

A Controversy Timeline

This has been reproduced with kind permission of the editors of the Journal of Museum Education. It appeared in Volume 23, No 3, pp.4-6, 1998.

This timeline was edited by Maureen McConnell, Museum of Science, Boston [[link to mmccconnell@mos.org](mailto:mmccconnell@mos.org)] and Honee Hess, Worcester Art Museum [[link to honeehess@worchestera rt.org](mailto:honeehess@worchestera rt.org)]

This timeline of controversial exhibits is presented as a work in progress. We created it by reviewing past issues of Museum news, re-reading articles on controversy amasses by guest editors, soliciting your input through museum listservs, and picking the brains of our authors and colleagues.

We have tried to list exhibits that caused controversy instead of exhibits that tackled controversial topics without creating a stir. We also confined the entries to exhibitions in North America. This kept the list to a reasonable length. We also noticed trends were easier to spot if the list was more succinct.

1913

The International Exhibition of Modern Art, known as the Armory Show, introduced Americans to modern art from Europe. While

drawing huge crowds in New York and later at the Art Institute of Chicago and in Boston, the exhibition was considered shocking and provoked great controversy. Some accused it of obliterating the line between the artistic and the obscene.

1924

The American Museum of Natural History opened a new hall, *The Age of Man*, criticised by anthropologist Frans Boas as having a racist premise.

1949-1950

The Boston Museum of Art was criticised for exhibiting work created by alleged communists.

1955

Family of Man, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, presented 500 photographs from 68 countries brought together by Edward Steichen as “mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.” It was criticised for not being real art and for being an inappropriate display for a fine arts museum.

1956

The Dallas Museum of Art was criticised for exhibiting communist art.

1969

Harlem on My Mind at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, was the first concerted effort by a major art museum to address contemporary social concerns. It was criticised as the view of outsiders, for implying that there is homogeneity within the black

community, and for its failure to adequately represent the relationship between blacks and whites.

1970

At the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, an exhibition of eastern Mediterranean jewellery ran into trouble over the acquisition history of some of the pieces on display.

1971

Drug Scene in New York at the Museum of the City of New York was the first in a series of exhibits examining difficult issues. Although controversy was anticipated, the exhibits were well received.

1972

The Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology (now the national Museum of American History) celebrated the first “youth vote” under the 26th Amendment in the 1972 election with *The Right to Vote*. When the museum was chosen as the inauguration of Richard M. Nixon, the Committee to Re-Elect the President pushed to close the exhibit. It was closed to the public early in 1973.

1984

Another side of the Twentieth Century at the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society, Fort Wayne, Indiana, portrayed the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in this city in the 1920's, making the community uncomfortable.

Ancestors: Four Million Years of Ancestry at the American Museum of Natural History, with

artifacts from South Africa, drew opposition from new York City Council members who proposed two bills- one asking the Museum to remove the fossils, the other cutting of city aid to any institution conducting business cultural or otherwise, with South Africa. Mayor Ed Koch opposed the bills. The Museum diffused the controversy but did not issue a statement opposing apartheid.

Museum News devoted an issue (October) to controversy in museums.

1985

Endings: An Exhibit about Death and Loss at the Boston Children's Museum stimulated public discussion of the appropriateness of an exhibit on death, particularly for a young audience.

1986

The Metropolitan Museum of Art scheduled an exhibition that would include archaeological specimens collected from the Israeli-occupied West Bank of the Jordan River, saying it did not want to get involved in "politics," then revised its decision when other groups claimed the action was anti-Semitic.

At the National Museum of American History, *A More perfect Union* dealt with Japanese internment in the United States during World War II. It was one of several Smithsonian exhibits during this period criticised as revisionist. However, it was well received by most visitors.

1987

Some veterans, as well as members of Congress and editorial writers, protested the move of the Japanese mini-sub captured at Pearl Harbour to the National Park Service's USS *Arizona* Memorial in Honolulu. A film at the visitors centre was also criticised as too sympathetic to the Japanese.

1989

Piss Christ, by Andres Serrano, was part of a group exhibition mounted by the SouthEastern Centre for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This photograph of a Christian cross, immersed in a jar of urine was reproduced in the accompanying catalogue, where it was noticed and condemned by the American Family Association. The work became a congressional issue that led to budget cuts for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Congress declared the museum ineligible for NEA grants for five years.

The permanent exhibit on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy at the Sixth Floor Museum, operated in the former Texas School Book Depository by the Dallas County Historical Foundation, created by the Dallas County Historical Foundation, created a local controversy. Some advocated tearing down the building to eliminate a painful part of the city's history.

Robert Mapplethorpe: *The Perfect Moment*, organised by the Institute

of Contemporary Art (ICA), Philadelphia, led to a lengthy and celebrated court case in which the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre and its director were charged with exhibiting pornography. The exhibition was cancelled by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Congress declared ICA ineligible for NEA grants for five years.

The Shocking Show, an exhibition by a coalition of Indianapolis artists, included the image of a white boy holding a sign reading, "The only good Noger [*sic*] is a Dead One." Arts Indiana reviewed the exhibition and controversy ensued.

Out of Africa at the Royal Ontario Museum drew protests from African communities in Toronto over how the labels described the colonial relationship with Britain. There were also comments about the art and how it was collected. A United States showing was subsequently cancelled.

1989-93

Holocaust survivors clashed with historians during the planning of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum over various details, including the display of women's hair from Auschwitz (used by the Germans for submarine insulation). The disagreements were resolved, and the museum opened in 1993 to critical acclaim.

1990

An independent congressional commission issued its report on NEA. The endowment's appropriation was reduced by the amount of the grants for the Serrano and Mapplethorpe exhibitions.

Before the opening of *Darkened Waters*: profile of an oil spill at the Pratt Museum in Homer, Alaska, anonymous phone threats were received. The travelling version opened at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

At the National Museum of Natural History, "dilemma labels" intended to point out the stereotypes inherent in the wildlife displays and ethnographic halls brought out a controversy that eventually led to the closing of the Africa hall. The labels, a long-term initiative begun this year, were eventually removed.

1991

The National Civil Rights Museum opened in Memphis in the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. Local controversy focused on the decision to locate the museum in a run-down part of town and to associate it with the negative image of a painful event.

The labels for *The West as America: Re-Interpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art asserted new interpretations for works of art from the period of westward

expansion, chiefly related to the victims of Manifest Destiny.

1992

Mining the Museum, an exhibit at the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, created by African American installation artist Fred Wilson, took a fresh look at reinterpreting permanent collections to tell a greater range of stories about the human experience. It explored how one museum in particular had ignored the histories of people of colour. Some visitors were outraged, but the exhibit was generally well received.

1993

During the planning of *All about AIDS* at the Franklin Institute Science Museum, Philadelphia clashes with gay rights activists and the Catholic Church erupted. The differences were resolved during a testing phase at the museum.

1994

Science and American Life at the National Museum of American History drew reviews, letters to the editor and op-ed pieces in the *Washington Post* questioning whether the exhibit was slanted towards a negative view of the impact of science on modern life.

The Los Alamos Study Group, a peace organisation, and the Los Alamos Education Group, a group of veterans and Los Alamos National Laboratory employees, clashed over lobby space in the Bradbury Science Museum at the laboratory

in New Mexico. Both wanted space in which to present their opposing viewpoints on the use of the atomic bomb.

The re-enactment of an 18th-century slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg, developed in response to criticism that interpretive programs there sanitised slavery, brought angry protests from the Virginia NAACP charging that the auction was a sideshow used as entertainment. The protests were withdrawn, but the auction was discontinued.

Vanishing Desert: California's Threatened Habitat at the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, celebrated the richness of desert life and the effects of human impact. It aroused the ire of off-road vehicle groups. *Faces of Sorrow* at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, an exhibit of photographs that portrayed the effects of "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia, was charged with being anti-Serbian. The controversy questioned the museum's decision to address contemporary as well as historical issues.

Controversy around the Florida Museum of Natural History's *First Encounters*, a Columbus sesquicentennial exhibit, centred on the negative impact that the arrival of the Europeans had on the Native American population. Protesters splashed blood on the sails of a ship reproduction.

1995

More than 40 scholars signed a petition of protest demanding that the Library of Congress's exhibit *Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture* include a contemporary discussion of the place of Freud and psychoanalysis in psychology. The exhibit was postponed until October 1998.

The Last Act, a planned exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, was to feature elements of the *Enola Gay*, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. The exhibit created a storm of controversy, as historians and veterans clashed over whether the historical or commemorative voice should be predominate. The exhibit opened in modified form.

Back of the Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation was shown at five historical black colleges but then

encountered protest at the Library of Congress from African American employees. The exhibit was removed five hours after it was installed.

1996

A question of Truth, an Ontario Science Centre exhibit, looked at scientific phenomena from different cultural points of view. It explored the nature of science and its intrinsic bias.

Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art travelled without incident until it reached the Phoenix Art Museum, where some in the community deemed two artworks unpatriotic and disrespectful. As many as 2,000 protesters called for the exhibit to close, but the museum kept it open.

1997

Currier and Ives, Printmakers to the American People: Highlights from the Collections of the Museum of the City of New York raised controversy when shown at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Protests within and outside the museum questioned the need to exhibit the "Darktown Comics" prints.

1998

The Supreme Court upheld the 1990 law requiring "general standards of decency" for NEA grants.

The Association of Art Museum Directors issued guidelines for museums to determine whether artworks in their collections were unlawfully confiscated by Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, both had faced public controversy over the issue.