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Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Editorial 06

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Art often educates — and shocks

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The cross of Christ touches the depths of human feeling and religious hope of countless people.

But this week it has touched some in a way that has them fighting mad.

The furor is over an award-winning photograph of an image of a crucified Christ floating in urine.

The artist, Andres Serrano, received \$15,000 as winner of the Awards in the Visual Arts program, which is funded by the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation, Equitable Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts.

Some people have condemned the artwork for its bigotry and blasphemy.



**Tom
Schaefer**

At least one religious group, the American Family Association, has demanded apologies from National Endowment representatives and the firing of those responsible for its selection.

And I must confess, at first blush, the image seems repulsive, even sickening, to me.

Is this art?

On reflection, I'm withholding judgment because it's possible — giving some credence to distinguished artists who have judged the entry — the image conveys a truth or evokes a feeling about the crucifixion that causes a re-examination of values and beliefs. The fact is, familiar images of the crucifixion are commonplace for a lot of people and have meaning only as a fashion accessory.

Historically, the cross of Christ has been depicted by artists in a variety of ways, some shocking to the sensibilities of contemporary people.

Pablo Picasso's jarring image of an assortment of bones on a cross, for example, became in the eyes of one religious scholar "the ultimate of the impotence of Christ in a drawing of the cross."

Perhaps in the vile medium of human urine, Serrano's work forces us to see the utter degradation of Christ on the cross and his identification with humanity in the most personal of ways.

After all, if art teaches us anything, particularly religious art, it's that shocking new images can become, in time, conveyors of meaning for people who are struggling to make sense of life.

That's worth a pause before rushing to judgment.