

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

A moment of reflection: Art as a symbol of academic freedom

I have failed the Saint Louis University community. I have failed you because I have given into a vocal minority of faculty and staff who found the recently placed sculpture, *Reclining Female*, offensive, and I have removed it. *Reclining Female* is a monumental (more than life size) bronze created by David Phelps, an American sculptor whose works are in museums and public spaces, galleries and private collections throughout the world. This piece was installed at the Palm Court swimming pools, located outside of the Simon Recreation Center, during the third week of July.

I had the statue removed from its location Aug. 17 — only one week before our new and returning students arrived for the fall semester. Our students — undergraduate, graduate and professional — will not have the opportunity to view the sculpture in order to make up their own minds. The majority of our faculty and staff will not have the chance to see the sculpture in order to form their own opinions. Most of us were on vacation when the statue was exhibited. Having now removed *Reclining Female* from the campus, I must now admit that I am disappointed: disappointed that I did not listen to my conscience. I am also disappointed that some members of our academic community do not seem to understand or are not committed to the sacred tenet of academic freedom or do not believe that academic freedom is a right and privilege shared by everyone at this American, Catholic, Jesuit university.

I would like to explain my rationale for removing *Reclining Female*.

I am not immune to challenges or controversies, nor am I afraid of dealing with them. However, as president, I must choose those challenges that I believe are of greater importance to the well-being and future of Saint Louis University. I have never backed away from a challenge when the best interests of SLU were at stake.

- My first months as president in 1987 were marked by the controversial invitation from the Great Issues Committee to Patricia Hussey and Barbara Ferraro, two religious Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, to lecture on “The Role of Women in the Contemporary Church.” Despite great pressure to withdraw the invitation, I supported the lecture based on the principle of academic freedom.

- Nor did I hesitate to enter the fray when we were in the process of selling the University Hospital to Tenet to safeguard the future viability of our School of Medicine.

- Prompted by issues related to ABA reaccreditation of our School of Law, I approved a University policy clearly stating that Saint Louis University would not discriminate based on sexual orientation. I also approved the chartering of the Rainbow Alliance as a SLU student organization, having developed a reasonable and morally compatible charter in keeping with SLU’s policy prohibiting any form of discrimination.

- When, after maintaining parking rates for three years, the fees were increased to help pay for three parking garages and to help make the parking program increasingly self-sustaining rather than tuition dependent, I did not hide from the resulting controversy and criticism.

- This spring, I upheld the academic freedom of our School of Public Health to invite former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm to present the annual Flanagan Lecture.

- Despite the outrage of a number of

benefactors and alumni, I participated last November with our students, faculty, staff and alumni in a protest march against the School of Americas at Fort Benning, Ga.

There is, however, only a limited amount of time in a day that I can use to explain or defend the concept of academic freedom, and to respond to letters such as the one written by the current Faculty Senate President advising of the Senate Executive Committee’s request that the statue be removed from our campus and another letter written by the immediate past president of the Faculty Senate that if I did not comply with their request, the Executive Committee would “take additional steps to see that it is removed.”

I have only so much energy that I can take from my work for this University to respond to those who feel the need for me to apologize for my “strange tastes when it comes to art.” While many in our SLU community liked the statue and thought it was appropriate for a university campus, I decided to remove *Reclining Female* because keeping the statue on campus would have been counter-productive. That is, it would have given critics a *cause célèbre* — an agenda to rally around and distract all of us from our tasks of teaching and learning. I am not angry. But I am disappointed.

I would ask each of you to pause for a moment and reflect upon this matter for the greater good of our SLU community. In my mind, this unfortunate situation raises several serious issues.

First, certainly, a good part of the immediate response to *Reclining Female* centers on one’s perception of art. The African art historian Ben Enwonu wrote, “It is easy to talk about painting and sculpture, or architecture, music and other forms of art; but it is not so easy to discuss fully what constitute their natures and qualities.”

What does art mean to us as human beings with free wills and souls and minds? What is the purpose of art? Is it simply to please the eye, or is it meant to evoke a response, a response that is predicated on the emotional development and maturity of the viewer? What emotions do a particular art form — music, painting, poetry, literature, sculpture — evoke from the listener or viewer or reader? The author and philosopher Leo Tolstoy wrote that the purpose of art is “... to evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced, and having evoked it by means of movement, line, color, sounds or forms expressed in words, so transmit that same feeling ...”

Many art historians would judge that a painting or sculpture that evokes neither a positive nor negative reaction may very well not be art at all. Simply because a viewer has a negative reaction to a work of art does not mean that it is necessarily “bad” art. Most viewers will have some kind of response toward a particular painting or sculpture given where their life’s experiences have led them.

Critics of the *Reclining Female* complained that it was tasteless, demeaning to women, too erotic or too sensual and an unnecessary temptation to our students who are “experiencing their sexual drive at a fever pitch.” What do our reactions to an art form say about our own emotional, spiritual, sexual and aesthetic development? Are we underestimating the ability of our students — undergraduate, graduate and professional — to discern and then to form their own aesthetic opinions and judgments? Have we lost a wonderful opportunity to teach our students to study and evaluate art and to help them reflect on their own perceptions and feelings toward it? What role models for free inquiry are those who demanded the removal of the statue?

Twenty-five yards to the north of the *Reclining Female*, in the Cupples House garden, are three male nude statues that were placed in that garden more than 30 years

ago by Father Maurice McNamee, S.J. Why is it that no one has complained that these statues are too erotic or too sensual? Was it the geographical location of *Reclining Female* that was offensive? Where else would you put a statue of a sunbather? On the grass near the College Church on Grand Boulevard? Is it not more appropriate near the place where people sunbathe and swim? Why

is it that the bronze monumental size statue of *The Family* (located on the Walsh Plaza near Griesedieck Hall) has not received the least bit of negative criticism, yet this same statue was the center of a great deal of controversy for several years when it was placed at the Health Sciences Center?

Secondly, art and aesthetic enrichment have long been important components of a Jesuit education. Art introduces us to a myriad of cultures and diverse interpretations of human life, the beauty of nature and the presence of God in all things. Through the arts, we have the opportunity to develop intuition, appreciation, imagination and insight. As educators teaching, studying and conducting research in a Catholic, Jesuit university, we are supposed to prepare our students

to discern and think critically. We are supposed to be committed to inform and form our students to analyze any subject in order to evaluate it to reach the truth. By removing *Reclining Female* from our campus, have we sacrificed

an important learning experience for our students? By acquiescing to the complaints of a few, are we patronizing our students, deciding for them as if they were children rather than treating them as adults and allowing them the freedom to evaluate and judge the piece for themselves?

As educators, are we not obliged to help our students put art in proper perspective regardless of its form of expression? Are we not obliged to help our students put human sexuality in a proper, balanced perspective rather than denying its existence or its importance and pur-

pose in all of our human lives? Do we consider our students too fragile, too immature to help them confront and challenge, enlighten and guide them in their search for clarity in their own perceptions and feelings toward their own human sexuality?

Thirdly, this issue is basically about academic freedom. Is our “sacred” academic freedom merely an empty concept, void of reality, mere rhetoric, or for that matter, the prerogative only of faculty but not of students, staff or administrators? If we do not like the length of a person’s hair or pierced eyebrow, do we demand that they be removed? If one does not like a particular piece of art — whether *Reclining Female* or the mosaics in the Cathedral on Lindell Boulevard or a Picasso painting — does one have the right to demand its removal?

I cannot help but wonder what is next.

- Will I be challenged to remove Pope Pius XII’s name from our library or remove his statue from the Lindell Circle because some believe Pius XII did not do all that he should and could have done to save Jews during World War II?

- Will I receive demands for the removal of crucifixes from our classrooms because they may offend someone or make atheists and non-Christians feel uncomfortable?

- Should we remove the new statue of King Saint Louis IX (located on Lindell Boulevard across from McDonnell Douglas Hall) because he led the Crusades to crush the Jewish and Muslim “infidels?”

- Should we remove the statue of Dr. Tom Dooley (a 1952 graduate of our School of Medicine who worked to save countless Laotian orphans) because of his alleged sexual orientation?

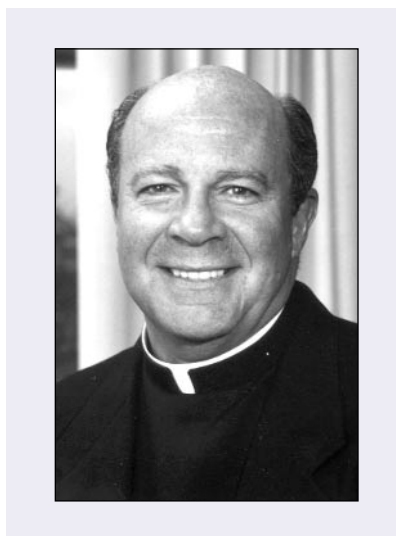
- Should we remove the outdoor sculpture near Fusz Hall that depicts an American Indian kneeling in reverence to the crucifix in the hand of Father Marquette because some may interpret this statue as a depiction of subservience of the American Indian to the white man?

What is next: removing books from our libraries that are ideologically contrary to our own values, aesthetic perspectives or convictions, and burning them as the Nazis did so that others cannot critically evaluate their contents to find the truth? Incidentally, the Nazis burned many of Max Beckmann’s paintings because they were considered too contemporary and abstract. Luckily, some of Beckmann’s paintings survived and are on display at the St. Louis Art Museum in Forest Park.

I know that some of you will believe that I am over-reacting or that this is simply a defense of what some consider “inappropriate” art. I respectfully disagree. I believe the basic issue is one of academic freedom of expression.

Thank you for taking a moment to reflect with me. These are important issues for all of us in our academic community to study, reflect and discern. Those of you who liked *Reclining Female* will now have to travel to SLU’s Lay Sculpture Park at the Henry Lay Center for Education and the Arts in Louisiana, Mo., to see it. Those of you did not like it will no longer have to see it as you walk through our campus.

L. Biordi S.J.



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