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And the Corcoran Mess

Those shouting "censorship" and declaring the very fabric of a free society to be endangered by the Corcoran's handling of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition are having it the easy way. Much tougher and more interesting questions are raised in this episode than are reflected in the concern of protest about government repression and homophobia and the rest. For instance: Is there any art, certified to be such by other artists, that is not suitable to be shown in an open, generally accessible exhibit by an institution like the Corcoran? Or is there a way to make the judgment on suitability? And what kind of an institution is the Corcoran, anyway? To whom does its responsibility run? What are the claims on it of the museum-going constituency it has assiduously cultivated and enlarged over the years with its permanent collections, outreach programs, school-related educational projects and well-advertised open tours? And does the relatively small amount of taxpayers' money that goes to support it give the taxpayers a say in the art shown?

The reason we think these questions are relevant is that we think the assumptions of many of those protesting are flawed. One of these is that only the unspeakable Jesse Helms and his kind would oppose showing Mapplethorpe photographs that have caused the controversy and that this fact alone is sufficient to discredit any reservations other people have about them. But, as is so often the case, Sen. Helms, America's Number One Yahoo, is being used as a foil and an excuse. For the truth is that a number of those photographs scheduled to be in the show strike a lot more people than Jesse Helms as wrong for the kind of showing in the Capitol and its method of support it gives to the arts. Helms is wrong for the kind of showing in the Capitol. The institution was never going to stop on tourist money. The Corcoran, anyway? To contrived a way to make the Mapplethorpe show accessible more as a matter of choice, than of chance encounter or of routine docent-led tours. The human mind has found means of making accommodations in the name of individual taste, tact and free choice in other arts and media. Apparently the show already came with a little cautionary labeling and a few other forms of compariability. It's not as though the principle would have been either novel or destructive, and surely it could have been elaborated by the Corcoran if its officials decided to go ahead with the show.

Instead, they scheduled the show without adequate understanding of what was at stake, planned to put it on without any special consideration of its impact and then, at the first sign of trouble on Capitol Hill, panicked and canceled with much handwringing about not wanting to get into politics or to give government an excuse for cutting funds for the arts in general and so forth. Thus: the worst of all possible worlds—the institution itself, though claiming in one breath that it is not merely doing the politicians' will, in the next begs understanding on the ground that it must do their bidding.

It has long seemed to us that in the arts and in science and in academic enterprises of other kinds many recipients of federal (and state) monies have been guilty of a combination of arrogance and naivete in failing to recognize that once they have taken the money they are, at least to some degree, legitimized the intervention they so deprecate. They have entered the essential, age-old patron-client relationship, and no less than other government-assisted enterprises, they will be subjected to certain standards and demands in the name of whose money they have taken. Money has been the point of access of the federal government into the affairs of various institutions all over the country in the enforcement of civil rights and other policy demands. It has been, if anything, remarkable that the inflow of federal funds to the arts in the past three decades has not created more conflicts than it has.

We persist in believing that the government has not censored the Mapplethorpe show: it will be shown elsewhere. And even in the Corcoran's case, it was not censorship but a bit of pressure that caused the institution to take the pictures down. The Corcoran should have been ready to stand up to that if it meant to have this show—both to be knowledgeable about what was being offered and to make a good case for its choice of the Mapplethorpe photographs and its method of presenting them. But it wasn't ready. Oh, dear! and canceled. The institution was careless in the first instance and craven in the second.