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Smithsonian's Board Failed in Crucifix Controversy



Frances M. Roberts/Newscom

A group protests the Smithsonian Museum's decision to pull a controversial video.

By Pablo Eisenberg

As the Smithsonian has faced sharp criticism about its handling of an exhibit on same-sex art, few observers have discussed the real problem: the repeated failure of the organization's board to uphold the values and integrity of America's largest and most important museum and art institution.

Four years ago, Lawrence Small was forced to resign as the institution's chief executive after a series of scandals tore the institution apart. The Board of Regents had tolerated inappropriate expenditures, exorbitant compensation practices, conflicts of interest, and poor governance. What exposed this dark underbelly of the institution was not the proper oversight of its board but the extraordinary investigative reporting by James Grimaldi of *The Washington Post*.

This time, the Smithsonian's leader, Wayne Clough, ordered the removal of a four minute-video from the National Portrait Gallery's exhibit, "Hide/Seek," because of objections from right-wing bloggers and a few conservative members of Congress. The video by the artist David Wojnarowicz, contained an 11-second segment showing ants crawling over a crucifix, which the critics called anti-religious.

The exhibit, which features paintings by well-known artists like Thomas Eakins, Georgia O'Keefe, Grant Wood, and Andy Warhol—some straight, some gay—elicited no complaints during its first month at the Portrait Gallery.

What caused the uproar over the video were the comments of William Donohue, executive director of the Catholic League, a nonprofit that has no connection to the Catholic Church. Donohue labeled the video “anti-Christian hate speech” and slurred the gay theme of the exhibit. He was joined in his denunciations by Rep. Eric Cantor, of Virginia, and Rep. Jack Kingston, of Georgia, Republican members of Congress who threatened to halt federal payments to the Smithsonian, even though the exhibit was financed entirely by private funds.

Very soon after the protests began, Mr. Clough ordered the Portrait Gallery’s director, Martin Sullivan, to withdraw the video. Mr. Clough informed the board of regents about his decision but did not involve them in the decision-making process, according to a Smithsonian official who asked not to be named.

What is remarkable is that an institution that spends more than \$1-billion a year and that has a powerful board and enormous prestige should have acted so precipitously without assessing the facts of the case and the dangers to the integrity of the museum. Clearly, the financial threats by a few ideologically impaired members of Congress were the overriding concern, regardless of whether the threats were even serious. The decision was both mindless and cowardly.

Nor should it have been a management decision. With the reputation of the Smithsonian at stake, it was a matter for the regents as well as the secretary.

Many museums have publicly criticized the Smithsonian for censoring a part of the exhibit and plan to show the video themselves. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts sent Mr. Clough a warning that it would no longer make grants to the Smithsonian if the video was not restored.

The Smithsonian has set a dangerous precedent. Will it cave in to future pressures from politicians, religious fanatics, unhappy critics, or disenchanted art lovers when the next controversy arises?

Art should remain free from politics, not dictated by the whims of the elite or the ignorance of kooky critics. Some art might be considered totally offensive and not worth displaying, but this should be a matter of thoughtful and judicious decisions. That is why we have museums, art institutions, and experts that can maintain the integrity of artistic products.

Where was the Board of Regents in this unfortunate episode? Although the board supported Mr. Clough, according to a Smithsonian spokesman, they have not commented publicly either individually or as a board. Do they support the censoring of art exhibits? Will they condone such

practices in the future? Will they succumb to unjustified political pressures? It is a time for them to speak up.

Mr. Clough is the former president of a university. Two of the Smithsonian's board members, France Córdova, president of Purdue University, and Shirley Ann Jackson, president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute should be especially aware of the importance of academic and scientific freedom and the right of academic and arts institutions to pursue and protect ideas and creativity without restriction. Their voices are wrapped in silence.

And what about Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, another of the board members who so often talks about progressive values? He said nothing during the scandals of the Lawrence Small administration, and now it is unclear where he stands on censorship. What about Rep. Xavier Becerra, the California Democrat who has been willing to attack private foundations for neglecting the poor but is not willing to stand up for the Smithsonian's right to sponsor sometimes touchy and controversial exhibits? And why has the board's chair, Patty Stonesifer, former chief executive of the Gates also had nothing to say?

Something is fundamentally wrong with a Board of Regents that has failed the leadership test and one that has showed cowardice rather than courage in the face of minor pressure. The American public and the Smithsonian deserve better.

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