

BROOKLYN MUSEUM DEBATE RAGES TO THE END

The debate over the Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibition, "Sensation," raged until its final day on January 9. The Catholic League led a protest of the painting, "The Holy Virgin Mary," which featured a dung-splattered portrait of Our Blessed Mother laden with pornographic pictures. To say the least, the debate drew some unusual responses.

Camille Paglia is an art historian who is known for her radical views and unpredictable positions. An avowed lesbian and former Catholic, Paglia still maintains more respect for the religion of her upbringing than many professed Catholics do today. "I'm just as sick of 'Catholic bashing' as [Mayor Rudy] Giuliani. I resent the double standard that protects Jewish and African-American symbols and icons but allows Catholicism to be routinely trashed by supercilious liberals...The Brooklyn show has fomented hatred in this country."

Another unlikely notable who sided with the Catholic League was journalist Mike Barnicle. "Imagine for a moment if a guy named Kelly sat down with an easel, produced a painting of a black man being dragged behind a pickup truck driven by a laughing rabbi with a smiling Billy Graham standing on the bumper, urinating on the victim's battered corpse, and decided to call it art," Barnicle wrote. "Would we all run to the museum," he asked, "insisting that it be displayed, toasting Kelly while reading sympathetic puff pieces about him in the New York Times?...Of course not. Why, the howling would wake up Eleanor Roosevelt."

But is throwing dung on Our Blessed Mother and surrounding her with pictures of vaginas and anuses necessarily a bad thing to do? Father George Wilson, a Jesuit ecclesiologist from

Cincinnati, thinks not. Indeed, he defends the portrait and tries desperately to put critics of the painting on the defensive.

Father Wilson raises the question, "Is the painting 'obscene'?" His answer: "Simply put, no." "We may not be used to graphic presentations of the labia; some may be disturbed by them, but that does not make them obscene." As for the artist, Chris Ofili, Father Wilson says, "It would seem more probable that he sincerely believes his work conveys some truth about Mary to him and to those viewers willing to work at understanding what he is trying to capture."

"Do we Catholics really believe dung and genitalia are 'dirty'?" This is what upsets Father Wilson, not the painting. He further explains that "In Ofili's culture, elephant dung is not something to be scorned but rather a profound symbol of life...." This allows him to write that "in the descriptions of the painting the material is quite accurately referred to as dung, after all; it is not called *shit* (his emphasis), an ugly expression characteristic of our asphalt culture."

Father Wilson is anything but vague: "Dung is a natural product of vital processes, created and used by God in the great mystery of life." But what of the porn pictures thrown on Our Blessed Mother? He can't defend that, can he? Oh yes. "A woman's genital organs play an important role in the transmission of that same incredible gift." Therefore, the Jesuit priest reasons, there is literally no difference between anatomical drawings in a medical textbook and *Hustler* magazine. Father Wilson's article appeared in the December 10 edition of the *National Catholic Reporter*, a popular weekly on Catholic college campuses.

To our knowledge, only Father Wilson has defended the use of pornography in the Ofili painting, "The Holy Virgin Mary." But the myth that dung in Africa is an honorific statement is quite widespread among the intelligentsia. Only white

multicultural freaks, we argued, would believe this.

Take, for example, the November issue of *National Geographic*. In it there is an article by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher about the Masai tribe in Kenya. It is not uncommon in this culture, they say, for the groom's female relatives to slap handfuls of cow dung on the head of the prospective bride. But this is not done to show how much they love her. "How she handles the *abuse* (our emphasis)," the authors write, "is believed to determine how she will face the challenges of marriage." One more thing—Ofili is not an African—he's a Brit.

None of the controversy stopped the Catholic League from honoring Our Blessed Mother on December 8, feast of the Immaculate Conception. Led by Msgr. Peter Finn, co-vicar of Staten Island and pastor of St. Joseph-St. Thomas parish, a group of 500 Catholics gathered in front of the Brooklyn Museum of Art to protest once again the blasphemous display. William Donohue spoke at the rally as did many local officials. Msgr. Finn led the group in the rosary.

At the rally, Donohue reminded the crowd that their efforts were not in vain. A similarly obscene and blasphemous exhibit in Detroit, he said, lasted just two days. The director who pulled the exhibit cited the trouble in Brooklyn as the reason why he stopped it; the Detroit exhibit featured a drawing of a baby Jesus in a bathtub wearing a condom. Donohue also pointed out that the "Sensation" exhibition was cancelled in Australia after all the rumblings in New York made international news.

The controversy continued on December 16 when a 72-year old Catholic man got by guards at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and squeezed white paint across the disputed canvas, "The Holy Virgin Mary." Donohue immediately addressed this incident in a news release:

"The Catholic League takes great delight in mounting a protest against the Brooklyn Museum of Art for sponsoring a cruel,

obscene and blasphemous exhibition, 'Sensation.' But we do not condone the actions of the man who defaced the controversial Madonna painting. There is a right way to protest and a wrong way to protest, and throwing paint on a canvas is wrong.

"That said, it is also true that the trustees of the Brooklyn Museum of Art still don't get it. For them to say that this was an 'incomprehensible act' is what is truly incomprehensible. Even a child knows that when someone viciously attacks another person's family, religion or country, there will be a strong urge to retaliate in kind. The real issue here is not the defacement of the canvas but the desecration of Our Blessed Mother. With public funding, no less!

"This raises a serious question: is it possible to deface a desecration? Or to put it somewhat differently, is it possible to deface dung? I leave this to the savants at the Brooklyn Museum of Art to ponder. Assuming they comprehend what I mean, of course."

Donohue was instantly attacked by journalist Gersh Kuntzman who branded the Catholic League president "Mayor Giuliani's commissioner for the Department of Religious Services."

On December 26, a 37-year old man threw red paint on the entrance to the museum and was promptly arrested. Not to be outdone, the Catholic League came back with one more statement of its own.

Just before the exhibit closed, Donohue sent a package to the museum's director, Arnold Lehman. In it was a huge pooper scooper and a package of ten hypo-allergenic disposable latex gloves. "Just as we provided vomit bags to facilitate the process of puking when the exhibit opened, we are now providing a pooper scooper and surgical gloves—latex, of course—to facilitate the sanitary removal of the dung. This should put to rest the rumor that we are not eco-conscious at

the Catholic League. And besides, who wants to step in barf and feces while dismantling this masterpiece?

“We hope that Arnold Lehman appreciates our thoughtfulness and puts our New Year’s gift to good use. We also hope he doesn’t exploit museum workers by ordering them to clean up his filth.”