

MAPPLETHORPE IN CINCINNATI: WHAT ARE THE COMMUNITY'S STANDARDS

By Alfred J. Tuchfarber

The uproar over the exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center put the city in the national news and called attention to its politics. Even before the exhibit opened, Hamilton County and Cincinnati authorities were moving to close it down.¹ "Banned in Cincinnati" seemed well on its way to replacing "Banned in Boston." The move to bar the Mapplethorpe exhibit was led by conservative religious and business leaders. The presumption of many in Cincinnati and the national media is that these

leaders represent the views of the average Hamilton County resident. But is this conventional wisdom correct? The editors of the Cincinnati Post, the city's afternoon paper, didn't think so.² They commissioned the University of Cincinnati's Institute for Policy Research (IPR) to conduct a survey of Hamilton County adults focusing on three basic issues surrounding the Mapplethorpe exhibit:

- (1) Should the exhibit be permitted in Cincinnati?
- (2) Using the U.S. Supreme Court's standards, was the exhibit obscene?
- (3) Should governmental authorities have the power to tell museums what they can exhibit?

Table 1

Mapplethorpe: Ban or Display?

	Display %	Prohibit %	DK %
TOTAL SAMPLE	59	38	3
AGE			
18-29	75	25	1
30-45	66	32	3
46-64	51	44	5
65 & over	36	62	2
EDUCATION			
Less than HS	47	48	5
HS Grad	48	49	3
Some College	70	29	1
College Grad	63	34	3
RELIGION			
Protestant	57	41	2
Catholic	56	42	3
GENDER			
Male	65	33	2
Female	53	44	3

QUESTION: "As you may know, a few of the pictures in the Mapplethorpe exhibit are sexually explicit . . . some people think sexually explicit pictures like those in the Mapplethorpe exhibit offend community values in Cincinnati and should be prohibited. Other people say that they are art and are covered by first amendment protections of freedom of speech . . . based on what you have seen, read or heard about the Mapplethorpe photographs, do you think that the Contemporary Arts Center should be *allowed* to display the sexually explicit pictures or should they be *prohibited* from displaying them?"

SOURCE: Survey by the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati, published in the Cincinnati Post, April 13, 1990.

Under the author's direction the IPR surveyed 561 randomly selected adults. The substantive questions were asked only of respondents who said they had "seen, read or heard anything about the exhibit of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe currently on display at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center." A striking 96% of the survey respondents had.

To Ban or Not to Ban

How many Cincinnatians wanted to ban the Mapplethorpe exhibit? Just 38%, while 59% thought the exhibit should be allowed, and 3% had no opinion (Table 1). Age had a strong impact: while more than two-thirds of respondents 45 or younger favored allowing the exhibit, just 36 percent of those 65 and older favored it. The relationship with education was also quite strong. Two-thirds of those with college educations would allow the exhibits to continue, while a small plurality of those with no college would ban it. Protestants and Catholics didn't differ on the issue of prohibiting the exhibition. Women were more inclined to ban it than were men.

Obscene?

The U.S. Supreme Court obscenity standard is a three part test, all of which must be met before a work is judged obscene. Taken as a whole, it would have to (1) appeal to an unhealthy (prurient) interest in sex, (2) offend community standards, and (3) lack serious artistic, literary, scientific, or political value. Hamilton County residents did not think the Mapplethorpe exhibit was obscene on any of these counts. Forty-three percent thought the exhibit appealed to an unhealthy interest in sex, but 50% disagreed. Fifty-six percent said the exhibit did not offend their personal standards, though 42% felt it did. In the closest split, 46% said the exhibit had serious artistic value, while 45% said it did not.

Government's Role in Museum Decisions

On the final issue, 55% said government officials and the courts should have no role deciding what art museums can display, while 42% would give them a role. The divergence between the actions of Hamilton County officials and the attitudes of a majority of the county's citizens really isn't surprising. The former were vigorously lobbied by a well-organized and influential group of religious and business leaders who sought to preserve what they considered to be appropriate community values. Those concerned about the free speech and artistic expression side of this issue were both less influential and slower to organize.

Interestingly, the exhibit was never closed in Cincinnati and has since moved on to — of all places — Boston. The Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) Director is charged with displaying obscene materials and will probably come to trial sometime over the summer. Regardless of the outcome of legal proceedings, many Cincinnatians are clearly reluctant to see art banned in their city.

Notes

¹Cincinnati is in Hamilton County, Ohio.

²The main reason the Post's editors doubted the conventional wisdom was because of a 1988 study done by the IPR for the Post which showed that on almost all social issues and values Hamilton County residents were identical to national norms. The 1988 IPR survey used exact replications of questions used in national studies by the Times Mirror Corporation study, "The People, Press & Politics," and the NORC General Social Survey. Comparisons of the national and local results indicated that Hamilton County residents held virtually identical views to those of the nation as a whole.

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