Government Should Not Fund Controversial Art

_Censorship_, 2002

Many artists and museums rely on public grants as a means of support. In the following viewpoint, Joseph Perkins discusses a controversial art exhibit sponsored by the Brooklyn, New York, Museum of Art in late 1999. Perkins contends that some of the art on display is obscene and the American public should not be forced to support obscenity with their tax dollars. He asserts that artists and museums should be subsidized by the private sector, not by the government. Perkins is an editorial writer for the _San Diego Union-Tribune_.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Perkins, why is Chris Ofili's painting, The Holy Virgin Mary, so controversial?
2. What happened in Cincinnati when a museum displayed photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe?

Chris Ofili must be pleased as punch. He's the British "artist" whose highly offensive painting, "The Holy Virgin Mary," has ignited a political and cultural firestorm in New York City.

With no concern whatsoever for the sensibilities of New York's Catholic community, the Brooklyn Museum of Art fully intends to display the artist's controversial piece—a portrait of the Holy Mother adorned with elephant dung and surrounded by pictures of buttocks (call it mixed media)—when it opens a new exhibit.

The museum's board of directors is all the more determined to stand behind Ofili's work in the wake of threats by New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani to withdraw the $7 million the museum receives from the city out of its $23 million annual budget.

So the museum has gone to court accusing the mayor of trampling upon the First Amendment. Guiliani's threat to withdraw city funding unless "Virgin Mary" is crated back to England is nothing less than government censorship, they sneer.

The New York art dispute brings to mind similar art-related flaps that have made the national news over the past decade.

A half-dozen years ago, it may be recalled, a San Diego trio, David Avalos, Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco, thought they would make an artistic statement about immigration by taking federal grant money they received from the National Endowment for the Arts and passing it out, in $10 bills, to illegal aliens.

The aim of this "conceptual art piece," which they entitled "Arte-Reembolso/Art Rebate," was to redefine public art, they explained, using symbolism, gesture and performance.

Three years before the taxpayer-bankrolled "Art Rebate," the NEA had gotten into trouble for subsidizing the "art" of Andres Serrano, whose most noteworthy piece was a photograph of a plastic crucifix in a beaker of urine, which he cleverly entitled "Piss Christ."

When the hoi polloi expressed indignation, Serrano pompously responded, "As an artist, I stand my
ground."

Then there was the infamous exhibit of so-called "homo-erotic" art by the late Robert Mapplethorpe, which toured the country at the beginning of the decade. Among other works included in the taxpayer-subsidized exhibit was a photograph of a man with a bullwhip inserted in his derriere (not to mention pictures of children in erotic poses).

The Mapplethorpe exhibit was so provocative, in fact, that a Cincinnati judge actually ordered a local museum curator to stand trial on misdemeanor obscenity charges for publicly displaying pornography under the guise of "art."

Defenders of Mapplethorpe, of Serrano, of Avalos, Hock and Sisco, and, now, of Ofili, hide behind the First Amendment, arguing that no matter how offensive an artwork may be to a certain segment of a given community, it enjoys constitutional protection.

However, while the First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech—and let us accept that "art," in all its permutations, amounts to "speech"—it does not obligate the government to fund artists (or museums) taking advantage of free speech rights.

Indeed, the Brooklyn Museum of Art has every prerogative to exhibit Ofili's dung-stained painting—the Catholic community and opinion writers be damned—but the museum's directors have no right to expect taxpayers to subsidize work they find patently offensive.

And one needn't be Catholic to find Ofili's painting offensive. The art elite may consider it some kind of contemporary masterpiece. But when you really get down to it, it's simply a hate crime masquerading as art.

Indeed, it's no different than a spray painted swastika on a Jewish synagogue (which could be called a mural). No different than a cross set ablaze on the lawn of a black church (which could be described as conceptual sculpture, with found objects).

Consider the absurdity of asking the Jewish community to subsidize the spray paint used to desecrate a synagogue or the black community to help pay for the lighter fluid used to burn a cross in front of one its churches.

Well it's no less absurd to ask Catholics (as well as offended non-Catholics) to blithely accept the expenditure of their tax dollars on art that disparages a sacred religious figure.

That's why the government ought to get out of the business of funding artists, either directly or indirectly.

If there is an audience for such offending "artists" as Avalos, Hock and Sisco, and Serrano and Mapplethorpe and, yes, Ofili, let that audience subsidize their work—by writing checks to museums or other arts organizations—rather than relying on the entire taxpaying public to do so.
Further Readings

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