

Pleasing to those on heaven and earth

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By **PETER GODDARD** Visual Arts
Sat., Sept. 1, 2007

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So we can only look in envy at the posse of sacred figures in "The Virgin, Saints and Angels: South American Paintings 1600-1825," at the University of Toronto Art Centre, and imagine the uncompromised spiritual, moral and social hold they had on their original impressionable audiences.

The exhibition of 55 paintings – many best understood as folk art – comes from a collection of some 60 pieces assembled by Marilyn and Carl Thoma, American collectors with a home near Santa Fe, N.M. The U of T connection

came by way of historian Kenneth Mills, director of U of T's Latin American Studies program, who knew about the show touring years back and later contributed an essay to its substantial catalogue.

The result is a win-win situation for everyone. U of T gets to advertise its Latin American studies. Students get something of ethnographic interest to mull over. The Thomas see their collection circulating (starting last fall at the Cantor Centre at Stanford University, Calif.). And Toronto gets to see painting from the time the Spanish first looted South America until 19th century nationalists gave them the boot.

Before the interest in the Spanish Viceroyalty period, the Thomas collected regional New Mexican art and California Impressionism. But work in the current show "just came out of the blue for us," Marilyn Thoma tells me on the phone from New Mexico.

"As soon as we saw for the first time about 10 years ago we started asking about where did this stuff come from? How did this field of art develop as it did?"

Few hard answers are to be found. The real understanding of many pieces – such as a sweet, semi-surreal Ecuadorian *Noah's Ark* from the 18th century – was buried alongside its original audience. Most of the artists are anonymous. One can only detect an influence of established Spanish masters such as Francisco de Zurbarán. Dates are vague.

Market value of the work remains a mystery, too. No neglected masterpiece is to be found.

But innovation was not on the minds of these unknown artists. It was all about pleasing their masters here on earth and in heaven.

As painting, *Santiago at the Battle of Clavijo* is a rather murky reiteration of any number of generic battle scenes common at the time from artists of all stripes. Yet it was terrific propaganda serving both the ruling Spanish Viceroyalty and the Catholic Church.

In depicting Saint James triumphantly leading the forces of Christianity driving the Moors out of Spain during the Crusades, Spanish politicians showed possibly rebellious Peruvians all the sharp edges that could come their way if they got uppity like the Moors. Spanish clergy could likewise illustrate just how bloody powerful their star saints were.

It's not all that far from *Santiago's* superpower politicking to Hollywood sticking fake bananas in Carmen Miranda's fruit bowl bonnet as a nice way of reminding peasants working decades ago at the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International) that their role in life was to sing funny songs, not plot strike action.