Affronted by Nude 'Last Supper,' Giuliani Calls for Decency Panel

BY ELISABETH BUMILLER

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani said yesterday that an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that includes a color photograph of a nude woman in Christ's place at the Last Supper was "distracting," "outrageous," and "anti-Catholic." Then he declared that he would appoint a commission to set "decency standards" to keep such work out of museums that receive public money. Virtually every museum in New York City receives city money.

Mr. Giuliani, who tried to shut down the Brooklyn Museum in 1989 over the "Sensation" exhibition, which included a painting depicting the Virgin Mary with a diaphanous sheet, decided that even though he had lost that case in court, he was considering filing suit again.

If he did, he said, he might base his argument on a 1990 Supreme Court ruling that endorsed the mayor's position in "Sensation" and that it was the "decency standards" the National Endowment for the Arts.

"It's important to look at what penalties are available for this," Mr. Giuliani said at a news conference at City Hall. Just as in 1991, he was reacting to large headlines and pictures in the Daily News without having seen the exhibition itself. He added that he and his lawyers would be investigating "a way to get this dispute to the place where I think we could win, which would be the Supreme Court of the United States."

The Supreme Court ruling that the mayor cited did not in fact set up standards for the exhibition of art in museums that receive public money. Instead, it upheld a congressional test for awarding federal arts grants.

The court also found that if the law was indeed to impose a "penalty on disfavored viewpoints," it would violate the First Amendment.

Mr. Giuliani, who is Roman Catholic, said he had "a few ideas" about who might serve on his decency commission. He added, laughing slightly, that they should be "basically decent people."

The mayor's remarks were greeted with some bewilderment by other city politicians. "This sounds like Berlin in 1933," said the Bronx borough president, Fernando Ferrer, a mayoral candidate.

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CITIZEN

Critic's Notebook

Making and Taking offense, Elevated to Art Form

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Again? Publicity and political gain have become inseparable elements in the planning and development of our sorry cultural wars, the battle is no longer just about making art, but about who we think should be able to take a pass occasionally.

The Brooklyn Museum has just had its first foray into the fray. Last year, the museum's director, Ed Watson, went to the Supreme Court and lost. Now, the museum has a new director, and the issue is back in town.

"You Mama's Last Supper," a large five-panel photograph made in 1996, in which the nudes, Ms. Cox, arms outstretched, poses as the figure of Jesus. The museum says it was making the rounds of the art world, including a stop during the 1999 Venice Biennale at the tiny Galer
tori di San Ludovico, a church. Before that, it was in a show at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn.

There was a flap from religious groups and politicians, and not much comment by art critics.

But as in the real estate business, the location is everything. There is no better spot to get noticed if you are taking aim at the Roman Catholic Church. The church had heard about the exhibition in the last few weeks, and it was not happy.

On the other hand, we might ask whether the religious community is a meaningful coincidence of the two works, according to the Brooklyn Museum and the mayor.

"You Mama's Last Supper" is an event that is being elevated to the status of art form.

Renee Cox, with her work "You Mama's Last Supper," which led Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani to propose a decency panel to oversee the suitability of works in publicly financed museums. Ms. Cox said, "Get over it."