

# SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM REVISES TEXT AFTER PROTEST

When the Catholic League was first asked by the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, for permission to display one of the league’s anti-condom posters, it gladly said yes; the museum is a Smithsonian Institution gallery in New York City. The poster, 10,000 of which were displayed in New York City subways in 1994, is reprinted below:



<b>Want to know a Dirty Little Secret?</b> <b>CONDOMS DON'T SAVE LIVES.</b>		
	But restraint does. Only fools think condoms are foolproof. Remember, better safe than sorry.	
	Some common sense and a public service message from the <b>Catholic League</b> <i>for Religious and Civil Rights</i> 1011 First Avenue New York, NY 10022 (212) 371-3191	



The league poster was selected to be part of the exhibition entitled, *Design on the Street: Mixing Messages in Public Space*; the graphic design exhibition opened September 17 and runs through February 17. What stunned the league was the liberties that museum officials took with the league’s poster. The text that described the poster, as well as the text that explained two other condom posters that were featured, suggested that the league was being set up for derision.

The good news is that when our objections were raised, the National Design Museum behaved responsibly by revising the contested text for all three posters.

What follows is a selection of the correspondence that details this incident.

November 19, 1996

Ms. Ellen Lupton  
Curator of Contemporary Design  
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum  
2 East 91 Street  
New York, New York 10128-0669

Dear Ms. Lupton:

Last spring, I was invited to submit the Catholic League subway poster, "Want to Know a Dirty Little Secret?" I was told that it would be part of the upcoming exhibition entitled, *Design on the Street: Mixing Messages in Public Space*. Having recently seen the exhibition, I was angered to see the liberties that were taken with our work.

The Catholic League anti-condom poster is shown alongside of two other entries. Referring to our ad, the inscription at the bottom of the display says, "The Catholic Church, which maintains an uncompromising stance against birth control, promotes abstinence as the only guarantee against AIDS." That part is fine, but the next sentence is outrageous: "The Church associates sexuality with dirtiness and secrecy."

As a matter of fact, this is not what the Church teaches. From the *Catholic Catechism* itself, it says, "Sexuality [within marriage] is a source of joy and pleasure." It then quotes from Pope Pius XII who, in 1951, said "The Creator himself...established that in the [generative] function, spouses should experience pleasure and enjoyment of body and spirit. Therefore, the spouses do nothing evil in seeking this pleasure and enjoyment."

But there is more to object to than simply this. There is another poster called "Decision." It is described, in part, as follows: "Aimed at

Hispanic subway riders, many of whom are Catholic, this bilingual campaign uses a familiar and engaging narrative form to suggest that condom use, abstinence and monogamy are all forms of AIDS prevention.”

Now what was the purpose of flagging the Catholicity of most Hispanics? Isn't it your message that many Hispanics don't accept the Church's teachings on sexuality? And isn't this the kind of tendentious editorializing that is inappropriate for a Smithsonian institution to be making?

There is more. The final inclusion is an ACT UP poster that features a picture of Cardinal O'Connor. The final sentence makes plain the message that you intended, namely that it is wrong for Cardinal O'Connor to speak to issues that affect New York: “This angry, abrasive poster attacks New York's Cardinal O'Connor, who has taken a prominent political as well as religious role in the city's life.” How cute. I await a statement from the Smithsonian on the propriety of a rabbi sticking his nose into the affairs of New York City.

Just as bad is the way ACT UP is characterized. We learn that ACT UP “is an organization that has aggressively advocated improved health care, housing, and protection from discrimination for people with AIDS.” What is most amazing about this is that the poster in question was an invitation to gays and lesbians to STOP THE CHURCH by attending a December 10, 1989 protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral. However, what really happened on that day was hardly a protest, rather it was urban terrorism: militants interrupted Mass and spat the Host on the floor, an act worthy of Nazis. And yet this exhibition depicts ACT UP as Good Samaritans.

I also find it striking that in the book that accompanies this exhibition, *Mixing Messages: Graphic Design in Contemporary Culture*, only the first two posters are published. What happened to the ACT UP poster? Why wasn't it printed as well?

There are a number of avenues that I can pursue about this matter, but before doing so I would like to give you the opportunity to respond. Justice demands that the commentary explaining the posters either be

removed altogether or substantively revised. The ACT UP poster should certainly be withdrawn.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.