

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Viceroyalty of Peru (Peru), 17th century)

Pair of salvers

silver in own colour, cast, beaten
and chased

each: 23.7 x 7 cm.; 9 1/8 x 2 3/4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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An extraordinary pair of silver salvers, each featuring a circular base that provides stability for carrying liquids, supporting a round platter or tray made up of a thick sheet of silver with a depression in the middle. This central orifice would have housed a recipient that may have been a little cup known as a “jícara”, possibly made of silver, cocobolo hardwood or gourd, with silver ornamentation, and intended to hold some kind of liquid, beverage or infusion. This central well features a decorative border of petals that would have served as a beautiful frame for the container holding the infusion. The depression itself is in plain silver with no ornamentation. The decorative elements on the platter radiate out from the middle, featuring animals surrounded by exuberant and dense phytomorphic motifs in a sort of *horror vacui*. Arranged symmetrically on an axis, prominent elements include felines and birds. The jaguars, typically Andean animals, appear to be licking their lips at the sight of the rich foliage, while breathing in the fragrance of a beautiful open flower hanging over their heads. In their beaks, the birds are seen carrying thick branches of leaves at the end of which varying birds' heads are seen to emerge. The salvers therefore present typical Mannerist grotesque decoration, bearing witness to the complex phenomenon of transculturation.

The felines and birds are immersed in a realistic depiction of foliage and phytomorphic elements that present curves and counter-curves. It is worth highlighting the exuberant display in the representation of the variety of flowers and their buds, which are seen from multiple points of view, thereby enriching the floral diversity.

The salvers' bases are broad, made of plain silver with circular indentations, whereas the platters showcase intricate chasing and *sgraffito* work in an attempt to create a lifelike representation of the anatomy and characteristics of the jaguars, with it being worth highlighting the fur, claws and snouts. Likewise, the birds use their claws to perch on the foliage, with their wings and tails unfurled aggressively, executed through fine chasing work in an attempt to lend verisimilitude to the depiction of their plumage and combative body language. The edges of the platters are plain with a subtle upward lip.

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The ornamental language of these salvers is completely naturalistic, with indigenous fauna and flora playing a prominent role, as Peruvian Baroque art placed a high value on local elements, often including aspects of Andean wildlife in its depictions. The pair of salvers we are presenting here is exceptional in that they often got broken up and it is more common to find single items than complete pairs.

We could also add that this splendid pair of salvers is testimony to the profane or civil silverwork of the rich dinnerware services that existed in the Peruvian Viceroyalty. Silver was so abundant in Peru and its surroundings that the precious metal was used for many everyday objects. The silver workshops of Lima, Arequipa, Cuzco and Potosí produced large numbers of objects that were normally made in other, cheaper, materials, such as pewter, bronze, ceramics, tin or copper.

The palaces of the elite classes and mansions of the wealthy were home to all sorts of silver items. Braziers, kettles, mate cups, herb boxes, drinking cups, candlesticks, trays, boxes, chests ewers with flaring spouts and salvers (fig. 1) were made in this noble metal for the prosperous and thriving colonial society, wealthy from the mining business and trade, which created an environment that encouraged the development and popularization of silverwork. Their houses were showcases for degrees of luxury and opulence that astonished foreign visitors. Although the society of the Viceroyalty imitated the customs and habits of the “old country”, it also generated a repertory of innovative objects aimed at the new social customs of the Americas taking shape in the Andean region, Peru and Bolivia. It was as such that new types of object emerged in Latin America, and we are referring here to those related to the deep-rooted custom of drinking herbal infusions, particularly mate, in the Peruvian Viceroyalty. These innovations allowed for the development of a wide range of artefacts, to which our beautiful and outstanding salvers belong.

As occurred with other artforms, silverware also drew heavily on Spanish models, Flemish engravings and book covers arriving in the Americas from Spain, which were the main sources for the master silversmiths working in the Andean region.

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These Spanish models were themselves inspired by Italian grotesques from the early 16th century and drawings by Flemish Mannerist engravers such as Frans Floris or Cornelis Bos, active in around 1550 (fig. 2). The silversmiths replicated these ornamental decorations, and steadily Andean silverwork introduced local flora and fauna motifs, as well as fantastical ones, “green” men or women, mermaids and Andean cherubim, in a gradual process of transculturation and *mestizaje*, thereby building up a unique universe of homegrown techniques and motifs.

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Figure 1. *Salver*, Peru, Lima, 1600 – 1635, silver in original colour. Private Collection

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Figure 2. Cornelis Bos, c. 1545, engraving. Museum Boijmans, the Netherlands