



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on December 1, 2010

Smithsonian Exhibit Outrage: Asking the Wrong Questions

Although the “Hide/Seek” exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution opened on October 30th, it didn’t start generating national outrage until CNS News published a lengthy and detailed review on Monday. In that review, astonishing and outrageous videos, paintings, photographs and montages by gay and lesbian artists were displayed, including “an ant-covered Jesus, male genitals, naked brothers kissing, men in chains, Ellen DeGeneres grabbing her breasts, and a painting the Smithsonian itself describes in the show’s catalog as ‘homoerotic.’ ”



The historian and co-curator of the exhibit David Ward tried to explain away the reasons behind the exhibit:

This is an exhibition that displays masterpieces of American portraiture and we wanted to illustrate how questions of biography and identity went into the making of images that are canonical....

I believe that the American public is mature and tolerant in its opinion of alternative points of view. This is an art and cultural exhibition that displays important and key works of artistic creation and attempts to interpret them against the background of American history....

It would be wrong for us as a museum to close off the discussion of any question because of a personal or political point of view....

In our permanent collection, we show the extension of the rights to all Americans laid out in the Declaration of Independence ... the proof is in the art.

The timing of the exhibit coincides with the celebration of Christmas, running from the end of October through February 13th, 2011. But that wasn’t the intent of the curators at the National Portrait Gallery. Martin Sullivan, the NPG’s director, [said](#) “I regret that some reports about the exhibit have created an impression that the video [of the Crucifix] is intentionally sacrilegious ... it was not the museum’s intention to offend.”

Many were offended nevertheless. With nearly 65 percent of the Smithsonian’s budget coming from the federal government, claims that the exhibit itself was funded privately, mostly from gay-and-lesbian-friendly groups, fell on deaf ears. Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute said “If someone takes taxpayer money, then I think the taxpayers have every right to question the institutions where the money’s going.” Gary Scott with the Intercollegiate Studies Institute agreed: “Leaving aside the merit or lack of it in the exhibit itself, the notion that taxpayers don’t fund it is unpersuasive.”

First, most of the overall budget derives from tax monies for the facility, and maintenance and staff. Second, the exhibit appears inside and is monitored by [the Institution’s] staff. Finally, if it was funded only by outside funding the exhibit would be outside in a snowdrift.

When House Speaker-elect John Boehner (R-Ohio) got wind of the matter, he called on the Smithsonian



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to pull the exhibit or “face serious questions” in the next Congress when its budget comes up for review. Boehner said in a statement “American families have a right to expect better from recipients of taxpayer funds in a tough economy. While the amount of money involved may be small, it’s symbolic of the arrogance Washington routinely applies to thousands of spending decisions involving Americans’ hard-earned money at a time when one in every 10 American is out of work and our children’s future is being threatened by debt.”

House Majority Leader-to-be Eric Cantor (R-Va.) expanded: “This is an outrageous use of taxpayer money and an obvious attempt to offend Christians during the Christmas season. When a museum receives taxpayer money, the taxpayers have a right to expect that the museum will uphold common standards of decency. The museum should pull the exhibit and be prepared for serious questions come budget time.”

According to the Interior Department the Smithsonian received \$636 million for fiscal year 2010, but the Gallery claimed that the cost of the exhibit itself was only \$750,000 and that was privately funded. But Bill Donohue of the Catholic League didn’t care who paid for it or how much it cost. The four-minute video of ants crawling over the Crucifix of Christ “was designed to insult and inflict injury and assault the sensibilities of Christians. If the government can’t fund the promotion of religion, it shouldn’t be in the business of funding an animus to religion.” The next day the gallery [announced](#) that it removed the offensive video but left in place the rest of the exhibit. Donohue came close to asking the right question as he [started a campaign](#) to cut public funding for the institute: “This is not the first time the Smithsonian has offended us. I’m going to cast the net much wider. Why should the government pay for this? How dare they take our money to fund attacks on (our religion)?”

When Donohue was informed that the offensive video was being removed, he backed off, saying that “they made the right decision” and that he didn’t object to the exhibit as a whole but specifically to parts he considered anti-Christian.

Glenn Beck got into the fray as well. [On his show](#) on Monday, Beck said:

And then you have tax dollars funding this wonderful display. It’s Christmas at the Smithsonian. Here’s this wonderful — oh look, it’s Jesus with ants on Him. They describe it as the first major exhibition to focus on the sexual difference in the making of modern American portraiture.

What? You’ve got to be kidding me, right? What does this have to do with the birth of baby Jesus, and why is He now covered with ants? Whose values are these?

All of this either skirts the key question no one is willing ask, or ignores it altogether: where in the Constitution is the federal government permitted to fund any such thing? A careful look at the enumerated powers given to the “general government” shows only 18 specific powers. Nowhere is the power provided to fund the cultural entertainment or degradation of the people even mentioned. And to seal off any discussion about interpretations of the “general Welfare” clause, the Commerce clause, or “necessary and proper” clauses, the Tenth Amendment had to be included before the Constitution could be ratified:

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

All the questions raised so far by this egregious example of moral degradation are side issues. Threats of a boycott by Catholics, or a budget review in the next Congress, or whether the present funding only covers the cost of the buildings and staff of the Smithsonian and not the specific exhibit itself, or



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whether freedom of speech is at risk, or whether it's appropriate to spend money like this during the Great Recession — they all miss the point. The whole purpose of the limits placed on the federal government by the Constitution simply make questions like these irrelevant. If someone wants to fund moral degradation privately, fine. Let them hire a hall, put up their blasphemous paintings and invite people in to see them. But let's not cover up the real issue or distract conversation from the essential point: government shouldn't be involved in funding any such thing as the Smithsonian, even if its exhibits were entirely honorable and uplifting.

As fiscal crunch time approaches, conversations about government funding of museums and other unconstitutional spending must become more acutely focused on the proper, constitutional role of government in the first place.



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