

The view from the jaded top

Metropolitan Museum director offers an olive branch to New York Mayor Giuliani

By Barry Grey
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An op-ed piece which appeared in the October 5 edition of the *New York Times* sheds light on the belated and weak-kneed response of the New York cultural establishment to the efforts of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to suppress an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Just days after Giuliani cut off municipal funding and filed suit to evict the museum from its city-owned building, after the museum refused to shut down the exhibit entitled “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection,” Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, weighed into the controversy with a *Times* article bearing the headline “Making a Cause Out of Bad Art.”

Montebello heads arguably the most powerful and prestigious cultural institution in New York. Yet the target of his ire was not Giuliani, who is engaged in a crude assault on artistic expression and Constitutionally protected free speech, but rather those who have reacted with anger and concern over the city's attack on democratic rights.

They, according to Montebello, are missing the main point: the “Sensation” exhibit is a collection of bad art, and the museum and its most vocal defenders are guilty of perpetrating a cultural hoax. The Metropolitan Museum director goes so far as to praise Giuliani with the extraordinary assertion: “Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, for one, has shown astute critical acumen.... I find no fault with the Mayor's aesthetic sensibilities, only with his effort at censorship.”

To attribute Giuliani's demagogic attack on the Brooklyn Museum to “critical acumen” and “aesthetic sensibilities” is to insult the intelligence of the public. For one thing, as Montebello well knows, the mayor

has never bothered to look at the exhibit. Instead he has seized on the controversial works of which it is comprised for palpably and cynically political purposes. Seeking the Republican nomination for the US Senate race in 2000, he calculates that a well-publicized attack on “sick” art and “pornography” will win over the Christian right and other extreme elements in the party that have been cool to his election bid because of his relatively moderate position on abortion and other cultural issues.

Moreover, Giuliani has focused his assault on the issue of religion. He has singled out a painting of the Virgin Mary by Chris Ofili, a London-based artist of Nigerian descent, denouncing it (or, more precisely, slandering it) as a blasphemous attack on religion in general, and Catholicism in particular. As Giuliani reiterated at a City Hall press conference on October 4, his criterion for shutting down publicly-subsidized museums is whether or not they display works that are anti-religious:

“If another museum does the same thing that this museum does, if it aggressively attacks, let's say, a different religion, I'll have the same reaction to it.”

Thus the fundamental issue is not the artistic merit of Ofili's painting, or any of the other works in the “Sensation” exhibit, but the democratic right to express views—religious or anti-religious—without facing sanctions by the state. Giuliani, and those who have lined up behind him—the Catholic hierarchy in New York, Republican presidential aspirants, the US House and Senate—are seeking to establish a de facto proscription on anti-religious expression, an assault on free speech that directly contravenes the First Amendment separation of church and state.

Montebello simply ignores this crucial aspect of the controversy. The chilling, McCarthyite essence of Giuliani's vendetta has deeply troubled wide sections of the population in New York. Among the record crowds that have lined up to view the Brooklyn Museum exhibit are many thousands who consider their attendance an act of protest against the city's assault on democratic rights.

It is obvious, in contrast, that Montebello, notwithstanding his pro-forma objections to censorship, is not particularly bothered by such questions. His indifference to basic issues of democratic rights has, moreover, implications for his views on art. He finds no fault with Giuliani's "aesthetic sensibilities, *only* with his effort at censorship" (emphasis added).

This is a remarkable juxtaposition. It does not seem to have occurred to Montebello that there might be something profoundly anti-aesthetic about a sensibility that embraces thought control and state repression.

The bulk of Montebello's article is a rather commonplace rumination on the difference between good and bad art. Whatever one may think of his aesthetic notions, it is impossible to ignore the element of fawning before Giuliani, who, after all, controls the city purse strings.

Montebello concludes by reminding us that "the Metropolitan, along with nearly 30 of the city's cultural institutions, large and small, did publicly ask the Mayor to reconsider his position to cut the Brooklyn Museum's public financing and dismiss its board." Even here, the obsequious and spineless tone is unmistakable. Montebello chooses to omit the fact that it took the cultural establishment more than a week to issue any public protest, and that it did so only after secret negotiations between the chairman of the Brooklyn Museum's board of directors, Robert S. Rubin, and the city collapsed, despite Rubin's offer to remove the Ofili painting and segregate other works which the mayor found offensive.

After reiterating that "what remains terribly disturbing to me" is the failure of more people to join with Giuliani in expressing "their dislike for works that they find either repulsive or unaesthetic or both," Montebello finishes with a flourish: "I firmly believe in the independent role of museums and so much as I may disagree with some of the exhibitions they mount, I will defend to the death their right to do so"—an

assertion that, based on all that has preceded it, needs to be taken with a large grain of salt.

The artistic merit, or lack thereof, of the works featured in the Brooklyn Museum exhibit is an important question. Aside from the intrinsic value of the pieces, critical issues are raised, such as the relationship between art and the general public, the criteria for judging the merit of artistic creations, the overall state of art in the present period. The *World Socialist Web Site* will, in the coming days, publish a review of "Sensation" by our arts editor, David Walsh.

We will not, however, lend the slightest support to those who seek to obscure basic principles of free expression and democratic rights under the cover of aesthetic criticism.

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