

THE MUSEUM OF SCANDALS

Éléa Baucheron
Diane Routex

Front cover: Maurizio Cattelan, *La Nona Ora*, see p. 40

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Éléa Baucheron
Diane Routex

THE ART THAT SHOCKED
THE WORLD
**MUSEUM OF
SCANDALS**

What possible link can there be between a figure of Saint Teresa by a devout sculptor, an Impressionist painting of an open-air dance, and tattooed pigs? The answer is that they all created a scandal. Looking at works of art in terms of the controversy they caused can help us to understand a specific period by giving us an insight into its innermost prohibitions, fears, and aspirations. This book offers readers a different way into art and social history through the study of a selection of seventy works with stormy histories. Art is full of difficult subjects: sex, blasphemy, political and artistic revolution all find their way into art, to the consternation and horror of all backward-looking, conservative-minded people, who would much rather see art shut up in an ivory tower well away from real life and controversy. It is a moot point whether anything can be controversial in its own right or whether it depends on the “eye of the beholder.” Artists very often find themselves chastised for being trivial and accused of corrupting the morals of their age. People are quick to pounce on the slightest departure from convention or failure to obey the rules, and in a sense this is a continuation of the trend set by Plato when he voiced his mistrust of art as an “imitation of an imitation” and of artists therefore as peddlers of illusions.

Looking at what has upset people over the ages is illuminating. In the Middle Ages, for instance, people were clearly touchy on the subject of religion, whereas in the nineteenth century it was anything about politics that raised their ire. Could you say off the top of your head what our current generation finds morally offensive? From the evidence we have assembled, it seems, as you will see, to include assaults on human dignity, exploitation of the weak (children and animals), and the commercialization of art. Sensitive subjects do not fall neatly into period or type, however: fear of sacrilege was not peculiar to our distant ancestors, for instance. That said, our period seems to be marked by its unbridled pursuit of the scandalous. Whereas in the past scandal was frowned upon in art, today it is synonymous with success and extends across all domains, including not just literature and cinema, but also advertising and television. “I shock, therefore I am” would be a fitting mantra for the twenty-first century.

But as you will discover in the pages that follow, the scandalous in art is far more than a sales gimmick. It springs from all kinds of causes and has all manner of effects: it forces people to think, and sometimes to act; it rejects preconceptions and outdated rules. Who says that art should be nothing but aesthetic contemplation?

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MASACCIO

FRA BARTOLOMEO

HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER

MICHELANGELO

VERONESE

EL GRECO

CARAVAGGIO

BERNINI

DIEGO VELÁZQUEZ

PAUL CHENAVARD

ANDRES SERRANO

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

ALEXANDER KOSOLAPOV

MAURIZIO CATTELAN

MOUNIR FATMI

SACRILEGE

“Woe to the man through whom scandals come!”

(Matthew 18:7-11)

Is art religious in origin? While many scholars contend that it is, others argue that it proceeds primarily from a love of beauty, which man later harnessed to a spiritual purpose. Whatever the truth of the matter, in ancient and primitive cultures the two were closely intertwined. Stylized pieces dating back to prehistory seem to have been linked to shamanistic rites or to have been designed to secure divine intervention. It was not long before religion imposed detailed rules on artists, sometimes going so far as to ban completely all representation of the divine. In spite of this, the various religions have generated a vast array of magnificent works of art of all kinds, from intricate mosques to giant Buddhas, and from paintings to sculptures.

Western art was initially geared to depicting a Catholic universe. In the Middle Ages, it was literally under orders to do so, with Gregory the Great, Pope Gregory I (r. 590-604), stipulating in the seventh century that art had two functions: to spread knowledge of the faith by creating and disseminating images of religious figures and scenes; and to move the faithful to devotion through such images and so elevate their souls. At this time, artists were considered craftsmen and were not free to work as they pleased but instead had to adhere to rigorous rules governing everything from materials to subjects and their treatment. Their works were rarely signed. A work was made and bought – generally by churchmen or members of princely families – to serve a specific religious purpose. In the sixteenth century, Catholicism went into crisis as re-

formers established the Protestant Church. The rivalry between the two Churches led not only to killings and torture, but also to a fight for the moral high ground, which in turn led the papacy to monitor art very closely. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) set out principles designed to intensify the Counter Reformation, decreeing among other things that there was absolutely no place for profanity of any kind in a sacred work. Clerics kept a very close eye on artists, who had little freedom: any hint of originality in treatment or interpretation was seen as revealing an impious tendency to flout the rules of the Church and as demonstrating sympathy for the Reformation. Very few dared tread anything but the most well-worn paths; though, equally, many artists clearly did not feel stifled and zealously depicted and defended their faith in their works. It was not until the Renaissance that artists began to gain greater freedom and confidence. As time has gone on, religion has come to play an increasingly smaller role in society and art, and profane, lay, even anti-clerical subjects have become permissible. Blasphemy continues to vex some authorities, but these days it no longer leads to torture or the stake. It remains a highly sensitive subject, however, and believers of different faiths can be quick to take offense, as shown by the Muhammad cartoons controversy that rocked Europe and the fury that Andres Serrano's twist on a crucifix aroused (see p. 34). Whether by providing inspiration and subjects, exerting control or offering patronage, religion has been a constant influence on art.