

# Identity Politics and Artistic Controversies

by Sophia

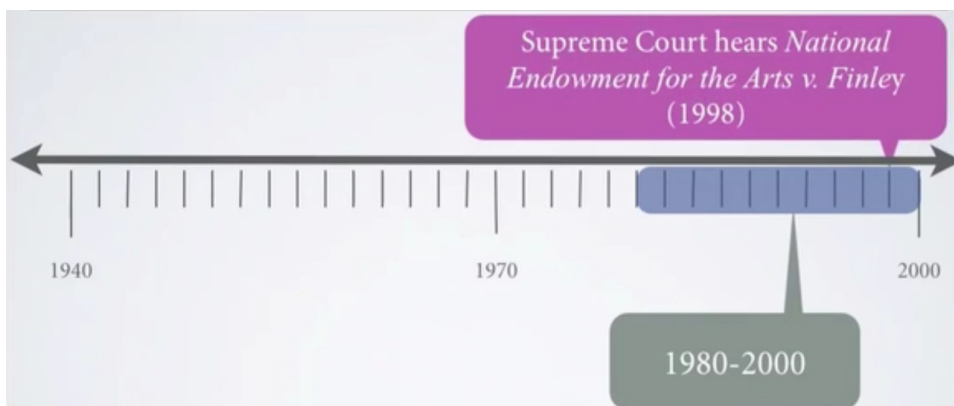


## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is a bit different than the others you've seen in this series. It focuses more on the questions surrounding artistic controversies and identity politics. You will look at three artists and descriptions of the controversies. Then some questions will be posed at the end to get you thinking about matters of freedom of speech and issues of decency in a broad context. These can be controversial issues, so in the spirit of neutrality, this lesson will simply present the facts, pose the questions, and attempt to keep bias out. You will cover:

## 1. Time Period: Identity Politics and Artistic Controversies

The art and controversy that we're talking about today take place between 1980 and 2000.



## 2. Karen Finley

Karen Finley is a well-known performance artist whose work often incorporates themes pertaining to women's and children's rights, abuse, drugs, and their effects on the American family. The manner in which she addresses these issues is often met with controversy given the graphic nature of the performance. She received funding from the **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)** through a grant, which she used to finance her traveling show called "We Keep Our Victims Ready."



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The performance involves her sitting in a rocking chair and delivering a monologue. She then removes her clothing above the waist and smears chocolate over her bare chest while describing, without holding back, a sexual assault. It's a rather shocking performance, but her motives behind it have been personally stated to the effect that she is confronting people with the reality of these issues versus pretending they don't exist.

Senator Jesse Helms, who represented North Carolina at the time, felt it was only smut. He attacked her and the NEA for awarding her the grant.



Senator Jesse Helms

The chairman of the NEA subsequently retracted the award. After pressure from Congress and three other highly profiled accounts of alleged indecency from NEA award recipients, the NEA no longer funds individual

artists. Finley subsequently sued the NEA for a violation of her first amendment rights. After winning in the lower courts, the case went to the Supreme Court in 1998, where the ruling was overturned in favor of the NEA.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)**

A federally funded program that supports artists' organizations and their creative activities.

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## 3. Robert Mapplethorpe

Robert Mapplethorpe was an immensely talented photographer known for his large, stylized black and white portraits of celebrities and famous people; color and black and white pictures of flowers; and highly stylized portraits of nude men. Mapplethorpe, an openly gay man, gained a degree of notoriety among a portion of the public for what it felt were obscene and/or pornographic depictions of graphic homosexual activity, which were featured as part of a traveling exhibit called "The Perfect Moment."



**Robert Mapplethorpe**

Despite the fact that the show had gone through two major cities, Chicago and Philadelphia, the fact that the NEA had donated a sizable amount of money to the Philadelphia Museum for the exhibit drew criticism from, once again, Jesse Helms and roughly 100 other members of Congress.

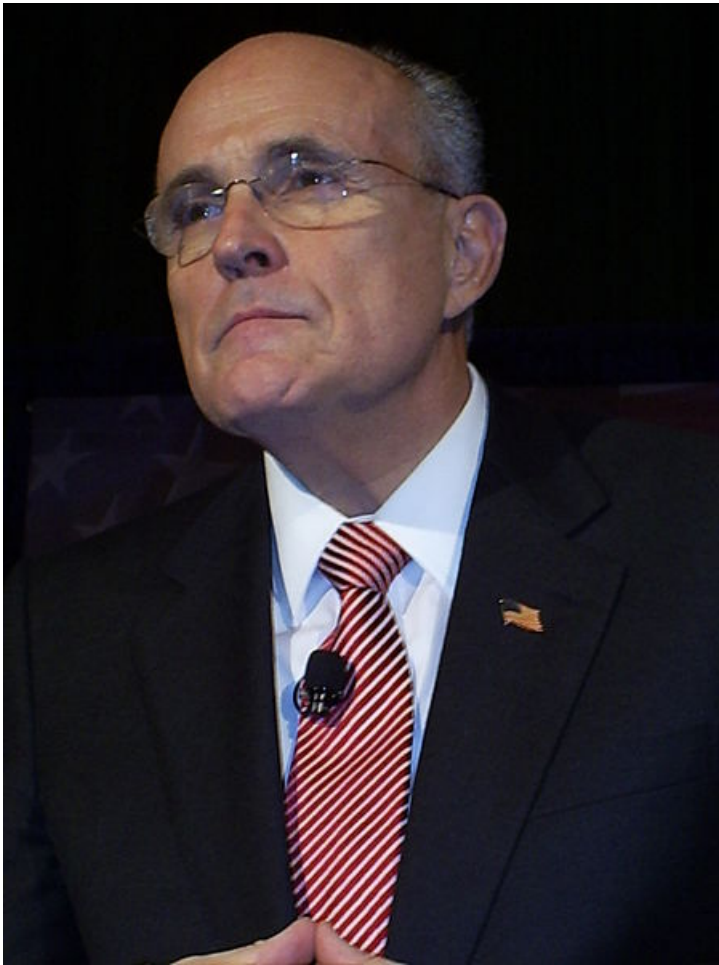
Despite this, the show continued on to Cincinnati, after which the head of the Cincinnati Museum was actually charged with obscenity. The charges were later overturned. This is one of the only cases where the artist wasn't personally attacked, as Mapplethorpe sadly died from AIDS complications in 1989.

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## 4. Chris Ofili

A more recent controversy took place in 1999 when Chris Ofili's exhibit "Sensation" was held at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. His depiction of a dark-skinned Virgin Mary surrounded by naked backside cut-outs in the shape of butterflies was shocking to many people, as well as the fact that the artist had used elephant dung as a major component of the artwork.

There was significant public outrage, with Mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani being one of the most vocal critics. He threatened to cut off funding to the museum. True to his word, Giuliani took action against the museum, which resulted in a court battle. The result was a federal judge ruling against the mayor and the City of New York. The painting is currently held at the Tate Museum in London.



Mayor Rudy Giuliani

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## 5. Questions to Consider

**Culture wars** refers to the contention that can occur when conflicting value systems are exposed to one another. These events raise certain questions:

- Where does the line form between freedom of expression and censorship?
- Should public funds be allotted to works of art that some disapprove of?
- Does art need to appeal to everyone, or have mass appeal, to be considered worthy?
- Does art need to appeal to everyone?
- Do some artists encourage controversy with the intention of increasing publicity for themselves? In other words, they purposely create controversial works of art for their own self-interests, gaining publicity through the controversy.



THINK ABOUT IT

Mass media is the process of reaching large numbers of people through various forms of media, such as print, television, and the Internet. In terms of art, this is great for exposure, but it has a flip side to it, which is that the backlash against controversial pieces of art will be amplified. Should that have any bearing on decisions regarding the value of exhibiting works of art?

These are difficult questions that people will continue to face regarding the arts as long as there are opposing sets of cultural values and people willing to stand up for them.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Culture Wars**

Conflict between values and philosophies in opposing cultures.



#### SUMMARY

Now that you've seen the lesson, are you able to identify and define today's key terms? Can you describe the controversies regarding **Karen Finley**, **Robert Mapplethorpe**, and **Chris Ofili**? Can you relate these controversies to the theme of the culture wars in the United States? The big idea for today was the artistic controversies of Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Chris Ofili, bringing to light the ongoing culture wars in America and leaving **questions to consider** regarding freedom of speech and issues of decency.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Culture Wars**

Conflict between values and philosophies in opposing cultures.

##### **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)**

A federally funded program that supports artists' organizations, and their creative activities.