

The Controversial Exhibition Of Contemporary British Art Held In Brooklyn Museum In 1999 Was Called _____.

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In 1999, the Brooklyn Museum hosted a groundbreaking and fiercely debated exhibition that challenged traditional notions of art, morality, and cultural boundaries. Titled "Sensation: The British Art Show", this exhibition became a pivotal moment in the conversation about contemporary art's role in society, especially as it intersected with provocative themes and controversial works. This event not only showcased some of the most provocative British artists of the time but also ignited debates that extended beyond the art world, touching on issues of censorship, cultural identity, and the limits of free expression. In this article, we explore the origins of the exhibition, the artists involved, the controversies it sparked, and its lasting impact on the art community and public discourse.

Background and Origins of the Exhibition

The Rise of British Contemporary Art in the 1990s

The 1990s marked a significant period for British contemporary art, characterized by a new generation of artists challenging conventions and pushing boundaries. This era saw a surge in experimental practices, provocative themes, and a desire to confront societal issues such as race, gender, and politics. The exhibition in question was conceived as a way to showcase these evolving trends, highlighting the innovative and often controversial work emerging from Britain.

Curatorial Vision and Intent

The curators aimed to present a diverse array of works that reflected the cultural and social tensions within Britain at the turn of the century. Their goal was to stimulate dialogue and challenge viewers' perceptions of art's role in society. The exhibition sought to embody a spirit of rebellion and inquiry, bringing to the forefront works that questioned authority, tradition, and morality.

The Exhibition: "Sensation" and Its Featured Artists

Overview of Key Works and Artists

The exhibition featured a roster of prominent British artists whose work was both critically acclaimed and controversial. Some of the notable artists included:

- Chris Ofili – Known for his intricate paintings that incorporated elephant dung, Ofili's work challenged taboos and explored themes of race and identity.
- Damien Hirst – A leading figure of the Young British Artists (YBAs), Hirst's pieces often involved death and mortality, including his famous preserved animals.
- Marc Quinn – His sculptures and installations examined the human body and identity, sometimes using unconventional materials.
- Sarah Lucas – Known for her provocative sculptures and photographs addressing gender and sexuality.

The exhibit also included controversial installation works, provocative photographs, and mixed-media pieces that challenged viewers' sensibilities.

The Role of the "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living"

Damien Hirst's iconic work, a shark preserved in formaldehyde, became one of the most talked-about pieces within the exhibition, symbolizing mortality and the fleeting nature of life. Its display at the Brooklyn Museum attracted both admiration and outrage, highlighting the provocative nature of the exhibition.

The Controversies Surrounding the Exhibition

Censorship and Public Outcry

The exhibition's provocative content sparked immediate controversy, with critics and community members voicing concerns over morality, decency, and cultural sensitivity. Some argued that the works were offensive, blasphemous, or inappropriate for a public art institution. The Brooklyn Museum faced pressure from various groups demanding the removal or censorship of certain pieces.

Clash with Cultural and Religious Values

Particularly contentious were works that touched on religious themes or used materials considered taboo. For example, Chris Ofili's use of elephant dung and references to religious iconography stirred debate about respect for religious sentiments. The controversy revealed underlying cultural tensions and differing perceptions of artistic freedom.

Media Sensation and Public Debate

The media played a significant role in amplifying the controversy. Headlines labeled the exhibition as "obscene" or "shocking," leading to widespread public debate about the boundaries of art and free expression. The museum's decision to keep the exhibition open became a focal point for discussions about censorship in art institutions.

Impact and Legacy of the Exhibition

Changing Perspectives on Contemporary Art

The "Sensation" exhibition challenged audiences to reconsider what constitutes acceptable art and who gets to decide its boundaries. It brought to light the importance of freedom of expression in the arts and set a precedent for future provocative exhibitions.

Influence on the Art World

This exhibition contributed to the rise of the Young British Artists (YBAs), a movement known for its provocative and boundary-pushing works. It also influenced subsequent exhibitions worldwide, encouraging curators and artists to explore controversial themes boldly.

Legal and Institutional Consequences

The controversy prompted discussions about censorship policies in museums and galleries. Some institutions adopted more explicit guidelines regarding sensitive content, while others reaffirmed their commitment to artistic freedom. The Brooklyn Museum's handling of the situation became a case study in balancing public sensibilities with artistic expression.

Enduring Cultural Significance

Over two decades later, the "Sensation" exhibition remains a landmark event in contemporary art history. It exemplifies the power of art to provoke, challenge, and reflect societal tensions. Its legacy persists in ongoing debates about the limits of free speech,

cultural sensitivity, and the role of art in public spaces.

Conclusion: The Lasting Impact of "Sensation" in Brooklyn

The 1999 exhibition known as "Sensation" marked a pivotal moment in the landscape of contemporary British art and its reception worldwide. While it ignited significant controversy, it also underscored the importance of confronting uncomfortable truths and pushing artistic boundaries. The debate it sparked continues to influence how institutions, artists, and audiences approach provocative art today. As society continues to grapple with issues of morality, censorship, and freedom of expression, the legacy of "Sensation" endures as a testament to the transformative power of art to challenge and inspire.

Note: The blank in the title is filled with "Sensation," which is the actual name of the controversial exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the name of the controversial contemporary British art exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999?

Sensation: The Exhibition

Why did the 1999 Brooklyn Museum exhibition 'Sensation' generate controversy?

Because it featured provocative artworks by British artists like Damien Hirst and Chris Ofili, which many considered offensive and provocative, sparking debates on censorship and artistic freedom.

Which artists' works were prominently showcased in the 1999 Brooklyn Museum exhibition 'Sensation'?

Artists such as Damien Hirst, Chris Ofili, Marc Quinn, and Jake and Dinos Chapman.

How did the public and critics respond to the

'Sensation' exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum?

The exhibition received mixed reactions, with some praising its boldness and others criticizing it for being offensive, leading to widespread media coverage and discussions about art censorship.

What impact did the 1999 'Sensation' exhibition have on the perception of contemporary British art in the United States?

It significantly raised awareness and sparked debates about contemporary art's role in challenging social norms, while also highlighting the cultural differences in art reception between the UK and the US.

Additional Resources

Controversy

Introduction: An Unforgettable Moment in Art History

In 1999, the Brooklyn Museum became the epicenter of a heated debate within the art world and beyond, thanks to an exhibition that challenged conventional notions of art, morality, and societal values. The exhibition, titled "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection," thrust contemporary British art into the American spotlight—and simultaneously ignited controversy that would reverberate for years to come. This event not only showcased a provocative selection of artworks but also served as a catalyst for discussions about censorship, artistic freedom, and the role of public institutions in displaying challenging art.

This article delves deeply into the exhibition known as "Sensation," exploring its origins, the artworks that defined it, the controversies it sparked, and its lasting impact on the art world. As a product of its time, "Sensation" remains a landmark case study in how art can provoke, challenge, and ultimately shape cultural conversations.

The Genesis of "Sensation": Background and Context

The Rise of the Young British Artists (YBAs)

To understand the significance of "Sensation," one must first appreciate the movement behind it—the Young British Artists, or YBAs. Emerging in the late 1980s and gaining prominence throughout the 1990s, the YBAs were a group of innovative, boundary-pushing artists characterized by their provocative concepts, bold use of materials, and willingness to confront societal taboos.

Key figures included:

- Damien Hirst
- Tracey Emin
- Sarah Lucas
- Marc Quinn
- Marcus Harvey

Their work often combined shock value with conceptual depth, challenging aesthetic norms and questioning the role of art in society.

Charles Saatchi and the Collection

A pivotal figure in the YBA movement was Charles Saatchi, a billionaire advertising magnate and art collector. Saatchi's collection became a defining platform for the YBAs, providing a space for their provocative works and helping to bring British contemporary art into mainstream consciousness.

Saatchi's backing was both a boon and a source of controversy: it highlighted issues of commercialization, elitism, and the influence of private collectors on public art discourse.

The Road to Brooklyn

In 1997, Saatchi curated the exhibition "Sensation" at his own gallery, the Saatchi Gallery in London. Its success and notoriety set the stage for its subsequent international tour, including the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 1999.

The Brooklyn Museum's decision to host the exhibition was groundbreaking, as it represented a major American cultural institution embracing a collection of art that many found provocative, offensive, or morally questionable.

The Exhibition: "Sensation" - An Overview

Concept and Scope

The Brooklyn Museum's "Sensation" was a comprehensive exhibition featuring over 100 works from Saatchi's collection. It aimed to showcase contemporary British art that embodied innovation, controversy, and a willingness to confront societal norms.

The exhibition included paintings, sculptures, video installations, and mixed-media works. It was organized around themes such as mortality, sexuality, religion, and violence.

Notable Artworks and Artists

Some of the most discussed works in the exhibition included:

- "George Bush" (1994) by Marcus Harvey: A portrait of the former U.S. President composed of thousands of children's handprints, which sparked immediate controversy over its subject matter and the use of children's artwork.
- "The Holy Virgin Mary" (1996) by Chris Ofili: An image of the Virgin Mary adorned with elephant dung and glitter, challenging religious iconography.

- "Mother and Child" (1997) by Damien Hirst: A preserved animal sculpture that ignited debates about life, death, and the ethics of art.
- "Swinging" (1994) by Tracey Emin: A provocative autobiographical work exploring sexuality and personal trauma.

These works, among others, exemplified the YBAs' penchant for provocative imagery and conceptual boldness.

The Controversies Unfold

Censorship and Public Outcry

Shortly after opening, "Sensation" became a lightning rod for controversy. Critics and members of the public objected to several artworks, citing religious, moral, and aesthetic concerns.

- Religious Offense: Chris Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary" was particularly contentious due to its use of elephant dung and the depiction of the Virgin Mary, a revered figure in Christianity. Religious groups argued it was blasphemous.
- Obscenity and Morality: Some critics viewed the works as gratuitously provocative, questioning whether they served any artistic or cultural purpose beyond shock.
- Public Funding and Censorship: The Brooklyn Museum faced calls to cancel or restrict the exhibition, with some politicians and community leaders advocating for censorship.

The Museum's Response

Despite the uproar, the Brooklyn Museum stood firm, defending the exhibition as an expression of artistic freedom. The museum's director at the time, Arnold L. Lehman, emphasized the importance of free speech and the role of art in challenging societal norms.

However, the controversy led to significant political pressure, including threats of defunding and protests. Some community members staged demonstrations against the exhibit, while others defended it as a vital cultural dialogue.

The Broader Impact of "Sensation"

Artistic and Cultural Significance

The "Sensation" exhibition marked a turning point in how contemporary art was perceived and debated. Its impact can be summarized as follows:

- Redefining Artistic Boundaries: The exhibition pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable in public art, prompting discussions about freedom of expression.
- Influencing Public Discourse: It brought controversial art into mainstream consciousness, sparking debates about morality, religion, and cultural values.
- Shaping Museum Policies: The controversy prompted many institutions to reconsider

their policies on displaying provocative art, leading to more open discussions about censorship and artistic freedom.

Media and Public Reaction

Media coverage was intense, with headlines often emphasizing the provocative nature of the works. Critics were divided—some lauded the exhibition as groundbreaking and essential, while others condemned it as offensive and irresponsible.

Public opinion was similarly polarized, reflecting broader societal debates about morality, art, and free expression.

The Legacy of "Sensation"

Long-term Influence on the Art World

"Sensation" has left an indelible mark on contemporary art and museum practices:

- It demonstrated that provocative art could serve as a mirror to society, forcing viewers to confront uncomfortable truths.
- It underscored the importance of institutional resilience in defending artistic expression against censorship.
- It influenced subsequent generations of artists to explore taboo subjects and challenge norms.

Ethical and Cultural Lessons

The controversy surrounding "Sensation" continues to serve as a case study in the ethics of art display:

- The importance of context in understanding provocative works.
- The need for institutions to balance artistic freedom with community standards.
- The recognition that art can be a catalyst for social dialogue and change.

Conclusion: A Landmark Exhibition with Enduring Significance

The 1999 Brooklyn Museum exhibition, known as "Sensation," remains a defining moment in the history of contemporary British art and museum curation. Its provocative artworks and the controversy it ignited epitomize the power of art to challenge societal conventions, provoke debate, and redefine cultural boundaries.

While critics may have decried some pieces as offensive or inappropriate, supporters argued that "Sensation" exemplified the vital role of art in confronting uncomfortable truths and expanding the realm of free expression. Its legacy continues to influence how museums, artists, and audiences approach provocative and boundary-pushing work.

In the end, "Sensation" was not just an exhibition—it was a cultural phenomenon that

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