

MoMA GIVEN “DUNG ON VIRGIN MARY” ART

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on a gift to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA):

Hedge fund tycoon Steve Cohen no longer wants to keep his famous anti-Catholic art, “The Holy Virgin Mary,” so he gave it to MoMA. That was a predictable choice: the museum likes to insult Catholics. This masterpiece, by Chris Ofili, features elephant dung smeared on his portrait of Our Blessed Mother, along with pictures of vaginas and anuses. The media almost never mention the porn.

During Holy Week in 2009, MoMA featured the film, “The Pope’s Toilet,” a movie by two Uruguayans. It was more stupid than vile, though the *New York Times* was delighted to report that it was an “oblique dig” at the Catholic Church (it prefers more direct hits). We checked at the time to see if Muslims were treated to anti-Islamic fare at MoMA during Ramadan, or if Jews were treated to anti-Jewish art on Yom Kippur, but, alas, we came up empty.

In 2011, MoMA acquired a video, “A Fire in My Belly,” showing large ants crawling all over Jesus on the Cross. The Smithsonian Institution, which first hosted this gem, withdrew it following a protest by the Catholic League.

The “dung on the Virgin Mary” classic set off a furor when it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999; it was part of the “Sensation” exhibit. The protest was launched by the Catholic League, and supported by New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani. I led a demonstration in front of the museum, handing out “Vomit Bags” to those waiting in line. I was responding to a museum official who said the exhibition could make someone sick. I agreed, noting that puke can be slippery.

The media, which is opposed to bigotry, save for anti-Catholic expressions of it, took the side of the museum. Some tried to justify Ofili's work by saying that Nigerians consider it honorific to use elephant dung in their artwork. But he was not a Nigerian (his parents were): he was a Brit. Moreover, when I asked a well-educated Nigerian about this alleged tradition, he got indignant, saying those who make such statements are racists. I didn't dare ask him about the Nigerian meaning of the vaginas and anuses adorning works of art.

The Catholic League objected to the Brooklyn Museum of Art hosting this event for the same reason it objected to the Smithsonian exhibit years later: Catholic taxpayers were forced to underwrite it. On the "Today" show, I said of the former exhibit, "There are a lot of fat cat bigots who don't like Catholics in this country—let them sponsor it. But if the government cannot sponsor my religion, and it shouldn't, it shouldn't be in the business of allowing people to bash my religion."

MoMA not only disgraces itself by showcasing the "dung on the Virgin Mary," it looks more like a third-class storefront in a seedy neighborhood, one that wallows in snuff art.

If MoMA wants to put it anywhere, I would advise erecting it in one of the restrooms. That way the vomit can be flushed down the toilet.

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