

South America's epic past unfolds in the townhouse of Roberta and Richard Huber, whose collection will be featured in a forthcoming exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art



Living with antiques

Everything is timing," says Richard Huber, recalling opportunities spotted and seized over a long career that took him and his wife, Roberta, around the world. On a gamble, they invested in vineyards in Chile, an icebreaker in Antarctica, even an emerald mine in Minas Gerais, Brazil. A twenty-five-thousand-acre cattle ranch in the Brazilian outback served as a family retreat. "It took eleven hours to get there by plane, truck and river boat from São Paulo. Running water was dicey. Oh, it was primitive but I loved it for my children," Roberta says.

A similarly intrepid spirit marks the couple's approach to collecting. Over four decades, with more pluck and imagination than formal guidance, the Hubers assembled one of this country's major private collections of Spanish and Portuguese colonial paintings, sculpture, and silver, much of it made in the South American vicerealties of Peru and Rio de la Plata prior to 1820. Timing, as Richard says, is everything. Eager to redress past oversights in their collections and present a more balanced view of cultural influences in the New World, American museums are driving the growing interest in Latin American art.

Fig. 1. The Hubers redesigned their Manhattan town house to accommodate large works of art. High on one dining room wall hang the *Triumph of Saint Michael the Archangel*, possibly Cuzco, Peru, late seventeenth or eighteenth century; and *King Luis I of Spain on Horseback* (Fig. 4). Below them (partially visible) are *History of the Advent of Christ: Drunkenness and Wantonness*, Bolivian, seventeenth or eighteenth century, and, in front of it an eighteenth-century *Annunciation* from Peru. The mid-eighteenth-century cabinet inlaid with mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, ivory, and silver, is from Lima, Peru. Photograph by James Ray Spahn.

Fig. 2. *Saint Augustine, Lux Doctorem*, South American, perhaps Bolivia, late eighteenth century. Reverse painting on glass, 13 by 11 1/2 inches. Photograph by Graydon Wood.

Fig. 3. *The Good Shepherd*, Ceylon-Portuguese, seventeenth century. Ivory with polychromy; height 2 1/4, length 11 inches. Wood photograph.



Art and devotion



By Laura Beach



recalls. Dating to the late eighteenth century and still housed in its original frame, the work, possibly by a skillful amateur, depicts Saint Augustine in the company of other theologians (Fig. 2).

Like the explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), who documented every detail of his travels in Latin America between 1799 and 1804, the Hubers have created a pictorial record of their South America sojourns. Reared in North Carolina and educated at Harvard, Richard leapt at the opportunity to work in Buenos Aires, where the Bank of Boston transferred him in 1962. After a brief return to Boston, the family moved to São Paulo in 1967. “I couldn’t wait to get back to South America,” says Roberta, a petite, Massachusetts-born blonde whose energetic pace matches that of her husband. Richard’s career later took them to Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, New York, Chicago, and Hartford, where he retired as Aetna’s chief executive in 2000.

In each city Roberta immersed herself in classes and local arts organizations. She met Rishel at a birthday party in Hartford for Peter C. Sutton, then director of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. In Manhattan, studies at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts led to friendships with Jonathan Brown and Edward J. Sullivan, noted scholars of Spanish and Latin American art. The Hubers underwrite the institute’s Colloquium on Spanish and Latin American Art and Visual Culture. Additionally, Roberta is an advisor to the Hispanic Society of America. Such alliances have helped the couple develop expertise

in a field where specialist dealers are few.

In 2003 the Hubers and their Portuguese-speaking parrot, Rosa, settled into life in a renovated Manhattan brownstone. Exuberantly furnished with jewel-toned oriental rugs and plush nineteenth-century seating furniture, the quarters accommodate amply proportioned paintings and sculpture. Grapevines drape a cloistered patio, a daily reminder of the family’s Chilean vineyard, now managed by their second son, Alex.

“These are massive, ambitious things,” Rishel says of the collection, citing the nearly seven-by-five-foot oil on canvas portrait of Spanish King Luis I on horseback, probably painted in Cuzco, Peru around 1724 (Fig. 4), “but they are also very human.” Two eighteenth-century Bolivian paintings, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (Fig. 5) and *The House at Nazareth*, illustrate a distinctly South American fondness for scenes depicting the holy family engaged in cozy domestic pastimes. “We surrounded ourselves with pieces with which we wanted to live. The collection—it was years before we thought of it that way—grew naturally over time,” says Richard.

“Through travel, we became intrigued with the history of South America, which only deepened our interest in the art,” Roberta explains. Silver mined in Potosí (now in Bolivia), the largest city in the Western Hemisphere in the first half of the seventeenth century, fueled an artistic explosion that spread from the Andes to Spain. In the Altiplano it produced paintings that mingled European precedent,



Eager to redress past oversights American museums are driving the growing interest in Latin American Art

“The 1990s marked a new golden age for the field, with several very informative shows that brought colonial art to a wider audience,” says Joseph J. Rishel, the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s curator of European painting before 1900, who organized the 2006 traveling exhibition *The Arts in Latin America, 1492–1820* and is supervising the museum’s forthcoming show of the Huber collection.

The Hubers’ first purchase, in 1973, foreshadowed the adventure to come. “We were visiting Sucre, Bolivia, and heard about a woman with a colonial era reverse painting on glass for sale. We went to her house that evening and bought it for \$100,” Richard

Facing page:

Fig. 4. *Portrait of King Luis I of Spain [r. 1724] on Horseback*, possibly Cuzco, c. 1724. Oil on canvas, 79 ½ by 61 inches. Promised gift of the Roberta and Richard Huber Collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Wood photograph.

Fig. 5. *Rest on the Flight Into Egypt*, Bolivian, eighteenth century. Oil on canvas, 32 by 69 ¾ inches. Wood photograph.

This page:

Fig. 6. *Portrait of Rosa de Salazar y Gabiño, Countess of Monteblanco and Montemar [1749–1810]*, Lima, c. 1764–1771. Oil on canvas, 37 ¾ by 29 ¾ inches. Wood photograph.

Fig. 7. *A Virgin Martyr*, possibly La Paz, Bolivia, late seventeenth or eighteenth century. Oil on canvas, 63 by 44 ½ inches. Wood photograph.





often

transmitted via Flemish prints, with pre-conquest Andean traditions. “What we might perceive as naïve charm is often a translation of pre-Hispanic forms, colors and patterns to Spanish subjects and scenes,” says Edward Sullivan, professor of art history at New York University.

The cultural confluence is evident in *A Virgin Martyr*, a late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century Bolivian oil on canvas (Fig. 7). The artist, possibly from La Paz, depicted the popular seventeenth-century Spanish subject wearing a Eu-

the Christ Child (Fig. 9) and a *Pietà* of about 1720 (see Fig. 11) whose elongated forms reflect mannerist influence.

So-called “dressed sculpture” paintings of the Virgin Mary have a frothy, wedding-cake appeal. In the most beguiling examples, artists, using a technique called *brocateado*, applied a filigree of gold paint or gold leaf over pigment to simulate the appearance of sumptuous fabric (Fig. 12).

“After we moved back to New York, I became involved in the exhibition *Potosí: Colonial Treasures and*



“What we may perceive as naïve charm is often a translation of pre-Hispanic forms, colors, and patterns to Spanish subjects and scenes.”

ropean blouse and a skirt of distinctly Incan weave. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, editor of a forthcoming catalogue of the Huber collection, speculates that the painting may have been made for an affluent native family.

Few colonial South American paintings are signed and dated. Exceptions include two lively narrative-driven oils by the Bolivian artist Gaspar Miguel de Berrio (1706–after 1764) that date to 1760 and 1764 (Figs. 8, 17). Latin inscriptions hint that they were intended for an educated audience. Considered Potosí’s master painter, Melchor Pérez Holguín is represented by a small, mournful *Saint Joseph and*

the Bolivian City of Silver at the Americas Society. I learned so much, especially about silver, from curator Pedro Querejazu,” says Roberta. The more than three dozen pieces of silver in the collection range from frames and plaques with repoussé surfaces fecund with animal and plant life to chastely unadorned bowls. The variety of forms—from a baptismal basin and votive lamp to slave amulets, a box for coca leaves, and a water bucket—suggest wide access to the abundant metal along with its energetic use by a Catholic Church intent on making converts through showy display.

“Once the Cerro Rico was discovered in 1545,

Facing page:

Fig. 8. *Saint John of Nepomuk* by Gaspar Miguel de Berrio (1706–after 1764), Potosí, Bolivia, 1760. Oil on canvas, 40 ½ by 32 ¼ inches. Wood photograph.

This page:

Fig. 9. *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child* by Melchor Pérez Holguín (c. 1665–after 1724), Potosí, early eighteenth century. Oil on canvas, 13 by 15 ¾ inches. Wood photograph.

Fig. 10. On one wall of the dining room *Our Lady of Guápulo* of c. 1680, Cuzco, hangs above a wooden chest from Brazil, 1750–1800. The elaborate eighteenth-century silver hanging lamp is Peruvian. Spahn photograph.



Fig. 11. In the living room hang *The Flight into Egypt*, possibly La Paz, late seventeenth or eighteenth century; and *Pietà* by Melchor Pérez Holguín, Potosí, c. 1720 (promised gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art). On the mantel are three seventeenth-century ivory figures (left to right): *Christ Child at the Column* (Fig. 15); *Seated Christ Child*, Hispano-Philippine or Indo-Portuguese; and *Christ Child as Salvator Mundi*, Indo-Portuguese. Spahn photograph.

Fig. 12. *Our Lady of Guadalupe of Extremadura*, Peruvian, early seventeenth century. Oil on canvas, 31 3/4 by 39 3/8 inches. Promised gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Wood photograph.

Potosí became the largest supplier of silver to the Spanish crown for the next seventy years. Colonists and other miners became fantastically wealthy," says David L. Barquist, curator of American decorative arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. As with painting, South American silver mingles European and indigenous elements. To avoid paying taxes, makers rarely marked their wares. Much of what scholars have gleaned about craftsmen and their patrons comes from church records. "South America's indigenous population had been working with precious metals for millennia. The Spanish were smart enough to recognize a skilled workforce," Barquist says, noting that the sculptural qualities of European baroque decoration dovetailed nicely with pre-conquest Andean metalworkers' tradition of hammering silver sheet metal into raised designs. The fusion of Indian and European traditions was strongest outside the principal cities, in Alto Peru and the Jesuit missions in Paraguay.

One favorite piece, unusual because it is marked, is a profusely decorated tray (Fig. 13) thought to have been made between 1700 and 1725 in the city of Puno, on the shores of Lake Titicaca. "There is a rich tradition of church silver but this was made for private



use. Domestic silver can be ornate or utilitarian but, unlike church silver, which was often kept safe in treasuries, it was much more common for domestic silver to be sold off or melted down," says Mark Castro, who is coordinating *Journeys to New Worlds: Spanish and Portuguese Colonial Art in the Roberta and Richard Huber Collection*, which opens in February at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Another choice example is an eighteenth-century Andean processional lantern (Fig. 16). "It says so much about the public uses of silver, which you don't find in British America. In Spanish and Portuguese America, silver was out on the streets, in church processions," Barquist says.

The Hubers recently began adding seventeenth- through early nineteenth-century ivories sculpted by Goan, Ceylonese, and Filipino craftsmen for the Portuguese and Spanish markets. Roberta's interest in the sculptures intensified after 2005, when she met Margarita M. Estella Marcos, a leading authority on the subject, at a symposium at the Ayala Museum in Manila. One of their first acquisitions in the medium was the late seventeenth-century *Christ Child at the Column* (Fig. 15), an Hispano-Philippine carving notable, says Marcos, for its brilliant craftsmanship and originality. *Christ Child as the Good Shepherd* (Fig. 3), a diminutive Ceylon-Portuguese depiction of Jesus resting, head on a pillow and hand sheltering a lamb, is vaguely reminiscent of Buddhist art of the period. A nineteenth-century Hispano-Philippine carving of the archangel Michael (Fig. 14) slaying a dragon stands 45 inches tall. Its monumental scale is rare in ivory, as is its colorful surface. Most ivories were originally painted but few retain their pigment.

Among a handful of top collectors of colonial Latin American art in the United States, the Hubers are often mentioned in the same breath as Jan Mayer and her late husband, Frederick, who endowed galleries of Pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial art at the Denver Art Museum; the Chicago area collectors Carl and Marilyn Thoma; and Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, whose comprehensive holdings, administered by the New York and Caracas-based Fundación Cisneros, span pre-history to the present. "The collectors in this field are thoughtful, mature people. The material isn't plentiful," says Denver dealer Valery Taylor Brown.

Scarcity is not the only barrier to collecting. Provenance questions and patrimony laws, which vary from country to country, are major concerns. "It's often murky where these things come from and countries are being more careful about letting pieces go," says Stratton-Pruitt.

And bias remains. For years, the arts of colonial Latin America were viewed as inferior copies of European art or bastardized versions of pre-conquest indigenous artifacts. American curators often shrank from exhibiting overtly religious work. "The prejudices of high-low, center-periphery are passing. At



"At the end of the day, everyone is realizing that colonial art is far more complex than we ever imagined."

the end of the day, everyone is realizing that colonial art is far more complex than we ever imagined," Castro says.

In a sign of the times, in late 2010 the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston unveiled its new Art of the Americas Wing, for the first time displaying art of the Western Hemisphere as an organic whole. The department, led by Elliot Bostwick Davis, is preparing a major traveling exhibition on Asia and its influence in the New World for 2014. The show will emphasize decorative arts produced in colonial North, Central, and South America. "The field of

Fig. 13. Tray, possibly Puno, Peru, 1700-1725. Marked with a royal crown surrounded by a circle of pearls on the back. Repoussé, chased, and engraved silver; length 12 3/8, width 17 1/2 inches. Wood photograph.

Fig. 14. *The Archangel Michael*, Hispano-Philippine, nineteenth century. Ivory with polychromy mounted on a wooden base; overall height 45 inches. Wood photograph.

Fig. 15. *Christ Child at the Column*, Hispano-Philippine, late seventeenth century. Ivory with traces of polychromy; height 11 3/4 inches. Wood photograph.

Fig. 16. Lantern, Peruvian, 1738. Inscribed "ihs" above the door and "D. JOSE DE BILLA- NUEBA MANDO HACER ESTA LINTERNA PARA YGLESA DE MAYOC SIENDO CURA D. Y[?]/ OBREGÓN...EN EL AÑO 38[?]" around the bottom. Pierced, engraved, and burnished silver; height 15 3/4, diameter 7 7/8 inches. Wood photograph.



American decorative arts is getting very narrow. I'm pushing to expand our horizons by looking more broadly across the Americas. Examining the influence of Asia is just one way to do that," says exhibition organizer Dennis Carr, a curator of American decorative arts at the MFA.

The Brooklyn Museum's curator of European art, Richard Aste, is acquiring important works in advance of the traveling exhibition *Behind Closed Doors: Power and Privilege in the Spanish American Home, 1492–1898*, opening at his institution in September 2013. Other leaders in the field are the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, whose Latin American collections emphasize Mexican modernism; the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art in Santa Fe, where the arts of Hispanic New Mexico take center stage; and the Denver Art Museum. "Denver has the most comprehensive Spanish colonial collection in the



Fig. 17. The paintings in this view of the living room include (clockwise from left): *Saint Michael the Archangel*, Cuzo, eighteenth century; *Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Bishop Saints* by Gaspar Miguel de Berrio, Potosí, 1764 (both promised gifts to the Philadelphia Museum of Art); *Saint Gabriel the Archangel*, La Paz, late seventeenth or eighteenth century; and an altarpiece door with Saint John, Bolivian, probably late eighteenth century. On the floor at the left is a trunk decorated with eighteenth-century Spanish colonial paintings, possibly Colombian, eighteenth century. On the table at the far right is a polychrome wood figure, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, from Brazil, eighteenth or nineteenth century. Spahn photograph.

United States with objects of all media from all over Latin America," says Donna Pierce, the only curator dedicated solely to Spanish colonial art at a major American art museum. For the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Huber exhibition underscores a century-long engagement with Latin American art that began in 1892, when it accepted the gift of railroad engineer Robert Henry Lamborn (1836–1895).

Scholars who have accompanied the Hubers overseas describe them as a resourceful pair, more than equal to the road's hardships and responsive to its rewards. "We've traveled hard together, bounding over rutted roads in vehicles that seemed to have no springs. The church was open or we searched for the key. Basic facilities were often elusive," recalls Stratton Pruitt. More journeys lie ahead. Just back from biking the Veneto, the Hubers contemplate return visits to Spain and

Paraguay. They are anxious to see the Jesuit missions again. Goa, too, is on their list. "For us, a big part of the fun has been discovering the work ourselves," says Richard.

Journeys to New Worlds: Spanish and Portuguese Colonial Art in the Roberta and Richard Huber Collection will be on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art between February and June 2013. An illustrated catalogue published by the museum in association with Yale University Press, will accompany the show.

Richard and Roberta Huber have promised thirteen paintings from their collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The works include *Pietà* by Melchor Perez Holguin; two paintings by Gaspar Miguel de Berrio; the eighteenth century Bolivian paintings *The Flight Into Egypt* and *The House at Nazareth*; and the early eighteenth-century Peruvian painting *Portrait of King Luis I of Spain on Horseback*.