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Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Editorial 08

Henry Mitchell

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HENRY MITCHELL

Art and the Common Man

I visited the free show of Mapplethorpe photographs at the Washington Project for the Arts (400 Seventh St. NW) and dropped some cash in a glass jar they have down there for free-will offerings, hoping to encourage them.

But the main thing I got from the show was a renewed bafflement, the same the Founding Fathers wrestled with, at how far an elite should rule and how far a rabble should.

Rabble is an un-American word, of course. Here we have yeomen of virtue, often leading hard lives but fully reliable in self-government and general goodness.

Those yeoman farmers won American liberty in the first place, and framers of the Constitution were not likely to start calling them a rabble. Still, there was uneasiness in Philadelphia that the government might pass into the hands of uneducated men, quick to seize any temporary advantage to themselves and careless of the ultimate freedom and honor of the state.

They concluded the common man should rule but only at a discreet distance through the ballot.

Men at the Constitutional Convention did not exactly distrust the ordinary bloke so much as they

trusted him in quite limited ways. Your small farmer should not have much say in negotiations with France or setting monetary policy. They were settled that an elite should rule, but the common man should choose the elitist. They were uneasy how to do this, and some of them (all of them, at the last) wanted guarantees for the commonest of men, lest the ruling elite go too far and threaten liberty instead of defending it.

Literature is singularly happy that its protection is acknowledged. You can say or write what you please about the president, a senator, a mayor or a village idiot. But the lesser arts, painting, sculpture, photography and so forth, have not fared so well, mainly because relatively few people care about them.

When the two National Endowments, for the Arts and for the Humanities, got off the ground in the Nixon administration, there were many who said that if the government got into the arts field the state would soon be supporting art as sterile and trifling as that of China today. But others said no, the endowments would have distinguished boards that would pass on the quality of the art and the need of the artist, free from government control. People who

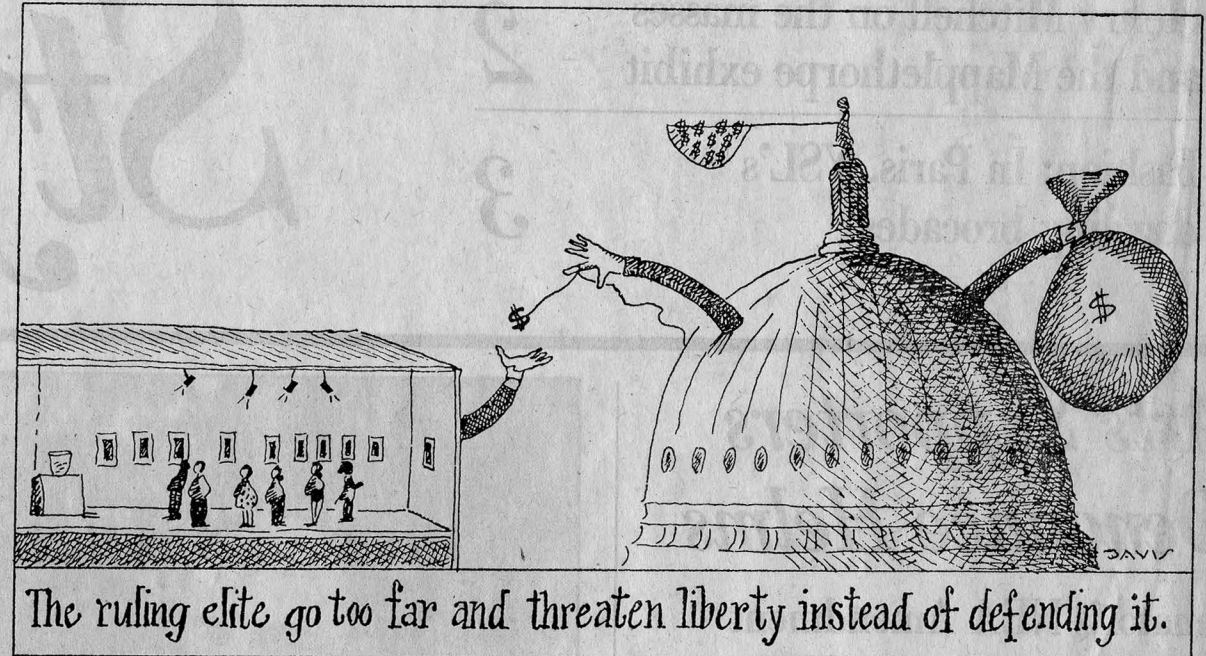
were not born yesterday said Ha. That will be the day.

Naturally, when the Mapplethorpe show came along, which had some trifling investment of tax dollars, the shout was raised that we should not be taxed to support pornography. Never mind that presumably competent boards had passed on the little support the Mapplethorpe work ever got from the state, and never mind that the Corcoran Gallery of Art had proclaimed the pictures important art worthy of a major show.

Pictorial art has not gone through the fights that literature has, and few care to defend it.

Why should anybody defend it? The Corcoran, after all, canceled it at the sound of the first firecracker, not even waiting for the first shot. Museum directors, not wishing to be beastly to the idiots of the Corcoran, mumbled a little and let it pass. Even artists intend to keep right on cooperating with the gallery. They all think they will sustain freedom by supporting those who would squelch them.

Supporters of the endowments said the quality of their boards would be proof against political tampering, and both artists and lovers of freedom



BY SUSAN DAVIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

would man the barricades at the first signs of state meddling.

The Mapplethorpe exhibit illustrates how little power the arts have and how little energy, let alone passion, their formal protectors can summon.

The Constitution is silent on painting and photography as it is on so many other matters, leaving it to citizens at large to work out. So it's working out, and the rednecks are

way ahead. If even the arts community doesn't go to bat for the artist, why should the ordinary bloke who doesn't see any art at any gallery?

One amazing argument is that the artist's freedom was not touched since, after all, you can see it at a better gallery than the Corcoran. Or, another imbecilic argument, he was free to make his art, it's just that no tax dollars should help in the cost of

showing it. This argument is never used for the National Academy of Science or NASA or universities. It can be used against art because few believe art amounts to a row of beans.

And this art in particular can be safely trashed because, first, it's just a photographer we're talking about, and besides he's dead, and besides he was gay, and besides he embarrasses me.