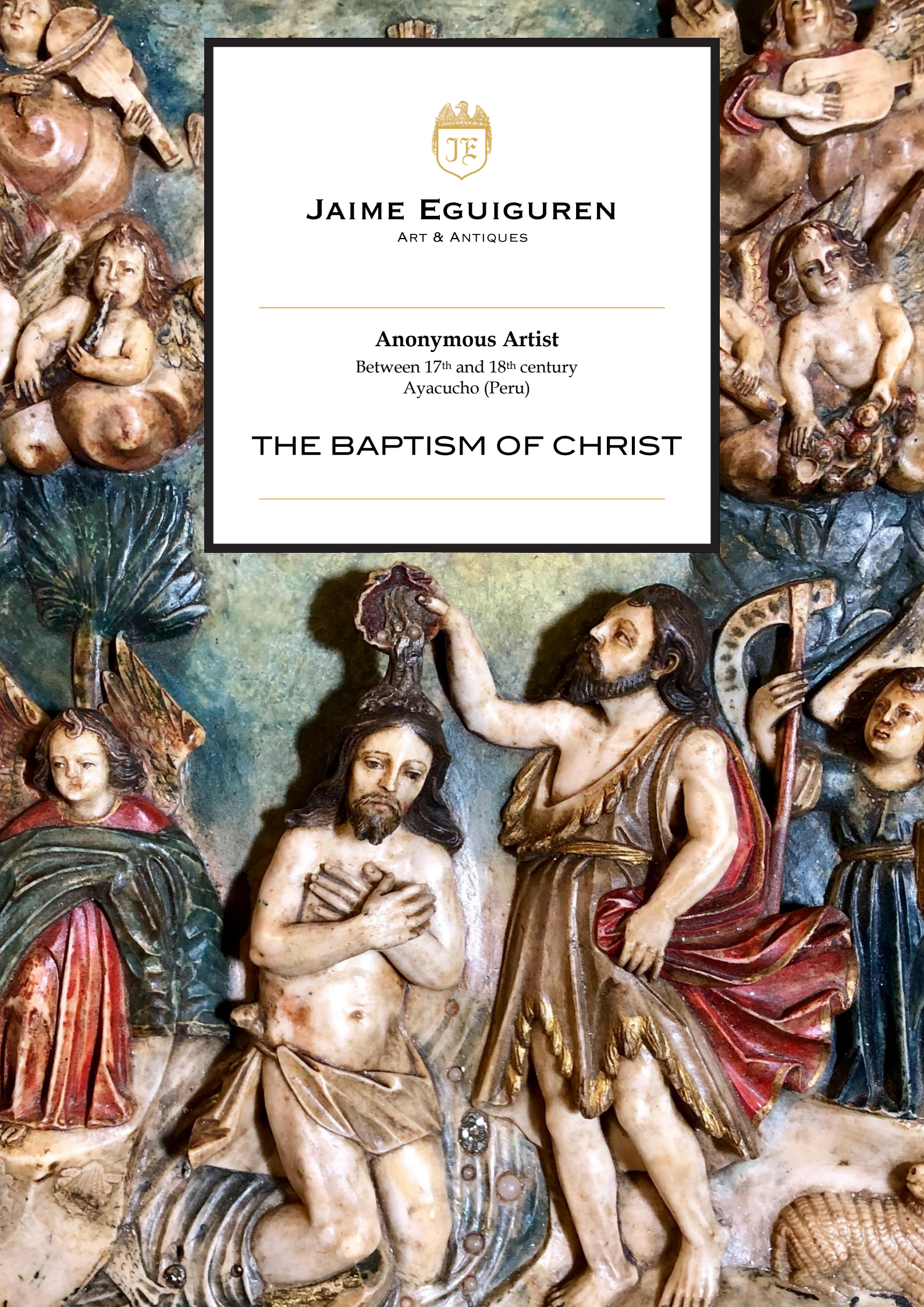
ART & ANTIQUES

Anonymous Artist

Between 17th and 18th century

Ayacucho (Peru)

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES



Anonymous Artist

Between 17th and 18th century
Ayacucho (Peru)

The Baptism of Christ

Relief work carved in Huamanga stone, encaustic polychrome and gilt. Encrusted with mica, pearls and hard stones.

33 x 24 cm

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

Over the past four centuries, Huamanga stone carving has given rise to a unique diversity of artistic, cultural and ideological manifestations of the city of Ayacucho and its area of influence, putting itself at the service, over the years, of the requirements of the Catholic religion as imposed by the colonial powers. It would appear that, prior to the vice-regal period, there was no Huamanga stone-carving activity but, rather, that the Iberian artists and artisans in the province were the ones who began carving the alabaster between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries. The Huamanga alabaster took on the Quechua denomination of *rumi* child (stone child), in allusion to the religious sculptures of the Child Christ that proliferated in the vice-regal period, and due to its fragility. It is also known as *berenguela*, acting as a substitute for Western marble.

The first works executed in this material were almost entirely of religious origin, this being an artistic form that was unique to Ayacucho. From the 18th century onwards, and through secular culture, other subjects began to be represented, from costumbrist and mythological ones, to depictions of the local wildlife, going hand in hand with the rise of a cultured Creole bourgeoisie in the period of independence, along with the everyday worship of a predominately rural clientele from the 19th century and, finally, with the development of an artisan market based on tourist activity from the mid-20th century onwards, leading to a drop in quality in this artistic form.

By 1626, the chronicler Bernabé Cobo would write that “at the diocese of Guamanga [sic] there is a big hill full of seams of a very fine alabaster which is as white as the snow, is used to carve small relief images, is very unusual and valued everywhere it is taken; and this stone is so soft that, soaked in water, it is carved with a knife”. It could be executed in situ, quickly and at a low cost, and easily transported.

Although a number of quarries of this type of alabaster do exist across the country, it was only in the aforementioned location that a form of sculpture developed, producing rounded figures and reliefs for both worship and decoration, the artists having learnt how to make use of the characteristics of the material, such as the ease with which it can be sculpted due to its low level of mineral hardness on the Mohs scale, the beautiful effect of its translucency, and the whitish colour that enabled it to become a local substitute for marble, ivory and, subsequently, porcelain and biscuit.

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

As we can observe in our relief, as well as in others from the same period, it is common to use gold leaf to coat certain figures, as well as the technique of wax encaustic. In the middle of the composition we find Christ, with his hands and arms folded over his chest in the midst of being

baptized. He exerts a powerful presence over the surface and depth of the work, as does the figure of Saint John the Baptist who is baptizing him, through the use of a marine shell that not only stands for the element purifying the soul (water) but also its reward, in the form of the pearl, reminding us of the Parable of the Pearl in which a merchant, having come across a particularly beautiful one, went and sold everything he had in order to be able to buy it. Comparable, according to Christ, with the Kingdom of Heaven and our abandonment of everything else in order to attain God.

John the Baptist presents a great deal of movement thanks to his foreshortened posture and his clothing, which appears to be dancing in the wind. It is hard not to notice the high level of detail with which the work has been embellished. This denotes not only great skill on the part of the artist in technical terms, but also a real interest in making the viewer a participant and a discoverer of, for example, each one of the musical angels bearing different instruments, or perhaps the offerings and baskets with fruit and flowers that are encrusted with pearls, thereby lending the work a certain sparkle and shine. Reminding us, perhaps, of the inlay works originating from Peru and Mexico, whose use of mother-of-pearl was a legacy of Namban art. At John the Baptist's feet there is a sheep representing God's flock (Man) and below this, the rest of the species, in this case local to Peru, such as birds, reptiles, fish, molluscs and sea algae.



Detail of the Huamanga relief depicting the Baptism of Christ in the Museo Pedro de Osma

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

One other well-known depiction of the Baptism of Christ exists, executed in this highly-prized South American alabaster, which we can find in Lima's Museo Pedro de Osma. It is of a similar quality to the one being presented by our gallery, and although these have been lost, it also presents the same technique of encrusted hard stones and pearls, which means that our Huamanga work is an extremely rare piece, worthy of featuring in the most important collections of Hispano-American art throughout the world.

Bibliography

- Gallagher de Parks, Mercedes (1942). *Costumbrist and Popular Huamanga Stone Sculpture* (study read at the 27th Americanist Conference in Lima, 1939).
- Luján, Flor (1987). *Artisan Huamanga Stone Work*. Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Lima.

Gonzalo Eguiguren Pazzi



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

