

## CENSORSHIP AT THE ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

by NCAC | Nov 9, 2022



Ben Sakogouchi, *Comparative Religions 101*, 2014/2019, Image courtesy of Bel Ami Gallery

In the Fall of 2022, the much-anticipated reopening of the Orange County Museum of Art was marred by the censorship of a painting by renowned artist Ben Sakogouchi in the museum’s *California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold*.

A few months prior to the opening, the artist was informed of concerns coming from the museum’s education department that some of the imagery in his work would make some patrons “uncomfortable, upset, [or] triggered.”

The source of these concerns lay in Sakouchi's inclusion of swastikas three times across the 16-panel painting that had been selected for the Biennial, *Comparative Religions 101*. Its centerpiece depicts a diminutive Albert Einstein dwarfed by an expansive and vibrant view of the Grand Canyon. Surrounding the central painting are 15 additional canvases, each of which explores humanity's quest for power and influence through satirical juxtapositions referencing religion, geopolitics, world history, and pop culture. Swastikas are used in the rendering of military units and politicians that were allied with Nazi Germany in World War II: on a flag behind Japanese Emperor Hirohito, on a flag alongside a Sikh brigade of an Indian military unit composed of prisoners of war, and behind soldiers who fought for the Independent State of Croatia—a puppet government under Hitler's Germany.

Responding to museum requests for additional context about his work, Mr. Sakoguchi dutifully answered 17 questions and created 10 short videos in which he narrates the ideas, histories, and symbols illustrated in the work. Following the submission of these materials, the artist was “notified that OCMA will no longer include *Comparative Religions 101* because the museum will not show any work that depicts a swastika.”

As Hyperallergic notes, the use of swastikas does not appear to violate the museum's policy. In 2009, it exhibited Peter Saul's *Stalin in 1943* (2007), which included images of Nazi soldiers with swastikas on their helmets being pummeled by Stalin—a sensationalized reference to Soviet-German battles during World War II.

Fourteen years later, in a time where antisemitism and related hate crimes are on the rise, increased sensitivity to associated symbols is understandable. And OCMA, as a private institution, maintains the right to limit all manner of protected artistic expression within its exhibitions, even if this runs contrary to its mission to “offer meaningful encounters with art and ideas.”

But mere representation of offensive symbols, language, and imagery is not in itself an endorsement of the ideas they stand for; this is generally understood in any historical exhibition of artifacts or propaganda from World War II. We should expect museum curators and educators—professionals tasked with the responsibility to research, interpret, and educate audiences about material culture—to know the simple fact that, especially in art, *context matters*. The ways that symbols are invoked, and to what ends, matters drastically to the meaning of the work.

In the case of *Comparative Religions 101*, one might also argue that history matters, and artists should not be prevented from addressing it or interrogating historical ideas, no matter how reprehensible or dated they are. When addressing societal ills, past and present, erasure of painful symbols and referents does nothing to alter their very real role in history and the residual impacts they have upon the present. In fact, the absolute banishment of such symbols could very well be seen as whitewashing the past. (Additionally, as Mr. Sakoguchi notes on his website, while the symbol of the swastika had largely been hijacked by Nazi Germany in the 20th century, it has existed for millenia as a sacred symbol in religions across the globe. To banish it entirely would mean the erasure of millions of cultural artifacts from public view and education.)

It seems that OCMA has recognized its error. In days prior to the Biennial, OCMA re-invited the work, but at this point, Mr. Sakoguchi had resolved against his participation in the exhibition. This is an unfortunate outcome for all parties involved—including OCMA audiences—and could have been avoided.

Institutional censorship of any potentially contentious works poses a grave threat to the vibrancy of our shared culture. Rather than resort to the omission of such works, NCAC encourages cultural institutions to be prepared. NCAC's publication, *Smart Tactics: Curating Difficult Content* contains a section titled "Museum Best Practices for Handling Controversy," which provides guidelines for managing controversial content and for transforming controversy into a learning moment for audiences and institutions alike.