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6-14-1989

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Barbara Gamarekian

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Recommended Citation

Gamarekian, Barbara, "Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 22" (1989). *Obscenity: News Articles (1989)*. Paper 24.

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Corcoran, to Foil Dispute, Drops Mapplethorpe Show

By BARBARA GAMAREKIAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 13 — The Corcoran Gallery of Art has canceled a planned retrospective of the work of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, anticipating that its content would trigger a political storm on Capitol Hill.

"Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," an exhibition of more than 150 works, many of them explicit homoerotic and violent images, was partially financed with a grant of \$30,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, an agency already under fire from Congress for its grant policies. The exhibition was to have opened on July 1.

"Citizen and Congressional concerns — on both sides of the issue of public funds supporting controversial

A museum decides discretion is the better part of neutrality.

art — are now pulling the Corcoran into the political domain," said the director of the Corcoran, Dr. Christina Orr-Cahall.

"Our institution has always remained outside of the political arena, maintaining a position of neutrality on all such issues," she said. "In a city with such a great Federal presence, this has been essential."

The Show's Itinerary

Organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, the show has appeared in Philadelphia and Chicago, and is to travel to Hartford; Berkeley, Calif., and Boston. Another extensive exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work was on view last year at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan. The photographer died of AIDS in March at the age of 42.

Dr. Orr-Cahall said that the gallery had not yet received Congressional pressure, but that gallery officials had been "monitoring" the situation and felt a major Congressional dispute was shaping up over the National Endowment's support of the exhibition. The Corcoran received \$292,000 in Federal funds in 1988 and the gallery is involved in a campaign to increase its endowment from \$2 million to \$12.5 million.

The decision was supported by the board of the Corcoran on the recommendation of its chairman, David Lloyd Kreeger.

"It was a close call," he said. "If

you went ahead, I suppose you could say you were upholding freedom of artistic expression against possible political pressure. But you have to consider the larger picture. The endowment has been under attack, its appropriation has been cut by the Executive again and again, only to be restored by Congress. And this is a very critical period in the appropriation process. If proceeding with this exhibition hurts N.E.A. appropriations, it is detrimental to the Corcoran and every other art institution."

Decision Is Applauded

A former chairman of the arts endowment, Livingston Biddle, called the Corcoran's decision a "wise one."

"In this current climate of confusion, exaggeration and hyperbole, it would be very difficult for an artist like Mapplethorpe, who is very controversial, to have a good viewing of his work in Washington," Mr. Biddle said. "I think the decision is beneficial to arts and to the Corcoran."

The controversy comes at a time when the arts endowment's budget is up for review and it faces reauthorization legislation. The endowment has been severely criticized in recent months by members of Congress regarding a grant made to an artist through the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. The work under fire, by Andres Serrano, is a photograph of Christ on a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine.

D'Amato Denounces Photo

Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York, took to the floor of the Senate on May 18 to express outrage. Twenty-five members of the Senate, across the political spectrum, co-signed a letter written by Senator D'Amato to Hugh Southern, the acting chairman of the arts endowment, asking that the endowment review and reform its procedures in making artistic grants.

"This is not a First Amendment issue," said Frank Coleman of Mr. D'Amato's staff. "The Senator has been a longtime supporter of the arts community in New York and has always supported full funding for N.E.A. He is absolutely opposed to censorship, but we are talking about taxpayers' dollars."

Representative Bob Carr, a Michigan Democrat who is the chairman of the Congressional Arts Caucus, said of the Serrano photograph, "I don't think the Government has an obligation in the name of art to fund that kind of stuff, but that is different from saying that the endowment shall never under any circumstances have any of its money used for what could be called a controversial subject on the grounds that someone might be offended and have a powerful friend in Congress."

The endowment has received more than 150 letters from members of Congress about the Serrano work,



John Blaisdell

Dr. Christina Orr-Cahall, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Senator Jesse Helms, a Republican of North Carolina, joined with Mr. D'Amato on the Senate floor in expressing his outrage over the Serrano photograph and "the blasphemy of the so-called artwork."

"There is a rumor afoot that Jesse Helms is preparing legislation to go with the appropriations bill that would delete money from certain programs in the endowment," said Mr. Biddle.

Comment From Helms's Office

Barbara Lukens of Senator Helms's staff, said: "I can't comment on something that hasn't happened yet. People are thinking of four or five different ways of going. They are working on something but they don't have anything in cement as yet."

As for the endowment's view of the Corcoran's decision, Mr. Southern observed: "We totally respect the right of the Corcoran to do as it sees fit in terms of its programs and exhibitions. That is their responsibility. We make grants with the advice of panels of the national council as best we can, and then the institutions are free to do exactly as they see fit with their artistic programming."

He paused and added, "This is a legitimate area of public concern — the matter of free expression is complex and with Government funding it becomes even more complex."

The Washington Project for the Arts, an artists organization, has been in touch with the Institute of Contemporary Art and is considering bringing the Mapplethorpe show to Washington.

"I'm appalled by the decision," said the director of the Washington Project, Jock Reynolds. "It is an outright cave-in to conservative political forces who are once again trying to muzzle freedom of expression in the arts. The Corcoran should look to the inscription that is carved over its entrance: 'Dedicated to Art.' They should stand by their motto and let Mapplethorpe's work speak for itself."