

ART AND CULTURE

World's first museum of censored art opens in Barcelona. Take a look inside

The collection of over 200 works is intended to challenge visitors and question the limits imposed on artists in an increasingly polarized world

By Joseph Wilson | Associated Press • Published November 17, 2023



AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti

“Silence,” an installation by French Algerian artist Zoulikha Bouabdellah that displays 30 pairs of stiletto heels on the same number of Islamic prayer rugs.

A drawing of a nude Donald Trump. A punching bag sculpture shaped like a woman’s torso. A display of women's party shoes standing proudly on prayer rugs. All are pieces of contemporary art that have provoked debate and, sometimes, violent reactions.

These pieces and dozens more that were subjected to some sort of censorship have found a home in Spain at [Barcelona's Museum of Forbidden Art](#), or “Museu de l’Art Prohibit” in Catalan. The collection of over 200 works, including ones by well-known creators such as American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and Spain's own Pablo Picasso, is

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intended to challenge visitors and question the limits imposed on artists in an increasingly polarized world.

Director Rosa Rodrigo said the museum is the only one in the world dedicated exclusively to art that faced petitions – often successful ones – for their removal from public view on moral, political, religious, sexual or commercial grounds.



AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti

A visitor looks at a leather sculpture of a woman's torso as a boxer's punching bag at Barcelona's Museum of Forbidden Art in Barcelona, Spain, Friday, Nov. 17, 2023.

“The museum gives an opportunity to works of art that, for whatever reason, at some point had been banned, attacked, censored, or canceled, because there are so many,” Rodrigo told The Associated Press.

The museum is the creation of Catalan art collector Tatxo Benet, who owns all but one of the 42 works currently on display – and the 200 more in storage. He was already collecting contemporary art when he began gathering “banned” works.

Five years later, Benet's idea became the Museum of Forbidden Art, which opened its doors in October. Since then, over 13,000 people have visited its galleries.

As more works come under attack, people like art critic and curator Gabriel Luciani say the exhibit is essential. “I think it’s imperative to have a place like this in Europe and around the world. Especially in these moments of censorship that we’re seeing. Not only in the arts but also in other political contexts,” he said.

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David Zorrakino/Europa Press via Getty Images

A person observes one of the works exhibited at the opening of the Museum of Forbidden Art, at the Casa Garriga Noques, on 24 October, 2023 in Barcelona, Spain.

In March, a Hong Kong department store took down a digital artwork that contained hidden references to jailed dissidents. The same month on the other side of the world, a Florida charter school principal was forced to resign after a parent complained about a lesson on Renaissance art that included Michelangelo's David sculpture.

Barcelona's new museum features well-known works of contention, including "Piss Christ" by Andres Serrano, a photo of a crucifix plunged into a vat of the artist's urine; as well as Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio," photos of sadomasochism that were challenged in court for obscenity.

"I think the collection could even be more shocking," Luciani said.

But the works by women, which have drawn ire from conservative religious groups or been repressed for their feminist content, are among the most powerful of the collection.



AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti

A visitor takes photos of the statue of A Girl of Peace, by Kim Eun-Sung & Kim Seo-Kyung at Barcelona's Museum of Forbidden Art in Barcelona, Spain, Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2023.

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“Silence,” an installation by French Algerian artist Zoulikha Bouabdellah that displays 30 pairs of stiletto heels on the same number of Islamic prayer rugs, dominates the center of a room. Bouabdellah agreed to have her work removed from a museum in Clichy, France, after the 2015 attacks in Paris against the staff of the Charlie Hebdo satirical newspaper, which had published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.

The physical abuse of women is captured by Kazakh artist Zoya Falkova in Evermust, a leather sculpture of a woman’s torso as a boxer's punching bag. It was one of six works removed from a museum in Kyrgyzstan when an exhibition of feminist art came under fire from officials who said it went against traditional values.

While most of the works are from the 21st century, Goya, Picasso and Klimt all have their place in the halls of the elegant modernist mansion that houses the museum. Goya had to sell his late-1790s “Los Caprichos” prints to the Spanish crown when he feared they could come under the scrutiny of the Inquisition, while Picasso saw his “Suite 347” of erotic drawings displayed in a private room in 1960s Paris.

Although censorship has taken many forms, the museum shows that the drive to silence artists who make challenging works is alive and kicking.



One of the works exhibited during the inauguration of the Museum of Forbidden Art, at Casa Garriga Noques, on 24 October, 2023 in Barcelona, Spain.

“Censorship in art has always existed because artists are always forerunners and touch on different themes,” Rodrigo said. “(But) it is true that most of the works on display are from the years 2010 to 2020. In those 10 years, in many different areas of the world, I think that societies themselves have undergone a regression of values, because it has not necessarily been governments which have acted (against artworks), but rather it has been society itself.”

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In 2016, the Australian artist Illma Gore posted her full-monty drawing of Trump on Facebook and had her account shut down to obscenity and nudity. Gore believes the piece led to her being assaulted on a Los Angeles street.

Following a series of canceled shows after he was accused of making inappropriate sexual comments to potential models, the late American painter Chuck Close, a master of photorealism, has a self-portrait on display at the Museum of Forbidden Art.

Commercial interests have also played a role in muzzling free expression.

Yoshua Okón's video of an obese woman lying nude on a table in McDonald's, called "Freedom Fries," was removed from a gallery in London after, according to the Barcelona museum, members of gallery's board were worried about damaging the fast-food chain's reputation.



One of the works exhibited at the opening of the Museum of Forbidden Art, at Casa Garriga Noques, on 24 October, 2023 in Barcelona, Spain.

The museum also houses several works that have come under physical attack, including "Piss Christ."

Spanish artist Charo Corrales' "With Flowers for Mary," which depicts a Virgin Mary masturbating, was slashed while exhibited in southern Spain after Catholic legal groups filed a lawsuit against the work for offending religious sensibilities. It is now on display in Barcelona with an open gash in the canvas.

Rodrigo said her museum hopes it won't see any attacks because visitors should come prepared to be shocked. She also believes that by grouping these works, they produce a more balanced impact. Plus, she has faith that



the spectator will show respect and restraint when granted the freedom to come in contact with provocative artwork.

"We want our visitors to feel comfortable, not that they are in a fortress," Rodrigo said, "because if we did that we would be sending the wrong message."

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Videojournalist Hernán Muñoz contributed to this report.

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