

**H**ave you ever noticed how so-called happenstance is never a matter of mere chance? That John Paul II's Letter to Artists (April 23, 1999) was in place before the flap about the "Sensation" exhibit (Oct. 2, 1999) is not a fortuity. It's yet another example of a providential concurrence. The sensationalism of "Sensation" was a wake-up call not just for New York art buffs and critics, but for everyone. It taught us how desperately we need a prudent commentator to interject reason into the polemics spawned by events like that of the Gotham-art imbroglio. Specifically, the situation cried out for someone with the sound

been allowed to showcase their provocative artifacts — more than 90 paintings, sculptures, photographs and installations — at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA) from October 1999 until January 2000? (see [www.brooklynart.org/sensation/sensmore.html](http://www.brooklynart.org/sensation/sensmore.html))

A case in point: Should one of the artists, Chris Ofili, who painted the Virgin Mary as a Madonna with breasts made of elephant dung and surrounded by pictures from porn magazines of female buttocks and genitalia, have been allowed to publicly display his image? Or for that matter, should any of the other "Sensation" works of "art" (including animal cadavers floating in formaldehyde, children with engorged genitalia and a picture of a serial killer

Plagens in Newsweek put it. Putting teeth into his objection, the mayor yanked the city's \$7 million annual subsidy of the BMA. On the other side, you had artists, the BMA officials and their supporters who cried censorship, who sued Mayor Giuliani for the denial of their First Amendment rights, and who refused to acknowledge that anyone's offended sensibilities could ever trump the right of free expression guaranteed by the first amendment.

### RIGHTS: EXERCISED RIGHTLY

When are rights authentic? When

are they exercised rightly? To use the case at hand: Does an artist — for example, Chris Ofili — have the right to display a piece of his art work — for example, "The Holy Virgin Mary" — which offends others — for example, Catholics and other believers for whom Mary is a sacred symbol?

The Pope sets the record straight about how to generate more light than heat from a discussion of events like "Sensation." Instead of a freedom-of-artists-vs.-censorship debate, Pope John Paul insists we need a rights-of-artists-vs.-duty deliberation. Artists have the duty, the responsibility, to serve society

## THE GOTHAM GAFFE What We Can Learn

erudition of Pope John Paul to shed light on the critical social and moral issues that stood center stage of the public square. For example: What does it mean to have a right and to exercise it rightly? And, What's the connection between morality and art?

### BACKGROUND: WHAT HAPPENED?

Here's an overview of "Sensation" and its aftermath. The brouhaha centered around a group of 40 young British artists and their works. The eye of the controversy: Should they have

accompanied by fingerprints of his child-victims) have been shown?

When the dust settled, we were left with two competing views. People like New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, on the one side, objected that the artists' right to display these highly offensive works was trumped by the right of New Yorkers — first, to be exposed to good rather than to noxious art; second, to not be required to support with their tax dollars art that distorts its subject matter, that blasphemes values and personages that are held sacred by various segments of the citizenry, as Peter



photo courtesy RNS

The Brooklyn Museum of Art "Sensation" exhibit abused people's rights

through their art (see Letter to Artists, nos. 3-4).

When artists put their intuitive creativity at the service of the common good — when they use their art rightly — they are exercising their freedom of expression in a responsible manner. This is to say that whatever the artist's genre — be it music, painting, poetry, sculpture — it is responsibly represented when it renews the lives of those viewing and listening, when it enables them to become better people.

Artists who fulfill their duty to be responsible creators produce works of art that will help their audience grasp and reflect upon the decisive temporal and transcendent truths referenced in their works. More, responsible artists help us mortals to grapple with and make sense out of those realities. Conversely, irresponsible use of their talent means that artists are abusing their gift and their freedom; such artistic endeavors fail to make society a better place by failing to help those who make up society better persons.

Philosopher John Finnis offers a conducive formula to distinguish legitimate rights from bogus claims. He maintains that rights are never a binary proposition (see his book "Natural Law and Natural Rights") — that is to say, exercising rights is never as simple as a pregnant woman (1) having the right to an abortion (2); or a worker (1) having the right to a just wage (2); or an unborn baby (1) having a right to life (2). There is always a third entity, a person or group of persons most directly affected by the claimant's exercise or enjoyment of the right, that must be allowed to weigh in. Therefore, a mother (1) has the right to abort her baby, (2) if and only if the oft-forgotten but very involved second party, the baby,

(3) has a genuine claim right that its mother ought not abort it.

Only when all affected parties are present and accounted for can we finally reach a verdict of whether the right under discussion is specious or genuine. Hence, a mother does not have a right to abort her baby, because her baby, given its innocence, humanity and personhood, has a right not to be unjustly deprived of its life. Stated another way, the mother has a countervailing duty to respect her baby's legitimate right to be born.

**F**urther, in the case of exercising or enjoying a genuine right — for example, the fundamental right to life — if we employ Finnis' ternary proposition, we are able to distinguish a responsible from an irresponsible exercise of a genuine right. Every innocent human being (1) enjoys the universal right to life (2) if and only if every person in society (3) has a universal duty to refrain from killing any innocent human being. Only insofar as every last member of society honors his or her duty to refrain from killing an innocent human being will every last person enjoy the right to life, the right not to be killed. It would be irresponsible and illogical of anyone, then, to insist that people refrain from killing them when at the same time they support the direct destruction of another person, say, by supporting abortion.

How do things pan out when we apply Finnis' theorem to the "Sensation" artists and their alleged right to display their work? Mayor Giuliani was correct when he argued that the right of the artists to freedom of expression depended on whether their artistic expressions honored respective counterclaims of New

Yorkers. In other words, the right of artists to practice their art is a legitimate right, but not an absolute one. As such, the right of the "Sensation" artists (1) to free expression (2) should not be exercised unless, in the process, pertinent rights of others (3) are supported. The countervailing right of some New Yorkers — to enjoy commonly agreed upon moral customs including the right not to have their sacred religious symbols disparaged and blasphemed by others — was not respected. Thus, to the extent that this was true, the artists' relative right to freedom of expression ought to have been curtailed.

The guidance offered by the Pope and Finnis allows us to take Giuliani's interdict a step further. Even if the "Sensation" artists were exhibiting in a private show that involved no public-tax subsidy, they still would not have a right to exhibit their socially divisive works. Even under private auspices, theirs would be an irresponsible exercise of the right of freedom of expression because it failed to respect a legitimate claim of others. These "art" works and their "artists" neglected respect for commonly recognized societal mores based on natural law and gradually recognized by civilizations over the passage of time.

Or, as one commentator suggested, we just need to think of an analogous case. If Ofili had painted the political figures Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson eating watermelon with the title, "Amos and Andy: Watermelon Memories," perhaps the justice of Giuliani's interdict could be better appreciated. Such an artifact would deny the right of others, especially

African-Americans, to expect rudimentary respect for their religious and political leaders. Or, to put it in the negative, such a representation would have maligned not just their public leaders but also the entire African-American community. *A fortiori*, Ofili does not have a right to paint the Virgin Mary, the person whom many believe to be the Mother of God and to be untainted

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by original or personal sin, in a way that distorts and denies those Marian attributes. That Ofili did exhibit the work is simply an egregious example of an abuse of his limited freedom of expression.

**CONNECTION BETWEEN MORALITY AND ART**

In his Letter to Artists, Pope John Paul II, relying on St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, makes the distinction between the habit or virtue of art and the moral virtues, particularly, prudence. He explains that the virtue of art (an intellectual *habitus*) makes the artist capable of "actualizing [his] productive capacities, giving aesthetic form to ideas conceived in the mind" (no. 2.2). The acquired habit of art makes the artist capable of producing objects that are made well, objects that, in their optimum physical excellence, might even attain the level of a masterpiece.

The virtue of prudence, in contrast, enables the artist to make a masterpiece of his or her life, to mold or form his personality by consistently choosing

the good in his actions. According to this analysis, to say a person creates good art in the aesthetic sense says nothing directly about the personal morality of the artist or the moral quality of his work.

**H**owever, as the Pope remarks, “The distinction between the moral and artistic aspects is fundamental but no less important is the *connection* between them” (no. 2.3). As we try to delineate what this connection is or how it works, we can again take our cue from Aquinas. He stresses that, while the virtue of art gives a capacity to make things well, it does not ensure that the artist will make good use of that skill or talent. In other words, artists who have acquired the intellectual virtue of art will not necessarily use their artistic talent for the good — that is, responsibly. Artists will only be able to do that if they are morally good persons, persons whose intellect, will and

passions have been brought into line with goodness by means of the moral virtues. Naturally, if they lack the cardinal moral virtues, artists will be more readily tempted to use their talent in immoral ways.

In this sense it’s true to say that artists reveal who they are by what they choose to do, including the way they choose to make and use their art. An immoral use of artistic talent means that the moral portrait the artist paints of himself thereby will disclose a morally weakened intellect, will and emotions. This is why the Pope explains that when artists create their work, they “express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are what they are” (no. 2.3). Just as pure water flows from pure sources, so morally good art flows from a morally upright artist. Sadly, the reverse is also true: the immorality of an artist leaves its imprint on his work.

Our original reflection on what constitutes a responsible exercise of an artist’s freedom of expression points directly to the intimate connection between morality and art. The freedom to do something, to exhibit one’s works of art, for example, is not a freedom to do whatever one wants, to display works whose subjects are not truthfully represented. Freedom of expression for artists is the freedom to choose the good in their artistic endeavors, to take great precautions to make things that conform to the truth of what is being created.

To the extent that artists make masterpieces of their spiritual and moral lives, will the aesthetic merit of their work be improved by the added moral qualities of truth, beauty and goodness. Being a morally good artist will not make bad art good. But a morally good artist will be able to make a work of art that is already aesthetically good even more excellent by virtue of its moral dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

Chris Ofili’s remarks to the press are instructive. In explaining the purpose of “The Holy Virgin Mary,” he admitted he was merely imitating those sexually charged portraits of Mary that were painted by the traditional art masters. His original “spin” on things was to present his sexual erotic Madonna in a “hip-hop” version.

There are at least two ways of critiquing his admissions, both of which reinforce our discussion about artistic freedom and the connection between morality and art. First, Ofili failed to realize that even the Marian masterpieces are imperfect images. To whatever extent the master artists were

blinded by materialism, worldliness or hubris, to that extent the work of art failed to represent the truth of Mary. Ofili should have recognized the deficit of what Jacques Maritain referred to as a “soft spot” of an artistic masterpiece, not emulated it.

Second, Ofili’s perception of a sexually charged Madonna could also be a reflection of his own morally corrupt intuitive imagination. For Ofili to have an affective connaturality for his subject, the Virgin Mary, he would also have to have a genuine knowledge and love of her. *Quidquid recipitur promodum recipientes recipitur* (“that which is received is received according to the one receiving it”).

In sum, if Ofili’s work, “The Holy Virgin Mary,” were a masterpiece, the dent in its aesthetic value due to his own moral instability would be discernible but not egregiously so. However, when moral corruption accompanies a work that is also corrupt from an aesthetic viewpoint, we’re dealing with bad art, whatever way we intend the word bad.

The art and the artist are really all of a piece. We can thank Chris Ofili and the “Sensation” artists for driving home the important truth of that insight. †

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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