

MYTHS COLOR “SENSATION” EXHIBIT

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Myth: In an unprecedented move, the Catholic League sought to censor an art exhibit.

Fact: The Catholic League never sought to censor anything and its protest of an art exhibit was hardly unprecedented. We made it clear that Charles Saatchi, the collector of the paintings, could always find some “fat cat bigot” to foot the bill in the private sector (as our communications director, Pat Scully, put it, “do it on your own dime”). What we objected to was public funding of hate speech.

It is worth recalling that in 1988, six months after Chicago mayor Harold Washington died, an artist portrayed him in women’s underwear and hung his masterpiece in the Art Institute of Chicago. The City Council immediately voted to defund the museum and a cop literally snatched the painting off the wall. Yet no one in the artistic community screamed “censorship.” And what did the museum do? It took out full-page ads in two newspapers apologizing for what it did.

So why the radically different reaction now? Because Harold Washington was African American and so were the aldermen who protested the painting. Indeed, the museum capitulated so much that it even promised to launch an affirmative action plan to hire more blacks. Fat chance Catholics will ever be extended like treatment.

Myth: “The Holy Virgin Mary” is the work of an African artist, Chris Ofili, who is “a devout Catholic”; we should respect his culture.

Fact: Ofili is not African—he is British (his parents were

born in Nigeria). Moreover, it never fails that when a Catholic trashes his religion, the media dub him to be “devout.” From reading what Ofili has said about his religion, it would be more accurate to describe him as a “self-hating Catholic.” And it is he who brought his art to our culture, therefore he needs to be more respectful of our cultural traditions.

Myth: Elephant dung in Africa has a positive connotation (it means “regeneration”) and that is why Ofili chose to use it; he also placed dung on portraits of black celebrities such as Miles Davis, Diana Ross and Cassius Clay.

Fact: This is a racist argument. The African Catholics that I have taught (as recently as last summer) have never indicated that they show their love for Our Blessed Mother by throwing a lump of feces on her portrait. Only some multicultural white freak in this country would believe such bull.

Is it also an African tradition to put pictures of vaginas and anuses on pictures of revered persons? If so, Ofili needs to explain why he didn’t surround his black heroes with porn pictures.

Myth: The Catholic League is mistaking artistic expression for bigotry.

Fact: This falsely assumes there is no such genre as bigoted art. The mistake is in thinking that some who defend “Sensation” aren’t bigots. To take one example, *New York* magazine chastised Ofili for not coming up “with something better than elephant dung for a desecration. Wouldn’t bat droppings or goat semen be preferable?” Anyone who sees this as something other than anti-Catholic is nuts.

Myth: The answer to bad speech is good speech: therefore the public expression of art that denigrates religion can be answered by the public expression of art that reveres religion.

Fact: Thanks to conflicting decisions reached by the U.S. Supreme Court, this is no longer a certainty, as witnessed by the surviving families of the Columbine High School massacre. They were invited by the Jefferson County School District to make a statement on ceramic tile that would be placed in the new school building. Some crafted such religious themes as crosses and biblical verses, only to have the school district reject them as a violation of church and state. The art was rejected while the Brooklyn Museum of Art controversy was raging, leaving the Catholic League to issue a news release entitled, "Columbine Religious Art Nixed Due to Lack of Dug."

Myth: New Yorkers, including Catholics, sided with the museum, and not with Mayor Giuliani and the Catholic League.

Fact: The evidence dovetails with the nature of the question: when the public was asked if Giuliani had the right to cut off funds for art he found offensive, most said no. But when asked if controversial art should be publicly funded, most also said no.

Myth: There was little religious or political support for the Catholic League position.

Fact: We not only got support from John Cardinal O'Connor and Bishop Thomas Daily of Brooklyn, we secured the backing of the New York Hispanic Clergy Organization (a Pentecostal group), the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, Agudath Israel, the Islamic Center of Long Island, et al.