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# Tolerance, trust and the meaning of 'sensation'

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Heritage sites, museums and galleries are increasingly being viewed as sites for dialogue and exchange. As a result, the last decade or so has witnessed a growing number of exhibitions that have been designed to be provocative and to challenge people's perceptions and accepted ways of engagement. Among these are the exhibitions that have been developed to allow previously unheard voices to be included in the representations and in the interpretations offered for public consumption. Some have used new frameworks, approaches and devices to encourage people to look at, and interpret, material differently. Others have included material deemed to be sensitive. A number of these have stimulated controversy and heated reactions in the public arena – even when they have been curated with sensitivity, responsibility and with a certain amount of consultation. Can, or should, cultural heritage sites and institutions try to avoid controversy?

This chapter charts the controversy and political and cultural contestation surrounding the 'Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection' exhibition, shown in the Brooklyn Museum of Art from 2 October 1999 to 9 January 2000. It is interesting to note the different controversies that surrounded this same exhibition when it was on show at the Royal Academy in London between 18 September and 28 December 1997.

In mid-September, a few weeks before 'Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection' opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA), I confidently told a French museum colleague that one of the distinctive qualities of New York City's generous support of the arts was that the almost $80-million annual subsidy came without strings. I described the traditional laissez-faire attitude of the city's officials toward the exhibits and programs of city-funded cultural institutions. So much for tradition! As we now painfully know, New York City was about to experience one of the most emotional cultural controversies in its history. Not since the Astor Place Riot of 1859, when the militia shot and killed 22 mostly young immigrants protesting the performance of a British Shakespearean actor, had New York City seen such an impassioned response to a cultural event.

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'Sensation' closed on 9 January 2000, after a successful three-month run attracting nearly 180,000 visitors. The legal aspects of the controversy were settled in late March when the museum and city dropped their respective lawsuits. However, the extra-legal issues raised by 'Sensation' continue to pose fundamental questions for America's museums.

As New Yorkers rushed to the barricades over issues of artistic freedom and public responsibility raised by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's plan to withdraw city funding to BMA unless it

canceled the 'Sensation' exhibition, it was clear that Chris Ofili's painting. *The Holy Virgin Mary,* had ignited the controversy. The painting presents a black Madonna, one of whose breasts was fashioned by the artist from elephant dung. Mimicking a halo surrounding the figure are what from a distance look like butterflies. A closer inspection reveals that they are photographs of female genitalia snipped from pornographic magazines. While some observers have praised the painting as an important work of art, most view Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* as undistinguished. One critic noted that if the painting had been titled *My Friend Mildred,* it would have gone largely unnoticed.

By giving the painting the title of an icon sacred to Christians, and particularly to Roman Catholics, Ofili was sure to create a sensation, particularly in a city that had witnessed almost two centuries of struggle by Roman Catholics to overcome anti-Catholic bigotry. Rudolph Giuliani, raised in an Italian-American Catholic family and a product of Catholic schools, was understandably offended by what he perceived to be a profane presentation in a city-supported ($7 million a year) museum. He was not alone. John Cardinal O'Connor, the leader of the 2.3-million-member Catholic Archdiocese of New York expressed his sadness at what he and many others, Catholic and non-Catholic, consider blasphemous. Attempts at compromise between the BMA and the mayor were quickly dashed as the traditional hardball New York politics swung into action.

On one side of the widening gulf were the Brooklyn Museum of Art, its director and trustees, and a majority of the city's cultural community. To these protagonists the issue was defending First Amendment rights against a mayor and his representatives who were perceived as bullies. On the other side were the mayor, Cardinal O'Connor, a variety of Orthodox Jewish organizations, the *New York Post,* and the Catholic League, a group comparable to the Anti-Defamation League.

As in previous battles of the 'culture wars', an air of religious intolerance prevailed and the demons of prejudice lying just beneath the surface of civil society soon awakened. Some of the exhibition's opponents tried to fire up anti-Semitism by claiming that the exhibition's major advocates were Jewish. Some of the exhibition's defenders depicted their antagonists as philistines and racists whose real objection was that Ofili's Madonna was black. In a hurried and sometimes derisory defense, BMA justified the presentation of the painting by noting that the artist himself was Catholic and claimed that the painting's dung accoutrement was an African symbol of renewal. Surprisingly and somewhat comically, both sides promoted vomit as a common metaphor to characterize the exhibition. The Brooklyn Museum of Art advertised and sold posters declaring, 'The contents of this exhibition may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety. If you suffer from high blood pressure, a nervous disorder, or palpitations, you should consult your doctor before viewing the exhibition.' On opening day, members of the Catholic League gathered in front of the museum to distribute 'vomit bags' to express their disgust. Celebrities from the literary and artistic world mounted their soapboxes, from where they blasted the mayor and others for opposing what they viewed as an important artistic moment in the city's history. It was a moment captured in the following headline in the *New York Times:* 'Seeking a buzz, museum chief hears a roar instead'.

Arnold Lehman's arrival as director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1997 after a distinguished eighteen-year tenure at the Baltimore Museum of Art was a breath of fresh air. Facing the daunting task of increasing the audience for what is universally considered a world-class but attendance-challenged institution, Lehman secured new and popular exhibitions such as 'Impressionists in Winter' and 'Monet and the Mediterranean'. To attract younger audience, he initiated 'First Saturdays' as free monthly events that include refreshments and dancing. The

'Sensation' exhibition was to be the next major project in the director's campaign to raise BMA's profile and increase attendance.

Lehman made the judgment that the works in 'Sensation', all of which are owned by Charles Saatchi, the advertising mogul and wealthy British collector, were worthy of BMA's galleries. The exhibition had previously attracted large crowds at London's Royal Academy, which was one of the reasons Lehman cited for wanting the show in Brooklyn. In court depositions, the director later admitted that he had not seen the exhibition in London before deciding to bring it to Brooklyn. The ownership of the works, the exhibition's underwriters, and the actions and motives of the director soon joined freedom of speech on the controversy's center stage.

One of the more instructive sidebars to the imbroglio was the response of the city's cultural community, specifically institutions funded through the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, collectively known as the Cultural Institutions Group or CIG. The CIG is composed of 33 institutions that include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. These private institutions occupy city-owned property and receive the bulk of the city's appropriations for culture in the form of annual warrants ranging from several hundred thousand dollars to more than $15 million. A volunteer from one of the member institutions annually chairs the loosely organized CIG. In 1999, that task fell to Alan J. Friedman, director of the New York Hall of Science. When the 'Sensation' crisis escalated with the mayor's threat to end BMA's city subsidy, it became Friedman's job to craft a response agreeable to the CIG members.

Later, Friedman described his efforts to mount a CIG defense of BMA as comparable to 'herding cats'. Through a series of e-mails, later released to the *New York Times,* and faxes, a letter praising the mayor for his support of the arts and criticizing him for his stand on the 'Sensation' exhibition was signed by the majority of the CIG members and several non-city funded institutions. Notably absent from both the CIG's internal discussion and the final letter was a considerate grasp of what had detonated the controversy: a public official's reaction to perceived religious bigotry. The inability of New York's cultural institutions to recognize and appreciate this element in the controversy is possibly one of the more important lessons for the American museum community.

Several signatories of the letter later claimed that the subject of the Ofili painting had not influenced their decision and that they would have signed the letter of protest to the mayor even if the icon in question had been Jewish or Muslim. Those who know New York City ethnic, racial, and religious politics find this assertion implausible. Hilton Kramer, the noted critic and editor of the *New Criterion,* and others proffered that the 'Sensation' *controversy* supported their view that anti-Catholicism had become the accepted prejudice of the contemporary intelligentsia and cultural élite.

Blindness to questions of religious bias raised by the 'Sensation' controversy reveals a tendency among some cultural advocates to become myopic in their defense of First Amendment rights. Lost in this advocacy is the equally important civic and constitutional principle that actually takes precedence over the freedom of expression. That principle, also found in the First Amendment, is the ideal of religious pluralism. This civic value has been severely tested during our national history as Know-Nothings mobs have torched Catholic convents, anti-Semites have sprayed swastikas on temples, and Hollywood has depicted Muslims as bomb-throwing terrorists. Despite these lapses, America and particularly New York City have thrived on religious diversity. One secret to America's success as a nation and New York's as a city has been their citizens' practical habit of respecting one another's beliefs, lifestyles, and values. Unlike some other parts of the world, America's citizens do not normally kill each other because

of their religious differences. Nor do they make a habit of trashing symbols with ethnic, cultural, and religious meaning. When they do and are caught, they usually go to jail. When the alleged offender of this social convention is a publicly supported museum, we can expect a spirited official response and heated public debate.

People of good will can disagree with the allegation that Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* is sacrilegious. One can also debate the quality of the painting, the tactics of Mayor Giuliani, the motives of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the role of Charles Saatchi and some of the exhibition's financial supporters. But most concerned observers would agree that something important has occurred with this particular flare-up in the 'culture wars' that requires attention by the museum community.

It seems a safe assumption that one outcome of 'Sensation' has been a decline in the public's trust in museums. Alan Friedman and three other signers of the letter to the mayor defended the Brooklyn Museum of Art against allegations in *the New York Times* of unethical behavior. In a letter to the *Times,* Friedman suggested that BMA's methods in organizing, funding, and promoting the exhibition are common and accepted practices in the museum world. That this view is not widely shared is evident in the moves by the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Association of Museums to form special committees to address questions raised by BMA's conduct.

It is an American museum axiom that museums have the right and responsibility to exhibit materials that advance an institution's mission even if the exhibited material is considered by some to be offensive. The museum community also takes pride in its tradition of abhorring bigotry of any stripe, intended or not. In the case of 'Sensation', many museum professionals are uncomfortable with the heightened commercialism and gratuitous theatrics that accompanied the Brooklyn Museum of Art's organization and marketing of the exhibition, as well as with Mayor Giuliani's heavy-handed response. They are also uneasy with the role played by Charles Saatchi and the exhibition's sponsors and the techniques the museum used in an apparent frantic effort to attract financial underwriting. Many museum leaders find themselves torn between a desire to defend the principles of intellectual and artistic autonomy and an equally steadfast commitment to professional ethics and religious tolerance. Answers to questions of professional ethics can be found in the traditional role of museums as public trusts in service to society, rather than commercial establishments promoting the interests of individuals. In searching for answers to the balance between free speech and religious tolerance, we might revisit the First Amendment for guidance.

The founders of American democracy were wise in believing that government should not be involved in questions of religion. They felt so strongly about the separation of church and state that they made the first provision of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights the following: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religions, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. To the framers of our form of government, this prohibition was more important than the protection against the government abridging freedom of speech, the second provision of the First Amendment. History taught them that the mixture of government and religion was toxic. Inherent in this principle is the prohibition of the use of public funds to support activities that can be seen as anti-religious.

The Brooklyn Museum of Art would deny that the presentation of *The Holy Virgin Mary* was anti-religious. Others would argue that, even if Ofili's painting was anti-Catholic, publicly supported libraries are filled with works that could be considered intolerant. But exhibiting on the walls of a respected museum a painting considered by many as blasphemous is quite different from placing books on library shelves. It is the particular power of museums that their

exhibitions are spectacles, large and small. If museums do their jobs well, audiences will respond to exhibitions visually first, then intellectually and emotionally. It doesn't take a Ph.D. or years of connoisseurship to comprehend how Ofili's work affected many who saw it. Some viewed it as a creative and challenging work of art. Others judged it as a gratuitous sacrilege. Whether art or sacrilege, the failure of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and its supporters to anticipate and appreciate the negative responses to *The Holy Virgin Mary* in a community that takes pride in and relies on tolerance was an error in judgment the consequences of which have yet to be played out.

It is too soon for museums to comprehend all the lessons of the sensation caused by 'Sensation'. But one conclusion is that the appearance of unethical activity and of what some view as an arrogant disregard for the values of their audiences ill serves museums. When they stand their ground, museums need to be confident that they are standing on ethical foundations. It is also essential that museums recognize and appreciate the diverse religious traditions of their audiences. It seems obvious, too, that cultural institutions would do well to realize that when they take the public's money they assume an obligation to be responsive to the public officials who manage this resource. To be unresponsive to the taxpayer's elected representatives implies a cultural autocracy that will not long survive in a democracy. After 225 years of experience, Americans have learned that they can exist with less than total artistic and intellectual freedom, particularly when the issues involve tax-supported institutions and programs. But how long can America's cultural institutions endure without public trust grounded in professional ethics, sensitivity, and tolerance? If it has taught us nothing else, the 'Sensation' exhibition has reminded us that public confidence in the ethical and responsive management of our institutions is an asset easily lost and difficult to recover.