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Tonalá Ceramics in Seville

Alfredo J. Morales
Universidad de Sevilla

When, starting in 1565, the gradual process of regulating the commercial relationship between the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Philippines began, an economic circuit on a global dimension was organized. The establishment of the Manila Galleon—which linked the archipelago’s capital with Acapulco, then continued along a route that proceeded overland across Mexico, ending at Veracruz and from there sailing anew toward Seville—established a pathway of momentous human and cultural exchanges that operated until the early nineteenth century.¹ Manila was an active port through which Western relations with China, Japan, Siam, India, and the Pacific islands were maintained and was the place from which a varied assemblage of refined, sumptuous, and exotic Asian products arrived in Mexico and the metropole. The curiosity about and interest in works of ivory, lacquer, mother of pearl, silk, and porcelain, etc. spurred trade, making these, alongside raw materials and spices, the usual cargo of the Manila Galleon, also known as the China Galleon. Interest in these types of goods was widespread, as they were always considered extraordinary and prestigious objects. These precious commodities, with their undeniable capacity for seduction, for centuries exerted an obvious influence on the applied, sumptuary, and decorative arts practiced in the extensive territories of the Spanish monarchy. In fact, the rich and exotic materials, the exquisite designs and shapes, and the vibrant decorative repertoires originating from Asia modified and enriched many of the creations of Mexican and Spanish art. These hybrid artworks are proof of a unique capacity for admiration and adaptation and of the extraordinary versatility of their creators, as well as of the existence of a refined and exquisite aesthetic taste in which the vestiges of a typological and functional nature come together with an interest in the exotic and an eagerness for novelty, in a global cultural context.²

The famous Mexican ceramics produced in the potteries of Tonalá, a town near Guadalajara in the present-day state of Jalisco, are testament to all this. There, numerous pieces were made, among which the large ceramic vessels called *tibores*, which follow typically Asian models and whose height usually reaches

1 Albert Bernabeu, ed., *La Nao de China, 1565–1815. Navegación, comercio e intercambios culturales*. (Sevilla, 2013).

2 Alfredo J. Morales, “Introducción,” in *Filipinas Puerta de Oriente. De Legazpi a Malaspina*, exhibition catalog (Barcelona, 2003), 25.

almost a meter, stand out. They were fabricated with a grayish mud, called rigid or sticky mud, which was extracted from the San Andrés mines and which was mixed with a clay composed of quartz, feldspars, carbonates, and oxides, which acts as a degreasing agent. On the outside, the Tonalá pieces incorporate a layer of much-filtered clay or engobe, called Sayula varnish, over which the painted decoration was applied, employing different clays crushed and dissolved in water for this purpose. These pieces mostly display a smooth surface, in imitation of Asian models, although in the more expensive examples, small raised surfaces that become angel or animal heads when decoration is applied are not uncommon, artistically enriching the whole. Also in the pieces of greater sophistication and of higher value, representations of animals, primarily cats, can be found above the handles and flanking the neck. The decoration typically consists of zoomorphic and vegetable themes painted in dark red and brown hues with details reinforced with white brush strokes. Once finalized, the vessels were burnished to the utmost perfection, achieving the appearance of glazed vessels. A final baking provided the greatest luster and colorization to the Tonalá pieces.

Tibores were normally made to order for exportation and their function was both decorative and utilitarian, as they were employed to store or transport liquids, such as oil, or even solids, such as vanilla, chocolate, or spices, during trans-Atlantic voyages. Beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century, these pieces achieved a great prestige in Europe owing to their quality and to the peculiar ability of the mud from which they were shaped to perfume all that with which they were put in contact. Thus, the water stored in these containers was a product much sought after and appreciated by European nobility.³

In several Spanish cities, ceramic pieces from Tonalá are found, with the largest and most important collection of them being preserved in Madrid's Museo de América.⁴ The city of Seville and some towns in its province also preserve some beautiful examples of Tonalá *tibores*, which will be referred to here. Some have already been studied and presented in a few exhibitions,

3 Sonia Pérez Carrillo (SPC), "Tibor," in *Filipinas Puerta de Oriente. De Legazpi a Malaspina*, exhibition catalog (Barcelona, 2003): 292.

4 García Sáiz and Albert de León, "La cerámica de Tonalá en las colecciones europeas," in *Tonalá, sol de barro*, (México, 1991).

but others are only now coming to light. For the most part, they reside in private collections, although some are in the possession of religious institutions, where they arrived as donations from patrons. Their presence is easily explained by Seville having been the port of entry for American products since 1503 and in light of its status as headquarters of the Casa de la Contratación de las Indias, the organization charged with control of New World commerce until 1718, when it was moved to Cádiz.⁵ In some instances, these extraordinary objects could be included in the trousseau that nobles and other high functionaries who had occupied important positions in the American administration brought back to the Iberian Peninsula. Such is the unique case of viceroys and presidents of the Audiencia, although other lesser officers imitated their collecting interests and similarly acquired or commissioned pieces of this kind, which they could carry on their return voyage or send back to their hometowns. Clergy or ecclesiastical authorities may also be responsible for the *tibores'* presence in Seville. With the passage of time, the utilitarian character that many of these vessels may have had originally was largely forgotten, subsumed by their role as pretty decorative objects, completing the ornamentation of religious environments, adorning salons, and enriching the premises of nobles' homes, as they continue to do today.

Among the Tonalá ceramic pieces that are preserved in Seville, the one in the old Hospital de Venerables Sacerdotes is particularly worth mentioning.⁶ In one corner of the central courtyard is found a beautiful ovoid-shaped *tibor* with a slightly flared neck and a swollen lip, measuring 110 cm in height, with a diameter at the mouth of 43 cm. The base is pointed and, as a result, it is placed on a metallic support to ensure its stability. The *tibor* exhibits two small handles on its shoulders to facilitate transportation. Its surface features a red engobe on which a vegetal and zoomorphic decoration is painted with dark reds and brown hues, with small details carried out with white brush strokes. The primary motif is of two double-headed eagles with outspread wings, coupled with representations of rampant cats, possibly lions. At various times, both themes have been linked with symbols of royal power, double-headed eagles be-

5 Ramón María Serrera, "La Casa de la Contratación en Sevilla (1503–1717)," in *España y América. Un océano de negocios. Quinto centenario de la Casa de la Contratación 1503–2003*, exhibition catalog (Madrid, 2003): 47.

6 AA. VV., *Los Venerables* (Sevilla, 1991).



1. Tibor. Hospital of the Venerable Priests. Seville. Photo by the author.

ing connected with the monarchs of the House of Austria. The decoration is completed with vegetable and floral stems of different sizes and shapes, which nearly cover the vessel's entire surface, except its base, on which the engobe base is apparent. All motifs are painted with a clear schematic highlighting the animals' essential features. This piece can be dated to the end of the seventeenth century (Fig. 1).

In the Seville home of the Counts of Santa Coloma, descendants of Antonio María de Bucarelli y Ursúa, who was governor of Cuba and Viceroy of New Spain between 1766 and 1771,⁷

⁷ Teodoro Falcón, *Casas sevillanas desde la Edad Media hasta el Barroco* (Sevilla, 2012): 138.

several *tibores* from Tonalá are preserved. Two of them offer a certain resemblance in their shape and color to the one previously mentioned. They are very paunched pieces with a large flared mouth and a thickened edge. The larger measures 85 cm in height and its mouth has a diameter of 50 cm, while the other has a height of 80 cm and a mouth diameter of 46 cm. They have reddish engobe and their decoration has also been carried out with dark red and brown hues, in addition to a number of details carried out with white brushstrokes that give vivacity and a certain vibration to the surface. The *tibores'* bases have a reddish hue darker than the rest of the piece. Among the decorative motifs are crowned double-headed eagles and various vegetable themes exhibiting large flowers, stems, and some fruits. To this repertoire are added several types of birds in varied postures that are distributed among the phytomorphic motifs that cover the *tibor's* body. Figures of birds flanking some sort of cartouche or medallion appear in the lower area of the neck, with a motif of waves and flower occupying the upper part. A similar composition in the form of a border or band has been employed on the *tibor's* shoulders, where two small rounded handles are available. A stand of carved and gilded wood serves to adjust the pointed part of the base. Moreover, a lid of the same material and techniques covers the *tibor's* mouth, an element that helps reinforce the typological relationship of this piece with the Oriental models from which it derives.

A different typology corresponds to another *tibor* in the house. This is an ovoid-shaped piece which also exhibits small lateral handles, but whose similarly slightly flared neck is slimmer and is also flanked by figures of animals, which appear to be dogs or cats. In its decoration, application in relief and painting are combined. The piece's front presents a strip at the bottom occupied by flowers, while the main surface is organized by a triple arcade whose supports and arcs are decorated by flowers. In the central register, a crowned double-headed eagle over a figure of a lamb in relief is provided, while on the sides are found rampant lions whose heads are also in relief, under which large birds are arranged. Large circular flowers and leaves occupy the spandrels of the arches, these themes reaching the start of the neck, which is also decorated with similar themes. Other vegetable motifs, including stems, leaves, and flowers of various types, complete the decoration of the registers occupied by the eagle and the lions.

Very different is the treatment on the *tibor*'s rear. A profuse vegetable ornamentation, with moved stems of voluminous leaves, flowers, and some sort of fruit clusters occupies the entire surface. Such motifs are painted in a dark reddish color with some orange and white touches, standing out over the ochre engobe at the base, a detail that differentiates this *tibor* from the previous pieces. This light color emphasizes even more the decoration on the front, for which red, blue, gray, and brown were employed. Some touches of white and areas of golden ochre make this decoration more colorful and lively. The small figures of animals that flank the neck and that are situated together with the small circular handles could be related to the representations in clay of dogs that were produced in Colima, a place not very far from Tonalá. As in the previous cases, the vessel has been placed on a stand of carved and gilded wood to give the piece stability. The *tibor*'s mouth is covered by a lid of identical material and technique, which reinforces its relationship with the Oriental models from which it derives (Fig. 2).

Although the provenance of these *tibores* is not known, one option would be to link them to the trousseau of the return voyage of Antonio María de Bucarelli, who, as has been noted, was the Viceroy of New Spain in the last third of the eighteenth century, although they are pieces made well before his stay in Mexico, as they can be dated to the end of the seventeenth century. Not knowing the inventory of pieces comprising his trousseau makes it complicated to be able to confirm such a theory. Conversely, they could have been acquired by some other family member at a different time, with the objective of enlarging the house's art collection.

The final two examples of Tonalá *tibores* that will be emphasized are found in the church of Santa Cruz of the city of Écija and are the property of the Hermandad de Nuestra Señora del Valle, patron of the town.⁸ They came to this church from the defunct convent of San Jerónimo del Valle, forming part of the trousseau of the said Marian image. Both pieces were restored by the Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico in 2001; they presented problems in conservation, with the state of one, which was incomplete and had been repaired crudely, being



2. Tibor. House of the Counts of Santa Coloma. Seville. Photo by the author.

especially worrisome.⁹ The *tibores* reach a height of 96 cm and a mouth diameter of 36 cm, featuring simple wooden supports and lids of the same material, but carved and gilded.¹⁰

These pieces bear a clear resemblance with the last one, which has been analyzed in the old Bucarelli house, as they offer an ovoid shape with a slim flared neck and they each display figures of animals on the sides, alongside small handles arranged on the shoulders. Lamentably, the more damaged *tibor* has lost these figures, while the other only preserves one complete fig-

9 Ana Bouzas Abad, "Tibores," *PH Boletín del Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico*, 39 (2002), 189.

10 Gerardo García León (GGL), "Tibor," *Filipinas Puerta de Oriente. De Legazpi a Malaspina* exhibition catalog (Barcelona, 2003): 293.

ure. The fronts of the *tibores* are also organized in three registers by arcades in what appear to be Tuscan columns. Their shafts and the arches' orders are decorated by large flowers joined by stems, while in the spandrels and in relief, cherubs' heads appear. A crowned double-headed eagle occupies the central register and on the sides there are rampant lions with heads in relief. The lower area contains a row of large orange flowers among which a wavy plant stem with leaves is developed. The base lacks decoration. Identical flowers and stems are distributed on the neck, in whose center appears a cherub head in relief. The engobe is of ochre color and red, green, orange, and gray have been employed in its polychromous decoration. The orderly ornamentation and chromaticism of the front face contrasts with the simplicity of the rear, in which merely some large red flowers joined with moved green stems with leaves appear.

The large *tibores* analyzed here are proof of the wide diffusion that the products of Tonalá achieved. They also demonstrate the ability of their creators to transform and adapt typologies of Asian origin that enjoyed great prestige among the tastes of creole and European society, using local decorative techniques and repertoires. Moreover, these exceptional pieces are testimony to the process of hybridization produced in a context of cultural globalization.

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Alfredo Morales

Alfredo J. Morales is an Art Historian and Professor at the Universidad de Sevilla, Spain. An expert in Latin American and Spanish Early Modern art, Professor Morales has earned numerous honours, including being the president of the Spanish Committee of History of Art (CEHA), or adviser for UNESCO in Latin America. He has been curator of exhibitions such as “Velázquez y Sevilla” (1999), “La fiesta en la Europa de Carlos V” (2000) or “Filipinas. Puerta de Oriente. De Legazpi a Malaspina” (2003).