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Critic's Notebook

A Startling New Lesson in the Power of Imagery

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Correction Appended

They're callous and feeble cartoons, cooked up as a provocation by a conservative newspaper exploiting the general Muslim prohibition on images of the Prophet Muhammad to score cheap points about freedom of expression.

But drawings are drawings, so a question arises. Have any modern works of art provoked as much chaos and violence as the Danish caricatures that first ran in September in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*?

The story goes back a bit further, to a Danish children's author looking to write a book about the life of Muhammad, in the spirit of religious tolerance, and finding no illustrator because all the artists he approached said they were afraid. In response, the newspaper commissioned these cartoons, a dozen of them, by various satirists. And like all pictures calculated to be noticed by offending somebody, the caricaturist's stock in trade and the oldest trick in the book of modern art, they would have disappeared into deserved oblivion had not their targets risen to the bait.



The newspaper was banking on the fact that unlike the West — where Max Ernst's painting of Mary spanking the infant Jesus didn't raise an eyebrow when recently shown at the Metropolitan Museum — the Muslim world has no tradition of, or tolerance for, religious irony in its art.

But there are precedents going all the way back to the Bible for virulent reactions to proscribed and despised images. Beginning with the ancient Egyptians, who lopped off the noses of statues of dead pharaohs, through the toppling of statues of Lenin and Saddam Hussein, violence has often been directed against offending objects, though rarely against the artists who made them.

Educated secular Westerners reared on modernism, with its inclination toward abstraction, its gamesmanship and its knee-jerk baiting of traditional authority, can miss the real force behind certain visual images, particularly religious ones. Trained to see pictures formally, as designs or concepts, we can often overlook the way images may not just symbolize but actually "partake of what they represent," as the art historian David Freedberg has put it.



That's certainly how many aggrieved Muslims perceived the cartoons. Circulating the pictures, they prompted Arab governments like those of Saudi Arabia and Syria, not otherwise champions of religious freedom, to support boycotts of Danish goods and to withdraw their ambassadors from Copenhagen. That in turn led European papers to republish the cartoons in solidarity with Jyllands-Posten and in defense of free speech.

Some of them have been reprinted in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Hungary, New Zealand, Ukraine and Jordan. One appeared in The Philadelphia Inquirer. They've spread worldwide via the Web, exacerbating Muslim outrage while leading many non-believing non-Muslims to scratch their heads over how such banal and idiotic pictures could ever be given a thought in the first place. Muhammad is lampooned with a turban in the shape of a ticking bomb; he's at the gates of heaven, arms raised, saying to men who look like suicide bombers, "Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins."

Irate Muslim protesters set fire to the Danish and Norwegian missions in Damascus, where Syrian newspapers routinely print the most appalling, racist cartoons of big-nosed Jews. In Beirut, rioters burned the Danish mission and vandalized a Maronite Catholic church, beating a Dutch news photographer mistaken for a Dane.

On Monday, Afghan security forces killed several protesters who tried to storm the American air base at Bagram. Yesterday the leading Iranian daily announced a contest for the best cartoon about the Holocaust, and 200 members of Iran's 290-member Parliament condemned the Danish cartoons: "Apparently, they have not learned their lesson from the miserable author of 'The Satanic Verses,'" the members said in a statement, referring to the fatwah against Salman Rushdie. From Gaza to Auckland, imams have demanded execution or amputations for the cartoonists and their publishers.

Over art? These are made-up pictures. The photographs from Abu Ghraib were documents of real events, but they didn't provoke such widespread violence. What's going on?

In part, the new Molotov cocktail of technology and incendiary art has hastened the speed with which otherwise forgettable pictures are now globally transmitted. Cellphones help protesters rally mobs swiftly against them.

And there is also the deepening cynicism and political hypocrisy now endemic in the culture wars. Last week a State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, simultaneously condemned the cartoons as "unacceptable" and spoke up for free speech, while the Joint Chiefs of Staff were firing off a letter to The Washington Post about a cartoon it ran in which Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, in the guise of a doctor, says to a heavily bandaged soldier who has lost his arms and legs, "I'm listing your condition as 'battle hardened.'" The letter called the cartoon, by Tom Toles, "reprehensible" and offensive to soldiers.



The Post's editorial page editor, Fred Hiatt, replied that the newspaper would not censor its cartoonists, inspiring John Aravosis, who runs Americablog, the Web site where the letter was first reported, to tell Editor & Publisher magazine: "Now that the Joint Chiefs have addressed the insidious threat cartoons pose to our troops, perhaps they can move on to the less pressing issues like getting them their damn body armor."

As is so often the case in the culture wars, choosing sides can be exasperating. Modern artists and their promoters forever pander to a like-minded audience by goading obvious targets, hoping to incite reactions that pass for political point-scoring. The twist in the Danish case is only that a conservative paper provoked Muslims. One may be excused for wondering whether the silence of the art world has something to do with the discomfort of staking a position where neither party offers the sanctuary of political correctness.



An obvious precedent, now comically tame by comparison, is the "Sensation" show at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, a promotional bonanza for the British collector and wheeler-dealer Charles Saatchi, who owned the art in the show. The exhibition incited protests by the Catholic League. Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani played the stern dad to a bunch of publicity-savvy artists whose work included a collage of the Virgin Mary with cutouts from pornographic magazines and shellacked clumps of elephant dung.

Previously unmoved to action by Catholic League protests against a play at City Center involving a gay lead character fashioned after Jesus, the mayor, contemplating a Senate race against Hillary Rodham Clinton, decided he was

personally offended by the art, although he had never actually seen it, and threatened to cut off public financing for the museum.

"You don't have a right to government subsidy for desecrating somebody else's religion," he said, foreshadowing a bit the Danish debacle about freedom of religious expression, notwithstanding that the artist of the Virgin Mary, Chris Ofili, happened to be Roman Catholic.

The New York art world was shocked only because it had expected the show to pass without fuss, since the art was already old news to insiders. But then museums nationwide had to hold their collective nose to defend Brooklyn over the issue of free expression, and by the end the whole affair had turned into farce, obscuring even the quality of what were, in fact, a few not-so-bad works of art.

No protester torched the museum or called for beheading anybody. Farce now becomes calamity over the cartoons, a different matter. The current bloodshed, fueled by political extremists and religious fanatics, turns the culture war once again into real war. People forget that Salman Rushdie's Japanese and Italian translators were stabbed (the Japanese fatally) and his Norwegian publisher shot.

What may be overlooked this time is a deep, abiding fact about visual art, its totemic power: the power of representation. This power transcends logic or aesthetics. Like words, it can cause genuine pain.

Ancient Greeks used to chain statues to prevent them from fleeing. Buddhists in Ceylon once believed that a painting could be brought to life once its eyes were painted. In the Netherlands in the 1560's, pictures were smashed in nearly every town and village simply for being graven images. And in the Philippines, enraged citizens destroyed billboards of Ferdinand Marcos.

To many people, pictures will always, mysteriously, embody the things they depict. Among the issues to be hashed out in this affair, there's a lesson to be gleaned about art: Even a dumb cartoon may not be so dumb if it calls out to someone.

Correction: Feb. 10, 2006

A Critic's Notebook article on Wednesday about the Danish cartoons that satirize the Prophet Muhammad referred incorrectly to the reaction in Auckland, New Zealand. While there were protests after the cartoons were published, imams there have not demanded executions or amputations for the cartoonists and their publishers.