

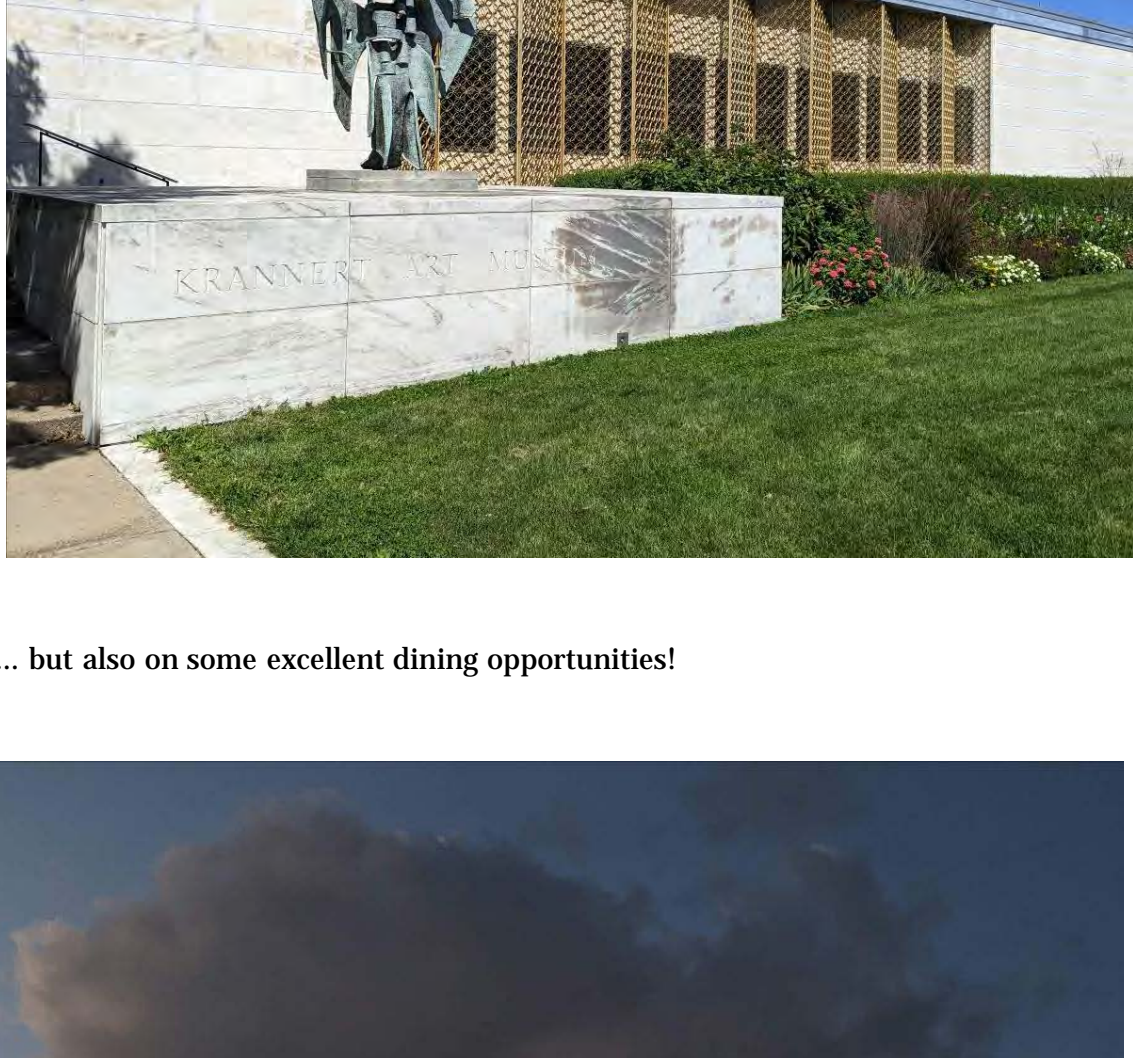
C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

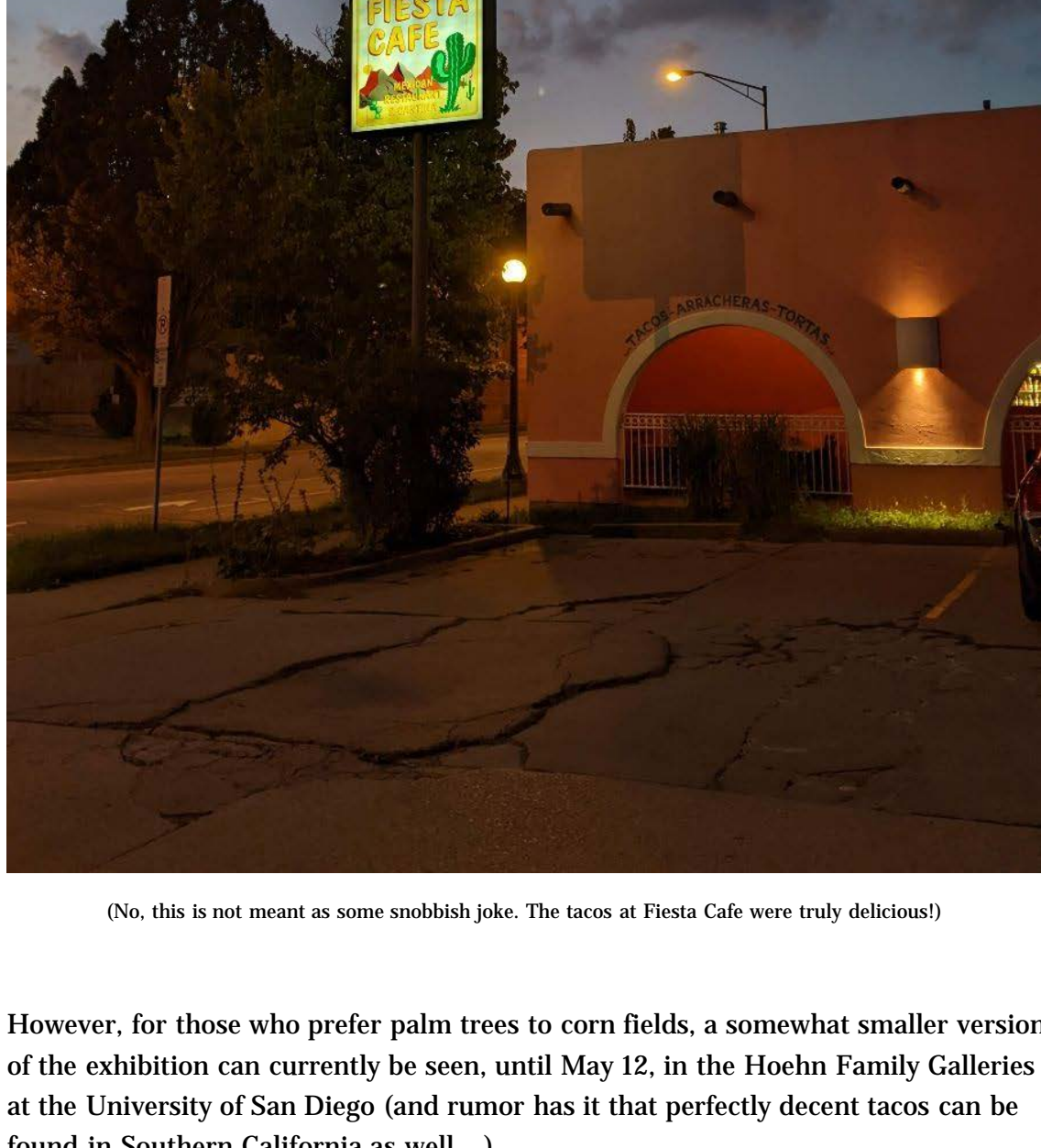
Distraction / Abwechslung
20 April 2023

I realize that the last *Distraction / Abwechslung* about Maureen Warren's fabulous exhibition *Fake News and Lying Pictures: Political Prints in the Dutch Republic*—both historic and highly relevant for today—came somewhat late, since the show closed at the Krannert Museum in Illinois back in December of last year. But I very much doubt that an earlier posting would have caused readers to head in droves to the autumnal corn fields of central Illinois.

Those who did not make it to Urbana-Champaign missed out on not only a remarkable exhibition in architect Ambrose Richardson's fine 1961 building ...



... but also on some excellent dining opportunities!



(No, this is not meant as some snobbish joke. The tacos at Fiesta Cafe were truly delicious!)

However, for those who prefer palm trees to corn fields, a somewhat smaller version of the exhibition can currently be seen, until May 12, in the Hoehn Family Galleries at the University of San Diego (and rumor has it that perfectly decent tacos can be found in Southern California as well ...).

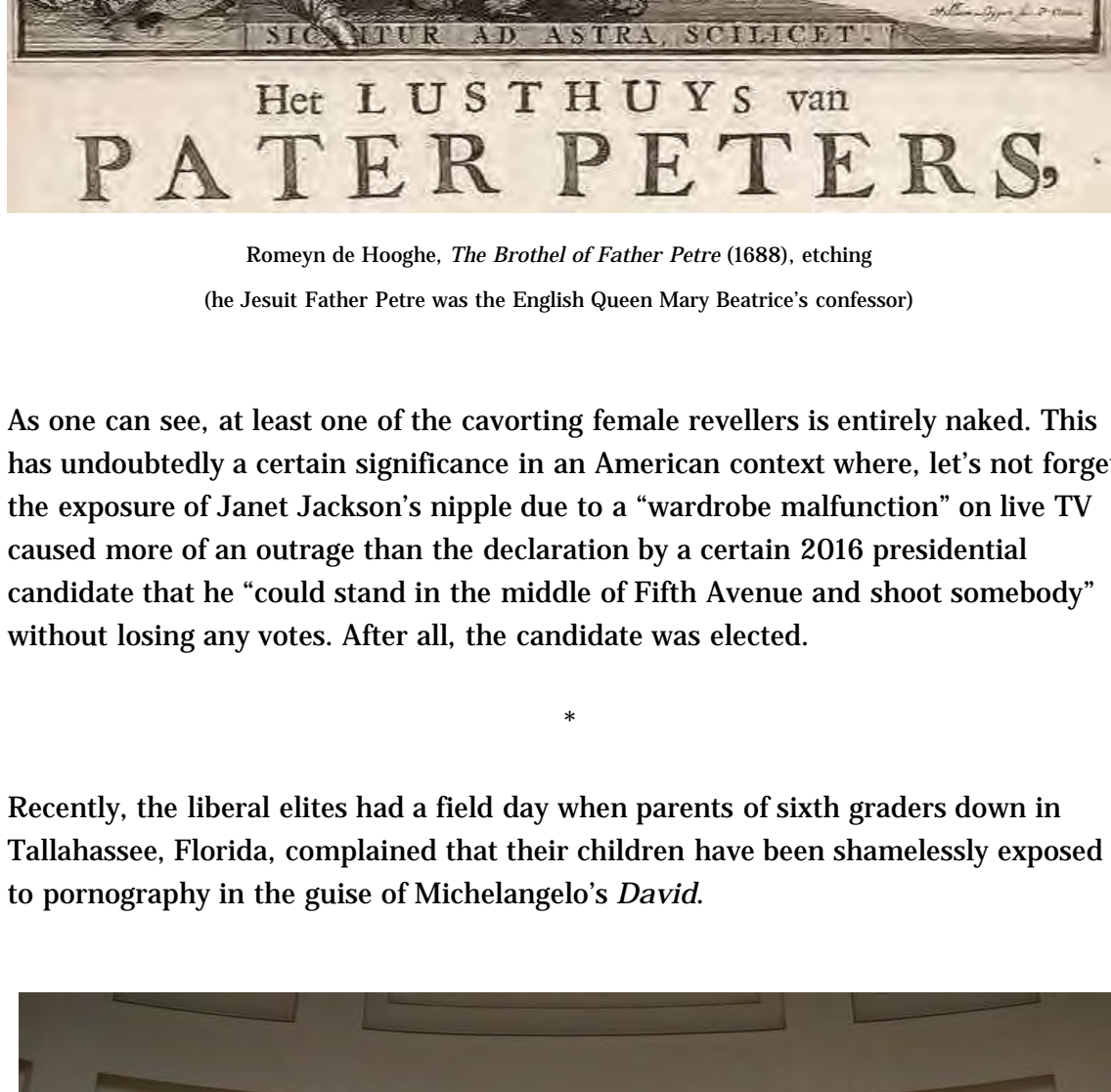
"Fake News and Lying Pictures" in California

Since my son is studying at Amherst, I was hoping to revisit *Fake News* myself at the Smith College Museum in nearby Northampton, Massachusetts, where the exhibition, according to the information given in the catalogue, was slated to be shown later this fall.

When trying to check for the exact dates of the Smith venue, I found no mention of it on their website. Upon inquiring, I learned from the communications department that the program "will not be presenting the traveling exhibition." A second email merely explained that, instead, "the museum will be presenting exhibitions that our curatorial team has developed from our collection that serves our Smith audiences and communities."

Fake News and Lying Pictures is exemplary in the way it demonstrates how visual culture was instrumentalized for political ends and how it was used to manipulate a wider public. It also shows how the political circumstances of this very period—the so-called Dutch "Golden Age"—were especially conducive to the flourishing of political prints since the Dutch Republic's structure as a confederation of independent provinces made it difficult to strictly enforce censorship. Ultimately, the show reminds us that propaganda is anything but a modern phenomenon. The question might be asked, therefore, why the museum at Smith College decided to opt out.

Could it be because, as a *historic* show, it might display culturally sensitive imagery deemed offensive by contemporary audiences? As stated before, the many achievements of the Dutch Republic during its long seventeenth century were to a large extent based on colonialism and exploitation, a counternarrative that has been increasingly explored in recent years in such exhibitions as the Rijksmuseum's 2021 show *Slavery. Fake News and Lying Pictures* is another important contribution to this long-overdue revision of traditional historical views. As a result, it is overflowing with images of cruelty and mayhem, torture and executions, and even debauchery involving a Jesuit monk!

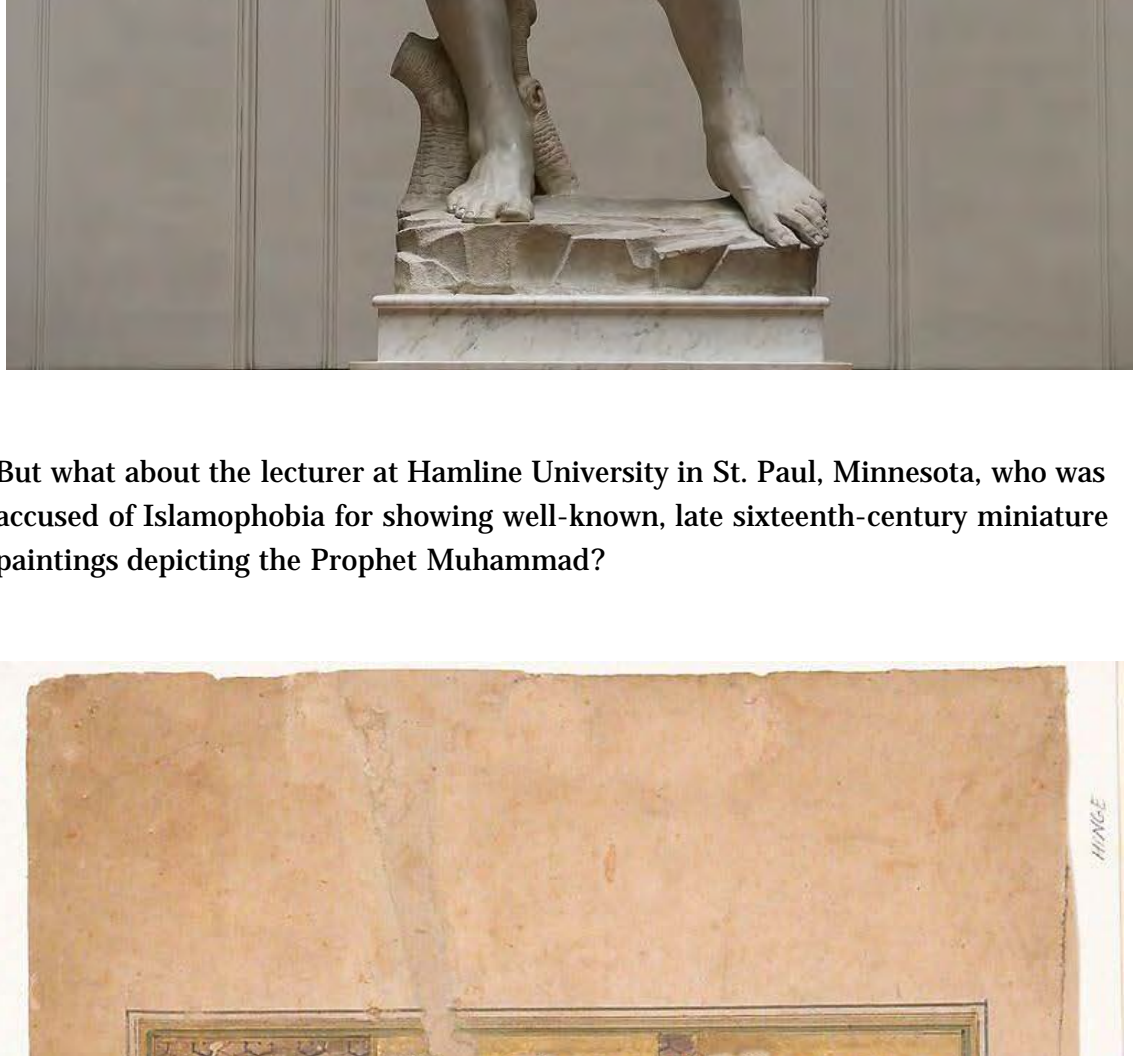


Romeyn de Hooghe, *The Brothel of Father Petre* (1688), etching
(the Jesuit Father Petre was the English Queen Mary Beatrice's confessor)

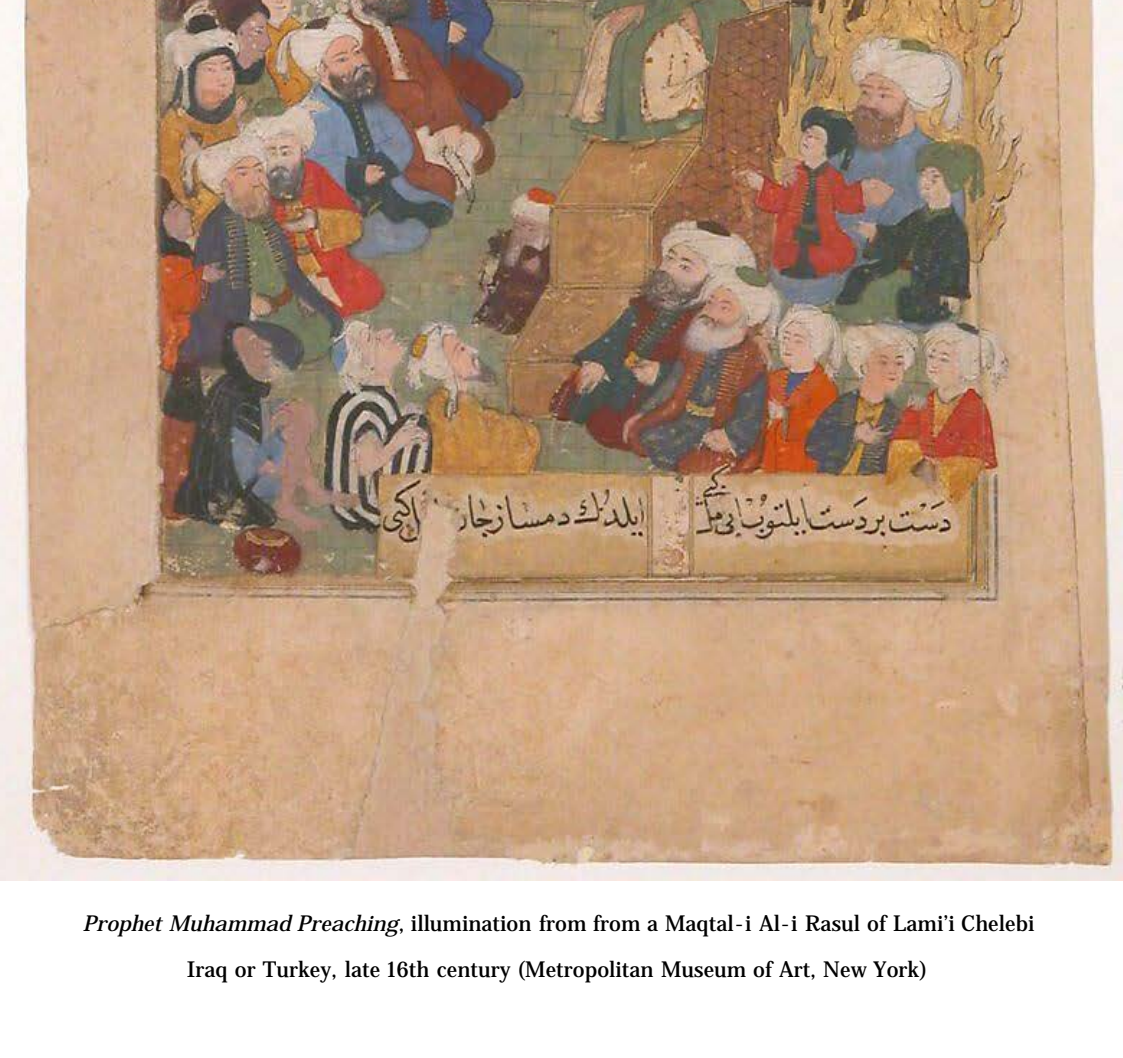
As one can see, at least one of the cavorting female revellers is entirely naked. This has undoubtedly a certain significance in an American context where, let's not forget, the exposure of Janet Jackson's nipple due to a "wardrobe malfunction" on live TV caused more of an outrage than the declaration by a certain 2016 presidential candidate that he "could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody" without losing any votes. After all, the candidate was elected.

*

Recently, the liberal elites had a field day when parents of sixth graders down in Tallahassee, Florida, complained that their children have been shamelessly exposed to pornography in the guise of Michelangelo's *David*.



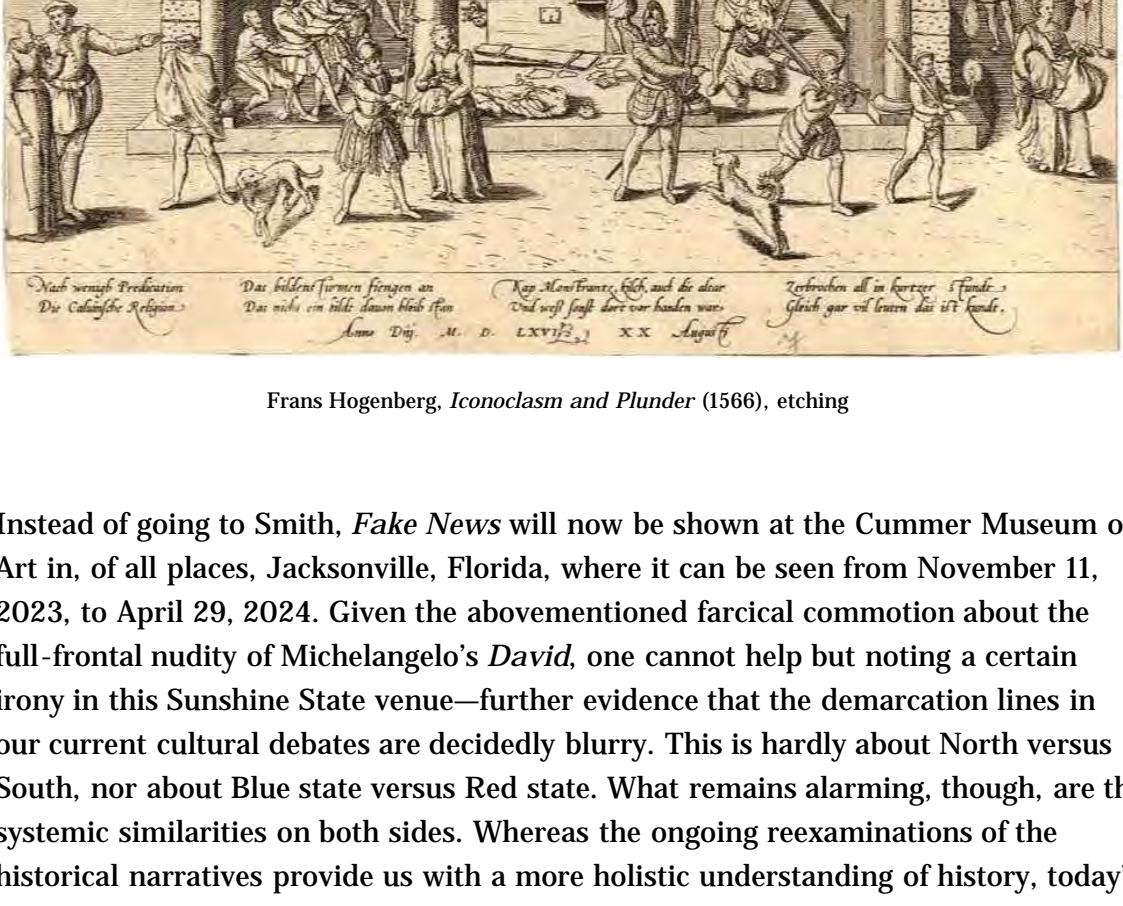
But what about the lecturer at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, who was accused of Islamophobia for showing well-known, late sixteenth-century miniature paintings depicting the Prophet Muhammad?



Prophet Muhammad Preaching, illumination from from a *Maqal-i Al-i Rasul* of Lami'i Chelebi
Iraq or Turkey, late 16th century (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

While it is generally true that Islam forbids images of its founder as well as of all other prophets, illuminations such as these date from a period when they were intended as objects of veneration and devotion, with Muhammad's face always shown fully veiled. (After all, Christianity, too, had its share of repeated iconoclastic movements.) This, and the fact that the lecturer prefaced the images in her virtual lecture with an explicit warning, did not stop a Muslim student from feeling offended—but it prevented the renewal of the lecturer's contract.

Given the lack of a public statement from Smith, we might never know what happened. Yet the cancellation is especially disappointing since the museum is part of a college. Isn't this what colleges are meant to do—foster dialogue and encourage open discussions about difficult subjects? Could it really be the case that an elite liberal arts college believes that a well-researched exhibition that displays, explains, and contextualizes historical source material might not "serve" the college's "audiences and communities"? What makes this even more poignant is that, as recently as March of this year, Smith's website proudly announced a class offered by Professor Loretta Ross that "advocates for calling people in, instead of calling them out" as "an antidote to cancel culture."



Frans Hogenberg, *Iconoclasm and Plunder* (1566), etching

Instead of going to Smith, *Fake News* will now be shown at the Cummer Museum of Art in, of all places, Jacksonville, Florida, where it can be seen from November 11, 2023, to April 29, 2024. Given the abovementioned farcical commotion about the full-frontal nudity of Michelangelo's *David*, one cannot help but noting a certain irony in this Sunshine State venue—further evidence that the demarcation lines in our current cultural debates are decidedly blurry. This is hardly about North versus South, nor about Blue state versus Red state. What remains alarming, though, are the systemic similarities on both sides. Whereas the ongoing reexaminations of the historical narratives provide us with a more holistic understanding of history, today's culture wars show signs of a political and cultural oppression that is evident across the political spectrum. Instead of getting broader, the discourse has been broken up and replaced by a narrow-minded and rigidly antagonistic either/or.

As a result, we seem to have reached a point where the slightest possibility that anything might "trigger" even the smallest discomfort in the viewer (or reader) is enough for an institution to preemptively resort to self-censorship rather than open a public dialogue (the controversies about last year's *documenta* in Kassel or the cancellation and later postponement of the Philip Guston retrospective are just some of the more notorious examples of this same phenomenon in recent years).

Such decisions are hardly ever made on the curatorial side. As an institutional outsider, one gets the sense that the power is increasingly shifting to newly implemented "communication" or "engagement and inclusion" departments. Often following on the heels of "corporate restructurings" even inside museums, a veritable cottage industry seems to have sprung up, dedicated to designing and implementing new "interpretative strategies." Needless to say, those decision makers can hardly be envied at a moment when everyone's grievance finds a ready echo chamber on social media. Yet the aim can hardly be to allow the respective radical bubbles to bob up and down in the calm waters of their own self-congratulatory complacencies (the use of the verb "to bob" here is my thoroughly inadequate attempt to translate the wonderful German phrase *vor sich hin zu dümpeln*). Wouldn't it sometimes be better to leave the calm waters, pop the bubbles, and, in the name of critical discourse and "engagement," risk facing a shit storm?

"Fake News and Lying Pictures"

