



## ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

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**Spanish Colonial, likely New Spain (Mexico), 1779**

*Allegories of the Four Continents*

Inscribed: “America,” “Europa,” “Asia,” and “Africa”

One (*America*) partially signed and dated, lower left:

“...reyna [or neyra] fecite año de 1779”

Four paintings, each oil on canvas,

*America*, 20 ¼ x 28 ⅞ inches (51.4 x 73.7 cm)

*Europe*, 20 ⅝ x 29 ⅛ inches (52.4 x 73.3 cm)

*Asia*, 20 ½ x 29 ⅛ inches (52.1 x 74 cm)

*Africa*, 20 ½ x 29 inches (52.1 x 73.7 cm)



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Provenance: Private Collection, Long Island, New York, from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century until 2024.

The art of the Spanish Americas is predominantly religious in subject matter. These four paintings are outstanding exceptions to the norm. They are depictions of the Four Continents as known in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Each allegorical representation is filled with the people, fauna, and flora associated—in part accurately, in part whimsically—with the respective continent. In each painting a female figure symbolic of a continent sits atop an animal associated with her dominion: America on an alligator, Africa on a lion, Asia on a camel, and Europe on a horse. The costumes, architecture, and objects that accompany the local denizens of these quasi-island continents help create a wildly decorative but wonderfully fanciful view of the world. At a time of vibrant international trade (with Mexico being an important center), these paintings may have been intended to demonstrate the extent of the realm of the Spanish Empire.

As with many paintings produced in the New World in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the compositions of the present works are based on European print sources—in this case an anonymous set of engravings of the *Four Continents*. The prints were likely Spanish, as the figure of Europe holds a shield bearing the coat-of-arms of King Felipe V and his son Ferdinand VI, who ruled from 1700 to 1759.<sup>1</sup> Our paintings are dated 1779, reflecting the sometimes-delayed dissemination of prints across the Atlantic.



Visual allegories of the continents originated in antiquity, but were limited to the three known ones of Europe, Africa, and Asia. With the discovery of the Americas, an additional emblem denoting North and South America was added to the set. (Australia seems never to have been included). Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, first published in 1593, established the tradition of illustrating female figures representing each realm, accompanied by representative objects, animals, plants, and people of the continent. Sixteenth-century engravings of the Continents, such as those by Philips Galle (after Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger) and Adriaen Collaert (after Maerten de Vos) broadly disseminated such imagery and painted decorations in canvas and fresco proliferated in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These included works by Luca Giordano, Corrado Giaquinto, Francesco de Mura Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, and others.<sup>2</sup>

Knowledge of distant lands from exploration and scientific inquiry informed these images, but inevitably elements chosen to be included in these images were drawn from limited information and often were based on stereotypes. In our *America*, for example, one finds the allegorical figure with attributes of bow, arrows, and a feathered headdress, a monkey behind her in addition to the alligator below, with a decapitated head pierced by an arrow on the ground, alluding to the belief that the populace was comprised of savages and, perhaps, cannibals. In a similar vein the figures in *Asia* all wear rich silk garments, while the allegorical female is bedecked with pearls and hold an incense burner—among the treasures brought to Europe by traders and travelers from the East.

Another set of the *Four Continents*—likely by the same author as the present paintings but lacking the signature and inscription—is in a private collection in Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Engravings, each 57 x 60 cm. A set of the four recently appeared at auction in Rome, but as Italian 19<sup>th</sup> century. <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/italian-engraving-19th-century-224-c-b804135b6e?objectID=187283845&algIndex=undefined&queryID=f98403b4f92e75b38f93f3b153a1a9d5>. We wish to thank François Velde for assistance in identifying the heraldic escutcheon. A later reworking of the images by Alexis Peyrotte replaces the Spanish arms with French fleur-de-lis. Two hand-colored examples are in the collection of Cooper-Hewitt Museum: <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18215499/> (America) and <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18215635/> (Europe).

<sup>2</sup> See: Freyda Spira, "Allegories of the Four Continents," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/alfc/hd\\_alfc.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/alfc/hd_alfc.htm) (March 2021). See also: A. Pigler, *Barockthemen*, Budapest, 1974, vol. 2, pp. 521-523.

<sup>3</sup> These are illustrated in the exhibition catalogue *Juegos de Ingenio y Agudezal La pintura Emblemática de la Nueva España*, exh. cat., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City, November 1994 – February 1995, pp. 216-217, 403, nos. 122-125.