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# Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Letter to the Editor 01

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## Canceled by the Corcoran

Post (letters)

The Corcoran Gallery of Art's cancellation of its upcoming exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs [Style, June 13] is outrageous as an ethical matter and counterproductive as a practical matter. It challenges the basic premise of artistic freedom—that an artist may select his own means of expression. And like all submission to censorship, it invites greater censorship in the future.

Those who sought to forestall the exhibition, notably Sen. Jesse Helms, make no bones about their purpose. They seek to impose uniformity of belief by characterizing viewpoints they oppose as profane or offensive. Such is their prerogative. However, we, as a society, should not surrender the diversity of thought they fear.

Mapplethorpe's homoerotic images would assuredly prove offensive to many viewers. So what? A fundamental purpose of art is to engender controversy and, thus, to kindle new and innovative thought. Even those offended by Mapplethorpe's work would be forced to consider its implications, not least of which is that our society encompasses different world

views and life styles. That alone would support the exhibition.

The Corcoran's decision limits access to ideas by restricting the acceptable subjects of artistic expression. It makes no difference whether that was the gallery's intent; it was the result. Hence, the cancellation is morally and ethically untenable in a free society.

Corcoran Director Christina Orr-Cahall's defense of the cancellation—that it was designed to avoid controversy regarding National Endowment for the Arts appropriations in Congress—might provide a legitimate basis for the decision if it were not so misguided. She suggests that by avoiding controversy here the Corcoran will ease pressure on NEA funding and thereby prevent even greater restrictions on artistic freedom. She is simply wrong.

Submission to censorship has never led the censor to put down his pencil. On the contrary, it encourages him to strive for greater control over expression. Indeed, as *The Post* reported [Style, June 14], a spokesman for Sen. Helms has already stated that "the fact that the Corcoran is not

going to open the show is not the end of the matter."

Once the principle of censorship is legitimized by acquiescence, the categories of impermissible speech grow inexorably, step by step, until the exceptions to free expression overwhelm the rule. We must state now, unequivocally, that a line has been drawn. Censorship must be eliminated before the ideas the censors fear are extinguished instead.

JAMES S. PORTNOY  
Washington

I applaud the Corcoran art gallery for withdrawing the photo exhibit it had planned to show by Robert Mapplethorpe.

The exhibit, whose organizers at the University of Pennsylvania Institute of Contemporary Art were funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, is "frankly sexual, including a number of homoerotic photographs as well as nudes of children."

Erotica in general, and therefore this exhibit in particular, should not be viewed in a museum such as the Corcoran. We are living in an age of a fatal, sexually transmitted disease and an increase in the sexual abuse of children; therefore, an exhibit of such photographs, open to families, would only be patently irresponsible as well as offensive to the mainstream.

Such an exhibit should never have been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Our government, founded upon a Judeo-Christian ethic, should serve and protect its citizenry within that ethic and dispense public funds accordingly.

I have witnessed the sterility and complete lack of creative fire that results from total government control and censorship of artistic expression in the Soviet Union, and it is tragic. But artistic freedom without exercise of moral responsibility is the other extreme, and it is equally tragic.

LINDA FAULKNER  
Washington

I was amazed at the description, given in clinical terms in James J. Kilpatrick's op-ed column June 19, of some of the photos in the Robert Mapplethorpe show recently canceled by the Corcoran. One photo showed a man urinating into the mouth of another man, an act that is perverted regardless of the gender of those performing it. My thoughts: those who consider perversion a fit subject for art have achieved decadence.

ROBERT LUCKE  
Clinton