

## Cutlers' Rockwell diplomacy bearing fruit

By Joe Baker  
Staff writer

NEWPORT — Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has been pretty busy lately, what with trying to negotiate peace with the rebel faction that has waged an ongoing war with the government for more than 50 years.

Santos reached an accord with the rebel faction late last month, but he wasn't too busy during the summer to send a letter to Laurence and Judy Cutler, who operate the National Museum of American Illustration on Bellevue Avenue. The July 21 letter thanks the Cutlers for sending him a copy of their 2012 book "Norman Rockwell's America," which catalogs many of the artist's works.

Last spring the couple sent a copy of the book to 150 heads of state around the world to give them a better understanding of American culture. Responses arrived almost immediately, prompting the Cutlers to send books to 42 world leaders not included in the first round of mailings. Although many of the letters were fairly perfunctory "thank you" notes, some were more personal.

The Cutlers find Santos' letter among the most thoughtful they have received to date.

"(Rockwell's) sentimental capture of the essence of being an American is revealed in an intimate way that allows us, foreigners, to step into the everyday life of strangers who easily



Daily News file photo

**Judy and Laurence Cutler of the National Museum of American Illustration sent copies of their book 'Norman Rockwell's America' to 150 world leaders and continue to receive letters in response.**

become familiars," Santos wrote. "In your kind letter, you said that harmony comes from better understanding. I could not agree more. In fact, that is why in Colombia we are attempting to solve the longest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere through dialogue.

"War in Colombia and elsewhere, you surely know, frequently unites nations, while peace divides them.

And Abraham Lincoln, knowing this, warned politicians 'to avoid measures of popularity if they want to have peace.' I have certainly learned the lesson."

The Cutlers were "absolutely gobsmacked" when they read Santos' letter, Laurence Cutler said. The 43 responses received so far are far beyond what they had hoped for, he said.

"I didn't even think we'd get these,

especially in these crazy times we're living in," Laurence Cutler said. "Rockwell's art deals with American civilization, the way we work, the way we play. Art plays a very important part in looking at the world today."

All the "thank you" notes are nice, Judy Cutler said, but the ones that show a genuine understanding of what the couple was attempting to do are the most gratifying. She noted one from Bela Hejna, head of the office of Czech Republic Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, as an example.

"(Rockwell's) illustrations and paintings excelled mainly due to his unique skill to highlight particular details which subsequently formed a fascinating story without any need for further explanation," Hejna wrote. "Therefore, I believe that your effort to familiarize the rest of the world with American identity, culture and lifestyle through this marvelous storyteller's work is an excellent idea which should be followed. It is my conviction that the familiarity with culture and traditions is a brilliant starting point for establishing and strengthening cooperation between any countries across the world."

"That is what we intended to do," Judy Cutler said. "We can start to have conversations. It doesn't always have to be warring, killing, fighting all the time. We can have a conversation. That dialogue is important."

Jim Rugh is director of special projects for the National Museum of

American Illustration, which is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year. He helped coordinate the mailing of the Rockwell book and agrees that the response from recipients has exceeded everyone's hopes.

"If we got nothing back, it would have met our expectations," Rugh said. "We certainly weren't expecting a shift in the Earth, but were hoping it would sensitize people to American values."

The beauty of Rockwell — arguably the most famous of all American illustrators — is that his work does more than just elicit emotion — it depicts it and American sensitivities, Laurence Cutler said.

"It's the art. We just want them to see it," he said. "They can just look at the pictures and get a sense of what we're all about. You don't have to explain American illustrators. (The art) speaks for itself."

Their first act of diplomacy has set the Cutlers on a new course. A friend has offered to introduce them to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The couple also has received an invitation to meet President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan when he next visits the United States.

The Cutlers have expanded their 2012 book and recently released a new one, "Norman Rockwell & His Contemporaries," which outlines the work of illustrators who inspired Rockwell and those he inspired in turn.

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