

Austria: Furor Over Jesus Orgy Drawing

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VIENNA, Austria -- Is it art _ or is it blasphemy?

Austrians are locked in a nationwide debate touched off by the brief display in a prestigious Roman Catholic museum of an etching that depicts Jesus Christ and his disciples having an orgy during the biblical Last Supper.

A chastened and chagrined Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, the top churchman in this largely conservative and overwhelmingly Catholic country, has ordered the offending artwork removed.

But the controversy rages on, with the Austrian media comparing it to the furor triggered by the Prophet Muhammad cartoons.

In some ways, it is proving as emotional as the political firestorm that occurred in New York in 1999, when then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was so offended by a portrait of the Virgin Mary adorned with elephant dung that he temporarily cut off funding to the Brooklyn Museum.

"I've even seen Web postings from extremists who have threatened to come to Vienna and blow up its museums with Molotov cocktails," exhibition curator Michael Kaufmann said Friday.

The dispute began on March 12 with the opening of "Religion, Flesh and Power," a collection of about 50 paintings, drawings and sculptures _ some with homo-erotic themes _ by Austrian artist Alfred Hrdlicka.

Among them is Hrdlicka's rendition of the Last Supper: a large, loosely rendered black and white etching that shows Jesus and his disciples engaging in sex acts on the table where they shared their final meal before Christ's crucifixion.

Hrdlicka, who turned 80 earlier this year, drew the scene in 1984 in tribute to Pier Paolo Pasolini, an Italian philosopher and award-winning filmmaker whose treatment of religious themes put him at odds with the Catholic church.

Angry faithful have been quarreling mainly about the venue: an Archdiocese of Vienna museum just across the cobblestones from St. Stephen's Cathedral _ a grand church that was built in 1147 and serves as the epicenter of the capital.

"That such an exhibit is on display in a diocesan museum is unbelievable," said visitor Richard Lyon, of Glasgow, Scotland.

"I am deeply offended and profoundly disgusted," Lyon wrote in the museum's guest book. "Whatever led the directors and others responsible to think that our Lord could be represented in such a way?"

In a statement issued this week, Schoenborn _ a staunchly conservative archbishop who was frequently mentioned as a potential successor to the late Pope John Paul II _ sought to distance himself from the backlash.

"The exhibition does not mean that the cathedral museum identifies with all of Hrdlicka's works," Schoenborn said.

"Of course, I would not have agreed to the presentation of works which are blasphemous or pornographic. I therefore expressly regret that a picture of this kind _ without my knowledge _ was included in the exhibition. This picture, which is injurious to the faithful, was removed on my orders on March 20."

The etching has since been moved to the private Ernst Hilger Gallery, a short stroll from the cathedral museum, where the rest of Hrdlicka's works will remain on display through May 10.

No demonstrations have been held outside either venue.

Bernhard Boehler, director of the cathedral museum, said earlier this week he was "surprised at the heat of the battle" over the orgy drawing.

"In Austria, no special reason is required for a church museum to dedicate an exhibition to the most important living sculptor," Boehler said. But he said the museum decided to remove the offending work "out of consideration for the religious feelings of some Christians."

"The protests came primarily out of fundamentalist Christian circles in the USA and Germany," he said, referring to various Web sites.

"There is a long dialogue between art and the church," Boehler added. "For the church, the quality is decisive _ not the piety of the artwork."

Hrdlicka could not be reached for comment Friday. But Kaufmann, the curator, said he was caught off-guard by the intensity of the debate.

"We were really sensitive" in choosing which works to show, he said, "and for me, the etching is fantastic."

Even Schoenborn paid homage to Hrdlicka as "one of Austria's most important living artists."

"Like nearly no other artist, he is concerned about suffering and mistreated people ... and he expresses this in his work in a shocking way," the cardinal said. "He says of himself that he is a communist and an atheist, but he nevertheless has a burning interest in the Bible."

Kaufmann concedes the whole point of the exhibition backfired badly.

"Their intention was to show that the church is wide open," he said. "Alfred (Hrdlicka) is more Christian than many people who go to church each Sunday."

On the Net:

Vienna cathedral museum, <http://www.dommuseum.at>

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