

# JAIME EGUIGUREN ART & ANTIQUES



## Tabor with Scene of Gallant Courtship

Mexico, Tonalá, late 17th–early 18th century  
Earthenware  
Molded, shaped, painted with slip (*engobe*) and burnished; single firing  
80 x 56 x 35 cm  
Provenance: Private collection, Spain

This magnificent amphora, or “tabor”, is egg-shaped with a long neck and two round handles on either side of its body. The vessel displays two clearly-differentiated faces. The front is ornately decorated with a triple arcade, the middle arch of which contains a relief scene made up of two figures framed by a voluminous drape and golden columns adorned with birds, enormous bunches of grapes and cherub heads at the bottom, which are repeated on the corners of the arches. One of the figures, a sumptuously-attired gentleman with dress coat and golden cloak, is engaged in gallant conversation with a beautiful young woman who looks up at him, enraptured.

Under one of the side arches we once again find the same male figure with a thick head of blond hair, elegantly attired in a dress coat, red waistcoat decorated with gold buttons and a hat. He is dressed in the style of late 17th century Europe. A curious bird is seen flying over his head. Under the opposite side arch we find the same man, standing up in a pose of analogous elegance, with an enormous red flower suspended over his head. In the middle of the amphora’s neck, as a conclusion to the narrative, we observe a scene oozing with romanticism; the aforementioned suitor elegantly courts the distinguished lady, her shoulders covered by a golden shawl and with a flower in her black hair. The beautiful young lady in her long red dress lovingly offers up a handkerchief, while her lover kisses her hand. The scene is completed by an aureole executed in gilt varnish. The space surrounding the various figures is filled with phytomorphic elements, leaves and a range of flowers and birds, in red, ochre and orange, with the relief motifs heightened using gold-colored varnish (Fig. 1).

The back of the work presents a crowned two-headed eagle, loosely painted using manganese oxide on an ochre background, and which is a direct allusion to the Spanish monarchs of the Habsburg House of Austria, who reigned until the end of the 17th century (Fig. 2).

The clear difference between the way the two sides were decorated suggests the piece was intended to be seen solely from the front, with the aforementioned three arches. Tibors were normally arranged

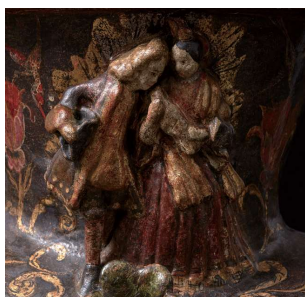


Fig. 1 Amphora’s neck detail

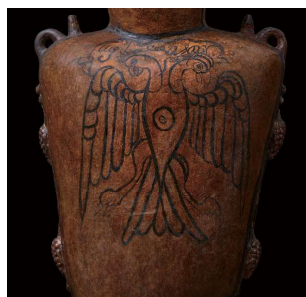


Fig. 2 Back detail

against the wall, and contained water which humidified and refreshed the dry Madrid air with their delicious aroma.<sup>4</sup> The scenes pictured in the arcade and on the neck of the vessel would appear to narrate episodes from the life of its owner, a member of the social elite depicted in an act of gallant courtship, as we can infer from his opulent dress, as well as the Habsburg eagle denoting sympathy for the House of Austria and the presence of the cherubim and bunches of grapes signaling his devotion to the Catholic faith.

This tabor is a unique example for its unusual subject and elaborate conception. In all likelihood it was expressly commissioned by the wealthy suitor in enduring remembrance of eternal affection for his lover.

It is extremely interesting to note that, of all known *tibors*, whether those in the Museo de América collection in Madrid, or the ones housed at the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig (Germany), or in Barcelona’s Museo Etnológico, this is practically the only known piece presenting so many relief figures participating in elegant scenes of courtship, which makes it one of the main exponents of this sort of object in terms of its rarity and exceptional artistic qualities.

The Museo de América collection boasts a piece presenting a similar sort of composition: a three-arch arcade on the front and some relief elements; one fashionably-dressed figure, pomegranates and cherubim, but it does not display the same number of figures involved in domestic and courtly episodes from the life of its owner as in our elegant tabor. There are, meanwhile, several tibors from the Madrid collection featuring the popular two-headed eagle motif on the back, the three-arch arcade and little relief figures next to each other making up varying iconographic scenes (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Tabor with Two-Headed Eagle and Relief Figures, Tonalá (Mexico), first third of the 17th century. Museo de América, Madrid

V.V.I.