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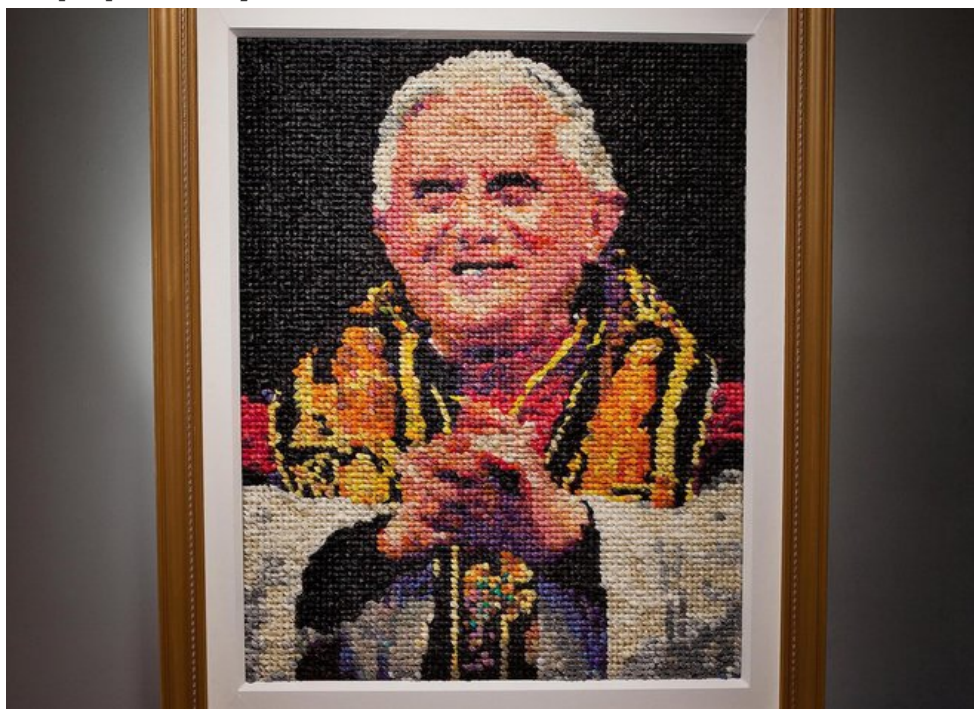
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Museum unveiling controversial condom portrait of pope early



Eric Baillies
"Eggs Benedict" by Shorewood artist Niki Johnson was recently acquired by the Milwaukee Art Museum. A special exhibit of the work will open Thursday in the Calatrava wing of the museum.

By **Mary Louise Schumacher** of the Journal Sentinel

July 29, 2015

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Milwaukee Art Museum to display condom portrait of pope early

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A special exhibit of Niki Johnson's "Eggs Benedict" will open Thursday in the Calatrava wing of the museum. The artwork was slated to go on view with the rest of the permanent collection in November, when the museum's main galleries reopen after a renovation.

Many of those who've derided the museum for acquiring the work in recent weeks have never seen the work in person, said Dan Keegan, the museum's director.

"The main thing, we realized, is we have to put it out," Keegan said, adding that people ask to see it every day and that he's never seen such interest in a single work of art at MAM.

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• **Art City:** Condom portrait of pope offers a chance for real dialogue

News of the museum's acquisition has drawn criticism from some Catholics who viewed the work as blasphemous. Some museum members, donors and docents vowed to withdraw support.

AdChoices

Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI blasted the decision in a blog post and an email sent to Catholics throughout the region.

"The archbishop expressed how sad he is that the museum leadership feels that they must display this piece of art because it is demeaning to a Catholic leader," Julie Wolf, an Archdiocese of Milwaukee spokeswoman, said Wednesday.

ListECKI's written piece argued, among other things, about the loss of objective truth and a resulting "radical individualism" that makes essential truths about God, sex and identity relative.

More than 14,000 people have also signed a petition calling the artwork "disgusting" and asking the museum not to display it. The petition, launched in early July by conservative Christian advocacy site CitizenGo.org, accused the museum of having a "double standard." It argues the museum "would never dare insult Mohammad or other religious leaders" in the same way.

Museum officials argue that "Eggs Benedict" is a solid — if provocative — work of political art that brings existing global discussions about AIDS and sexual health to the surface. It represents an opportunity for dialogue, said Keegan, who is Catholic.

And the "real meaning and power" of the artwork gets lost when the debate gets stuck online, he said.

"Something people don't realize is it's very beautifully made, it is incredibly well crafted, it's intelligently thought out and it took her years to make," said Brady Roberts, the museum's chief curator. "There is a lot to this work."

The double-sided work is a large, needlepoint-like portrait in latex. Johnson developed an elaborate system of creating color gradations by folding condoms of various hues inside one another. Not unlike a Pointillist painting or a medieval tapestry, points of color combine to create a likeness of the pope. It is only when you look at the artwork from the back, where it looks like a hooked rug of sorts, that it becomes obvious what it's made from. Still, what it's made from — and not how it's made — is the crux of the issue for some critics.

"What about art featuring national or international popular social reconstructionists in a manner that would depict the opposite of what they represented, such as Gandhi sporting an Uzi, Lincoln in Ku Klux Klan garb or Hitler with a yarmulke reading the Torah, all in the name of art and beauty?" ListECKI wrote. "Whose art and whose beauty? I would offer that even if the art museum considered accepting any of the above examples, there would be an extensive public discussion that would take place before any decision would be made."

Panel discussion

The museum will also host a panel discussion at 6:15 p.m. Aug. 20 to discuss the relationship between art and religion and also issues of censorship. ListECKI was invited to participate but declined.

"We'd add another chair," Keegan said, hoping the archbishop will change his mind.

The panelists are Roberts; Johnson; Jonathan Katz, a curator and professor of visual studies at the University of Buffalo; Jamie Manson, a theologian and columnist with the National Catholic Reporter; and Kali Murray, associate professor of law at Marquette University.

None of the panelists strongly oppose the artwork or its exhibition at the museum, though the museum has tried to recruit participants with that point of view, said Vicki Scharfberg, the museum's communications director.

For Johnson, the artwork is a critique of Benedict's controversial comments during a 2009 visit to Africa, when the then-pontiff suggested condoms could exacerbate the spread of AIDS. Many derided his remarks, particularly in Africa, where the majority of the world's AIDS deaths occur.

"Eggs Benedict" was first unveiled in 2013 — about a month after Benedict had resigned as pope. News about the piece went viral, often as a news-of-the-weird story. Johnson fielded interviews from around the world and appeared on CNN.

Joseph Pabst, a Milwaukee philanthropist and descendant of the Pabst Brewing Co. family, purchased the work and gave it to the museum, where it had to meet the requirements and approval of an acquisitions committee.

The Portrait Society, which first exhibited the work, was poised to sell "Eggs Benedict" to a private collector, but Pabst scooped it up specifically so it could be placed on public view, said gallery owner Debra Brehmer. Pabst has for years supported works and programs at the museum with similar themes, including a display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in 2010.

"Why did I buy it?" Pabst has said. "I did not buy it because I thought it was beautiful. I bought it because I thought it was provocative and I thought it was important. ... This piece has work to do. It has to make people think and have discussions."

The museum will exhibit "Eggs Benedict" through August along with extensive documentation, including an original news story about the former pope's comments, statements subsequently released by the Vatican about sexual ethics and an artist's statement from Johnson.

A security guard will be assigned to the work, and visitors will be able to see the front and back of the piece. Admission is required and includes entry to the museum's feature exhibit, "Van Gogh to Pollock." The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and until 8 p.m. on Thursdays.

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Visitors will be allowed to leave comments on a wall of Post-its, a technique the museum used during "30 Americans" in 2013, an exhibit that tackled challenging issues about race and identity.

That kind of engagement can be cathartic, Roberts said.

"It really makes a work of art live," he said. "It makes the museum a really vital forum."

Annysa Johnson of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art critic. Follow her coverage on Facebook (www.facebook.com/artcity) and Twitter (@artcity). Email her at mschumacher@journalsentinel.com.



About Mary Louise Schumacher

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. She writes about culture, design, the urban landscape and Milwaukee's creative community. Art City is her award-winning cultural page and a community of more than 20 contributing writers and artists. Follow her on Facebook and Instagram.

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