The Wild Bunch
Ventura, Beatty and Trump Stir Up Campaign 2000
Ten Works of Art That Have Rocked the Ages

Controversial art is no doubt as old as the prehistoric cave paintings. From emperors to mayors, artists and politicians have been natural adversaries. Here are some of the more explosive clashes.

741 The Byzantine iconoclasts ("image-breakers") thought that pictures and statues led to idolatry. The movement peaked under emperor Constantine V in the 8th century, resulting in innumerable whitewashed walls and crumbled sculptures.

1541 Michelangelo's mighty mural "The Last Judgment" was rebuked by the Vatican for its nude figures and threatened with destruction. But the pope settled for adding drapery.

1863 Manet's "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" shocked Parisians with its matter-of-fact nudity. Emperor Louis Napoleon called it "an offense against modesty."

1913 Duchamp's cubistic "Nude Descending a Staircase" was a sensation at the historic Armory Show in New York. It was lampooned in newspaper cartoons, and Theodore Roosevelt found it much inferior to Navajo blankets.

1933 Diego Rivera outraged his patron, John D. Rockefeller Jr., by tucking a portrait of Lenin into his giant mural in the new Rockefeller Center. The mural was destroyed.

1937 The Nazis called modern art Jewish and Bolshevik. They staged shows of "degenerate art" with work by artists, such as Chagall, next to pictures by the insane.

1966 Edward Kienholz's assemblage of lovers in "Back Seat Dodge '38," was called obscene by the board of the Los Angeles County Museum. The show went on—with the car's doors closed.

1981 Richard Serra made "Tilted Arc," a 120-foot rusted-steel wall outside a New York federal building. Politicians organized protests, and the commissioned work was removed.

1989-90 Congressmen attacked the NEA-funded tour of homoerotic photos by Robert Mapplethorpe. Washington's Corcoran Gallery canceled the show. Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center didn't. Its director was tried—and acquitted—of obscenity. Showtime is making a television movie about it.

1990 Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" depicted variations on the form of female genitalia. When the artist donated it to the University of D.C., Congress cut $1.6 million from the university's funding.

1999 Liliyana's attempt to dictate the content of an art exhibition. "I understand that there was a lot of pressure from board members not to alienate the mayor," said Brenda Richardson, a curator who worked with Lehman in Baltimore. "They're watching their funding."

Privately, some members of the art world also admitted to being uncomfortable with aspects of the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition, especially, as the mayor's office picked up on, the role of Saatchi. Unlike most museum exhibits, the show is drawn entirely from one private collection and Saatchi himself was heavily involved in mounting it. A passionate collector, he's spent the past decade discovering young artists in Britain and buying up their work. Complicating the issue is the fact that Christie's is one of the show's sponsors—the same auction house that sold 130 artworks for Saatchi in London last December, some by the same artists whose works are being shown in Brooklyn. (Those proceeds went to charity.) But the charge that Saatchi will cash in by quickly selling the work in "Sensation" is "off base since the show is traveling to Australia and Japan after its run in Brooklyn.

Meanwhile, all the noise surrounding the exhibition has distracted from the art itself. "The thing that's so appalling," says Lisa Phillips, the director of the New Museum in SoHo, "is that no one is looking at the work." "The Holy Virgin Mary" has been referred to in the press and by city officials as "smeared" with dung when, in fact, one small mound of dung is deliberately placed on the painting. (Such small dung heaps are a hallmark in all his work, a connection to his African roots.)

While the dispute headed to the courts, most legal experts put their money on the Brooklyn Museum. "Once the city commences financing this kind of programming," says lawyer Adam Cohen of Kane Kessler, "you can't revoke the financing for unconstitutional grounds." But the battle was clearly about more than the First Amendment. When asked about the criticism that he's simply trying to get votes, the mayor shrugged. "What's new? This is Giuliani. I speak my mind."

With Maggie Malone, Ray Sawhill and Gregory Beals