

# *Virgin in a Condom:* Te Papa's baptism by fire

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**ABSTRACT:** Two weeks after the opening of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) in February 1998, the British Council touring exhibition *Pictura Britannica* opened there in turn. It caused instant, deep and long-lasting controversy, largely due to two exhibits, Tania Kovats's *Virgin in a Condom* (1992) and Sam Taylor-Wood's *Wrecked* (1996). This article examines the controversy, particularly in regard to the former work, drawing extensively on the hundreds of letters sent to Te Papa from members of the public and subsequently lodged in the museum's corporate records. The extensive press coverage is also examined; although critical of Te Papa's handling of the exhibition, it generally opposed the removal of the two offending artworks. Two articles on the issue, by Jenny Harper and Justin Paton, receive close attention. The recollections of two pivotal Te Papa staff members at the time, Sue Superville and Ian Wedde, complement the account. Letters and phone calls from the public were overwhelmingly critical, often hostile. They convey a sense of insult and betrayal on the part of religious believers, many of whom had recently been excited by, and supportive of, Te Papa when it opened. Although numerous objections came from Catholics, other Christian denominations and religions were also widely represented. Correspondents supporting the museum often came from the art world, and several were practising Christians. They stressed the importance of freedom of expression and freedom from censorship, and admired the museum leadership for not capitulating to its critics. The response of Te Papa Chief Executive Cheryl Sotheran is analysed, particularly in her letter to Cardinal Tom Williams, an early and prominent complainant. Te Papa's role as a forum for debate is discussed and its effectiveness here is questioned. The article concludes by observing that while Te Papa held out against its critics by exhibiting *Pictura Britannica* intact until its scheduled ending, the museum thereafter followed a more risk-averse policy. This is reflected in the fact that no significant exhibition of international contemporary art has been held there since.

**KEYWORDS:** Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, art controversies, contemporary art, *Pictura Britannica*, *Virgin in a Condom*, Tania Kovats, Virgin Mary, Catholic Church, contraception, blasphemy, *Wrecked*, Sam Taylor-Wood, Cheryl Sotheran, Ian Wedde, Tom Williams.

## Introduction

One of New Zealand's greatest art controversies was caused by a disproportionately tiny 105 mm-high (or long) object, whose title simply declares what it is – *Virgin in a Condom* (1992), Tania Kovats's ready-made assemblage. It featured in the British Council touring exhibition *Pictura Britannica*:

*Art from Britain*, hosted by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) from 1 March to 26 April 1998, which opened just 15 days after the museum itself. The *Virgin* was the source and focus of mass demonstrations and prayer meetings outside the museum, involving hundreds of participants. A petition organised by the Catholic Communications Office demanding its removal attracted

some 33,000 signatures. Thousands of telephone calls, many abusive, bombarded the seven staff at Te Papa's Enquiry Centre, on duty seven days a week for seven weeks. There were two attacks on the display case, one of which caused minor damage to the exhibit, and an assault on a visitor host, which yielded a broken nose. A parliamentary censure motion was proposed by Geoff Braybrooke, and many of his colleagues – representing National, Labour and New Zealand First – publicly declared their views on the matter. The controversy featured twice on the TVNZ 1 current affairs programme *Holmes*, the latter occasion including an interview with Te Papa Chief Executive Cheryl Sotheran. The first episode of what became a classic arts and culture television series, *Backch@t*, was devoted to the controversy, as was a TV3 debate that screened live on Easter Monday. Members of the public sent hundreds of letters to the museum, all preserved in Te Papa's corporate records, and there were hundreds of column inches of press coverage, including an article in *The Times* (London), together with other news items, editorials and scores of letters to the editor (250 in Wellington newspapers alone). The BBC World Service programme *Focus on Faith* made the controversy its lead item on 26 March 1998. All this explains why Justin Paton, the *New Zealand Listener* art critic, warned his readers: 'Yes, this is *another* article devoted to a certain religious statue sheathed in a certain birth-control device, but do not change the channel yet'.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing, more than 20 years later, the memory of the controversy still lingers for many New Zealanders in their late 30s or over, even if the elderly demographic of many of the correspondents to Te Papa – apparent in their names, handwriting, literacy standards and Christian convictions alike – means they are now probably deceased. Ian Wedde, in his role as the museum's Concept Leader Visual Arts and Culture, was chiefly responsible for fronting *Pictura Britannica*. He gamely agreed to answer this author's questions, and 'can certainly remember some of the conflicts involved & some of the fallout, much of it distressing in varieties of conflicting ways'.<sup>2</sup> Wedde was echoed by the late Sue Superville, then Te Papa's Enquiry Centre manager, who could not 'recall a more powerfully emotive, intense and draining experience' at any other point in her 30-year employment at the Museum of New Zealand and Te Papa.<sup>3</sup>

Why, then, revisit this painful memory? Some may argue that an overview of the controversy has been rendered irrelevant by New Zealand's ongoing process of secularisation, already proclaimed by many of the *Virgin*'s champions in 1998. Social media rage notwithstanding, any

putative revisit of the exhibition today or even the acquisition of one of Kovats's editions of 12 sculptures might well generate less indignation. Instead, there would probably be some incredulity that there was any such indignation in the first place. That said, it is the art historian's duty to document and reconsider the 'foreign country' of the past, particularly when feelings ran so passionately at the time, with the rare phenomenon of art hitting the headlines day after day. Others may believe that the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting (2015) has rendered the controversy parochial and redundant. This, however, overlooks several dire – and prescient – warnings made at the time of the dangers of art ridiculing Islam, as opposed to the softer target of Christianity.

Indeed, the *Virgin* remains 'enshrined' in institutional memory and history. In *Te Papa: Reinventing New Zealand's national museum* (2018), Conal McCarthy recalled the 'controversy ... that suggested Te Papa would always remain in the headlines'. He believed the protests and counter protests 'demonstrated that Te Papa was, as it aimed to be, a public forum ... It was, and remains, "our place", as the tagline states, in the middle of New Zealand's conversations about itself, whether good or bad, positive or negative'.<sup>4</sup> While the latter point is valid, this article will question Te Papa's intention of being a 'public forum' and suggests that, in the case of the *Virgin*, it conspicuously failed to provide one, forcing protesters on either side of the debate to take that initiative themselves instead. The *Virgin* is surely overdue for being 'anatomised'; she inspired an unpublished student dissertation,<sup>5</sup> and has been perceptively, if relatively briefly, discussed in the context of *Sexuality down under* by Jenny Harper (2005), as well as in the legal context by Reid Mortensen in *Law and religion* (2000). Until now, though, there has been no accessible case study of the work itself and the ensuing controversy.

## *Pictura Britannica*

*Pictura Britannica* was curated by Bernice Murphy, then Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (MCA). As described in the *Art Newspaper*, it showcased 'the serious side of the Brit Pop generation', and comprised more than 100 works by 48 artists. Murphy explained 'that if you get behind the stridency and look at what is going on beneath it, there is a thoughtfulness as well as a toughness to young British art – a concern with nature, history and society that you don't find elsewhere'. Rather than taking a celebratory 'Cool Britannia' approach, Murphy's extensive catalogue text instead attempted to explain how this art was 'entextured by the social change which has taken place ...

especially during the Thatcher years', looking at the issues it raised about British culture, society and politics.<sup>6</sup> Giles Auty, art critic of *The Australian*, was distinctly unimpressed, finding the artists 'almost entirely cynical and cosmetic', and referred to their 'predictable, youthful predilection for "soft" targets – the Pope, democracy, the Virgin Mary, the British army – and so on'. He rhetorically demanded what illumination this offered 'to those more accustomed to cutting hedges than cutting edges'.<sup>7</sup> While Kovats was less prominent than the Young British Artists Damien Hirst (seen here at his more decorative rather than visceral), Rachel Whiteread and Mark Wallinger, all of whose works featured in *Pictura Britannica*, like several of her peers she was a product of the Royal College of Art, London, and had won the Barclays Young Artist Award at the Serpentine Gallery in 1991.

Ironically, *Pictura Britannica* was not intended for Te Papa. The venue was to have been the City Gallery Wellington, but urgent maintenance to its building, involving new roofing, forced it to close from mid-December 1997 to late March 1998, precisely when it had planned to host the exhibition. This enabled Te Papa to declare its interest. The process was not straightforward, as Louise Pether, Senior Curator Exhibitions at the MCA, explained to Bronwyn Simes, Manager (Short Term) Exhibitions at Te Papa:

The British Council was more inclined to pursue the City Gallery as a venue ... because they considered it to be a more appropriate aesthetic space. The British Council felt that Te Papa could not provide the

clean space required for an 'art' show and were very concerned about its possible presentation and reception there. We went in to bat for Te Papa, insisting that it was the best option to pursue. It wasn't easy to gain the approval of the British Council in London and Te Papa's enthusiasm for the project along with its commitment to meeting the installation requirements of the MCA and the British Council, were important factors in the discussion.<sup>8</sup>

Wedde confirmed this, recalling that the British Council was 'sceptical of Te Papa's "populist" identity and therefore of its suitability for a cutting-edge exhibition'. Both his and Simes's enthusiastic advocacy, the latter stressing that 'benchmark contemporary exhibitions ... will be staged regularly' by Te Papa, carried the day. Here, they were strongly supported by Murphy and Pether. Wedde recalled: 'It was my hope that the exhibition would give credible ... substance to an important moment in contemporary art that a national museum ... should be expected to show its audiences'.<sup>9</sup> The British Council finally gave its approval on 11 November 1997, little over three months before *Pictura Britannica* opened to the public.

Installation was rushed through, and heroic work was undertaken to get the wiring, electrical outlets and lighting grid up to speed, with false walls constructed (Fig. 1). Despite this, Jenny Harper, Head of Art History at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), felt that 'the space in which the exhibition is installed is unsuitable for this sort of show. It was never intended to be opened when the museum did'.



Fig. 1 *Pictura Britannica* installation, Te Papa, February 1998 (photo: Neil Semple). Museum Records, 1997, *Pictura Britannica* Exhibition: Installation view, MU000450/001/0005/0003, Te Papa Archives Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.

She was unimpressed by the ‘unlikely environment’ in which the exhibition was sited, ‘both intellectually and aesthetically. The space itself was physically unimpressive and the lighting poor. It was impossible not to approach the exhibition without seeing the bright lights of Time Warp, one of the new museum’s money-making, crowd-pulling, hands-on, high-tech events flashing below.’ As other arguments rapidly took over, even reviewers paid little attention to the effectiveness of the installation as such, and here Harper was an exception. A former curator and contemporary art specialist eager to see her field on display as much as possible, she also realised the ungenerosity of a wholesale dismissal of the exhibition, recognising: ‘Naturally I am pleased that Te Papa sees itself as a venue for current art and *Pictura Britannica* was obviously a useful offering for [Wellington’s biennial] Festival of the Arts’.<sup>10</sup>



## The *Virgin* anatomised

Surprisingly little has been published about the intrinsic qualities (or otherwise) of the *Virgin* in itself, and here Harper is again exceptional in summarising them: ‘Part of the conceptual strength of *Virgin in a Condom* is that two such disparate items are combined in a simple yet potent way. It cogently represents what for some is a contentious mixture of sex and religion, but all the time remains tiny, delicate and unexceptional.’<sup>11</sup>

In a neo-Dadaist way, evocative of the father figure of contemporary art, Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) – particularly his *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) – Kovats chose and combined two objects, a mass-produced resin votive figure of the Virgin Mary and a latex condom (Fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> As both were intended to fulfil utterly opposing functions – the sacred and the profane, the life-giving and the contraceptive, and to hostile critics, the pure and the sullied – their fusion created a sensational and controversial effect. A recent precedent, Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), a photograph of a small plastic crucifix immersed in a tank of the artist’s urine, was often mentioned by specialists in the same breath as the *Virgin*. In October 1997, just five months before *Pictura Britannica* opened in Wellington, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, George Pell, unsuccessfully demanded a court injunction against the National Gallery of Victoria ‘to restrain the display of [this] indecent, obscene and blasphemous figure’.<sup>13</sup> Yet Serrano’s act of creating the photograph was more overtly aestheticised and deliberate than Kovats’s momentary inspiration, or as she preferred to call it, accident. Moreover, despite Serrano’s unconvincing protestations, the title of his work was surely deliberately vulgar, confrontational, provocative and, to Pell, blasphemous. The *Virgin in a Condom* is, by contrast, more neutral, banal and, as Harper stated, unexceptional, perhaps lending it a more subtle and insidious power than Serrano’s effusion.

In her *Pictura Britannica* catalogue essay, Murphy found the work ‘poetic and potent with social tension. It condenses a range of social questions within Catholicism that are as historically resonant and nagging as the sculpture is tiny and smooth in its caul of latex.’ In a memorable phrase tailored to the catalogue’s target readership, she deemed it ‘a haplessly secular, apotropaic emblem of modern times’.<sup>14</sup> Her public

Fig. 2 *Virgin in a Condom*, 1992, resin and latex condom, 105 mm. x 40 mm. x 30 mm. (edition of 12). Artist Tania Kovats. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London (photo: Alex Hartley)

statement, written when the *Virgin* attracted attention during its showing at the MCA, was obviously less esoteric: 'Tania Kovats eloquently and simply encapsulates a range of issues concerning Catholicism, from contraception, abortion, safe sex messages in the community and sexual identity, to the relationship between the Catholic Church and images of femininity.'<sup>15</sup>

It would be quoted by Te Papa many times. An extract from Libby Anson's 1995 *Art Monthly* review was republished in the catalogue to help contextualise the work. She explained that Kovats 'has explored metaphors for the constructed notion of female identity and iconography, often condensing it into various configurations of the Virgin Mary'. Kovats 'works in a variety of media by which she achieves the ultimate artistic aim – expressing the conceptual in tangible form'.<sup>16</sup> The Virgin/condom combination

originated in a formal accident ... The piece has emerged as a controversial talisman, eloquently encapsulating issues surrounding Catholicism, contraception, abortion and sexual identity. The divine female, swathed in multi-layered, vagina-like robes is made phallic. It is suffocated beneath a temporary, delicate but nevertheless loaded symbol of male potency, rendering the object reminiscent of the crucifix-cum-dildo in *The Exorcist*. However, to suggest that it is merely blasphemous limits its potential as an art work. Kovats reproduced the piece as a multiple, the Arts Council bought one and now refuses to exhibit it. She was shocked and amused to realise she had created what amounts to a piece of political propaganda.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, the British Council relented when Murphy selected the *Virgin* for *Pictura Britannica*.

More important in this discussion, however, was the removal of any hint of the artist's amusement when the work provoked rising public anger during the first few days of its exhibition at Te Papa. In a letter to Cardinal Tom Williams, Archbishop of Wellington, discussed in more detail below, Sotheran pointed out that 'Some of the artists in the exhibition use humour to express themselves. The artist in question emphatically does not'.<sup>18</sup> When pressed to provide an artist's statement, Kovats explained:

The work ... was made at a time when I was thinking about the importance of the Virgin Mary as the most significant female archetype in Western culture. Non-Catholics and Catholics recognize her as an extremely important mother figure and of enormous influence in

the definition of female identity ... As an artist, and as an individual, I am interested in the ways that identity and sexuality are determined by belief systems. My artistic practice has continued to consider the relationship between art and spirituality. This is the framework of thought that surrounded the making of ... 'Virgin in a Condom'.

The work was not designed to give offence or make light of these issues. It is intended to prompt very serious reflection of these important questions that affect Catholics and non-Catholics alike: sexual politics, questions of contraception, abortion, and sexual identity affect us all. It is important to emphasize that the condom is a symbol of protection, literally a life-saver in the current climate of H.I.V. awareness ...

'Virgin in a Condom' is a cultural object – an artwork, not an object of veneration with religious intent. Its context is the art gallery or museum, which without wanting to abuse the right to freedom of expression by an artist, have to function as deposits and containers for often difficult or complex works of art.<sup>19</sup>

For obvious reasons, Kovats played down any phallic and fetishistic connotations, which Libby Anson celebrated but which would have inflamed public anger and disgust. Yet the artist's statement offers little help either to her religious critics or secularised champions. Calling it a 'cultural object' says little, and to suggest that it could ever be seriously considered an 'object of veneration' would have provoked angry disbelief from the faithful. While the work was intended to 'prompt very serious reflection' of the issues that Kovats then listed, it remains unclear just what the image was supposed to contribute to our consideration of them. While the condom's role as a symbol of protection and a lifesaver in the HIV/AIDS era was obvious, Kovats was strangely silent about its original and still dominant function to prevent life resulting from sexual intercourse. Both aspects would have inevitably fallen foul of the Catholic Church's objections to the use of condoms – indeed contraception of any kind – but together they would have surely made her 'apology' more robust.

Mark Sladen's otherwise enthusiastic *Frieze* review of Kovats's exhibition at the Laure Genillard Gallery in London (1995) perhaps not surprisingly concludes: 'I still don't think that the piece does much to extend the debates on which it touches'.<sup>20</sup> There are further, relatively brief discussions of the *Virgin* in Jeremy Millar and Philip Hoare's monograph *Tania Kovats* (2010), where Millar stresses how

the work's formal stridency and forthright title make it 'unusual in Kovats's *oeuvre*'.<sup>21</sup> One of the most perceptive interpretations of its power came not from the art world but from political commentator Chris Trotter's article 'Museum can't serve faith and freedom' in *The Dominion*. This returns us to the central discussion of the controversy:

Draping a statue of the Madonna in a contraceptive sheath is an act so rich in symbolism that it takes the breath away. The explosive reaction of the Catholic community bears witness to its artistic power ... *Virgin in a Condom* did not become one of the 'icons of late 20th century art' by being polite or advocating safe sex. It won its ... notoriety because it attacked head-on, and with calculating impiety, the Catholic Church's teachings on female sexuality. It is a bold bid to reclaim Mary's holy fertility from the immaculate conceptions of the Church: to protect her from the patriarchal ambitions of God and man alike. The rage of the faithful is, therefore, perfectly understandable. They know blasphemy when they see it.<sup>22</sup>

Trotter went on to attack the 'vapid secularism' of Te Papa's leadership, which had made them 'numb to the force of their own exhibits'.<sup>23</sup>

## *Wrecked* and questions of inclusion

Not one work, but two caused almost all the controversy of *Pictura Britannica*. Although the *Virgin* monopolised public and media attention, Sam Taylor-Wood's vast (1524 x 3962 mm.) Cibachrome colour print based on a film still, *Wrecked* (1996), sometimes ran a fairly close second (Fig. 3). A depiction of the Last Supper closely modelled on the fresco (c. 1495–98) in Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), it startlingly and irreverently departed from its Renaissance precedent by having a bare-breasted female stand-in for Jesus, son of God, who appears sexually aroused, as well as a cast including Taylor-Wood's boozy friends as the apostles.<sup>24</sup> It thus excels in the 'in your face' stridency that Murphy claimed she sought to avoid in her choice of other exhibits. Although some were shocked by its supposedly feminist challenge to a masculine god, its 'bad girl' connotations are more apparent, while the laddish 'apostles' clearly allude to the Young British Artists' lifestyle. Furthermore, its pictorial lavishness cannot quite conceal its superficiality compared with Kovats's powerfully simple creation. Taylor-Wood's work is at a remove, as it is based on art – Leonardo's canonical,



Fig. 3 'Last Supper the last straw', *Evening Post* (Wellington), 9 March 1998 (*Pictura Britannica*, Te Papa Exhibition files, 1998, Te Aka Matua Library, Te Papa).

if historically defective, re-creation of the Last Supper – and is therefore perhaps as blasphemous towards him as it is towards this deeply solemn moment in the story of Christ. Another art historical precedent for Taylor-Wood was *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child* (1926) by Max Ernst (1891–1976), whose ‘dire blasphemy’ was admired by tongue-in-cheek art critic Leo Steinberg.<sup>25</sup> Superville recalled that telephone complaints about *Wrecked* came later in the piece than they did about the *Virgin* and were less intense. Wedde confirmed that ‘in terms of public response it was the Kovats work that got the most attention’, adding, ‘I suspect the hostility to “Wrecked” was more sexist-affronted than outraged by perceived blasphemy.’<sup>26</sup>

Despite constant pressure to do so, Wedde never considered excluding either the *Virgin* or *Wrecked* from the exhibits. Understandably, he regrets nothing to this day, and believes that both works were ‘integral to the curatorial and artistic integrity of the exhibition as offered. They read as legitimate commentaries on the identity and gender politics of certain religious icons as interpreted by artists with the right to self-expression – I did not support the censorship of those views or the art works expressing them.’<sup>27</sup>

While the Art Gallery of South Australia deliberately excluded the *Virgin* from the Adelaide leg of the exhibition tour in 1997, arguably an act of prudent discretion rather than censorship, Wedde was concerned with showcasing as comprehensive an exhibition package as was compatible with the hastily prepared Te Papa gallery spaces. Any exclusions were made through size constraints, which were never an issue with the tiny *Virgin*. In a letter of support to Sotheran on 9 March 1998, Murphy implicitly contrasts the two institutional responses:

When the Art Gallery of South Australia took the decision that they would not show the *Virgin in a Condom* work at all, I suggested that an intermediary position be considered: namely that the work would be available for viewing on request, so that those who wished to exercise the right to experience the work could do so. The AGSA decided not to do this in the end, and so the work was never placed on view in the exhibition, or acknowledged as part of the project at all. I wish you to know that I admire the courage and commitment with which Te Papa has presented this exhibition.<sup>28</sup>

The question of whether the *Virgin* had a major impact on the MCA leg of *Pictura Britannica* remains ambiguous. Despite being sensationally stolen some weeks into the hanging – and hastily replaced with a replica from Kovats’s edition – it attracted far less media or public attention than it would in Wellington. The Society for the Protection of Community Standards, in its lengthy retrospective research report (2009), was therefore exaggerating when it claimed that ‘Ms Sotheran and Ian Wedde knew that the exhibition of these works [the *Virgin* and *Wrecked*] created outrage among the Christian community’.<sup>29</sup> At no stage in the discussions with the British Council or the MCA were there recorded references to either work likely causing outrage. The short time frame open to Te Papa meant that, unlike almost every other significant exhibition that it hosted, *Pictura Britannica* did not undergo the rigorous focus-group approval process run by audience-engagement facilitators, which might well have identified any problem exhibits. The extent to which the ensuing controversy was underestimated was poignantly reflected in the security arrangements made three weeks before the opening, with only one mobile guard on duty at any one time, walking through the exhibition every 50 minutes.

Excepting John Daly-Peoples writing in the *National Business Review* 10 days into the exhibition, by which time it was big news, reviewers generally paid little attention to the *Virgin*. Auty had summarily identified it as addressing a ‘soft target’, while Benjamin Genocchio in the *Sydney Morning Herald* believed that it ‘charms viewers with its utter contradiction’.<sup>30</sup> Anthony Bond did not mention it in his *Art & Australia* review, nor in New Zealand did either the *New Zealand Listener* or *Open Eyes*. In his Wellington *Evening Post* review, Mark Amery was relatively anodyne: ‘That it does stir us up reaffirms the power of the art object and the place of the museum for contemporary art’.<sup>31</sup> All this changed when, on 26 February, the TVNZ 1 *Holmes* programme featured an item on the exhibition that included a preview of the *Virgin*. The eponymous presenter, Paul Holmes, apparently confused the biblical Madonna with her modern stellar namesake, producing a range of emotional reactions from his prime-time ‘middle New Zealand’ audience; amusement was not the predominant one.

## ‘These disgusting items’

Harper observed that ‘no art controversy in New Zealand has promoted such sustained debate’ as *Pictura Britannica*. The reception, she believed, ‘revealed more about the concerns of the objectors than those of their makers’.<sup>32</sup> Several notable incidents that occurred during the exhibition were listed at the beginning of this article, but more require mention here. Te Papa’s senior management was threatened with violence, resulting in the installation of a security system in Sotheran’s private residence and her being in close touch with the police. Paul Brewer, Director of Communications, and Wedde were also the targets of abusive and threatening telephone calls. At the museum, a guard was permanently stationed beside the *Virgin* during opening hours to protect the work after its case was smashed. As the police had predicted, a telephone caller warned the Enquiry Centre of a bomb threat, but following a sniffer dog search, this proved to be a hoax. A constant crowd of Catholic demonstrators recited their rosaries and prayed their novenas outside Te Papa. A moment of farce entered the picture on 21 March, when a container truck pulled up in the middle of this devout crowd, its doors opening to reveal a living tableau of *Wrecked*, complete with a topless woman taking on the role of Jesus Christ.

On the political front, the Labour MP for Napier, Geoff Braybrooke, unsuccessfully proposed a parliamentary motion to censure Te Papa. He argued: ‘Whoever pays the piper calls the tune. We can’t now do a Pontius Pilate act and wash our hands of it. God knows how much public money has been spent on bringing these disgusting items to this country.’<sup>33</sup>

John Banks, a prominent National MP, went further and vainly demanded Sotheran’s prosecution and at the very least her resignation.<sup>34</sup> This was matched by Arthur Skinner, President of Catholic Action, a specially formed pressure group, which attempted to lodge a private prosecution against Te Papa for blasphemy. Solicitor-General John McGrath refused to allow the case to proceed, regarding it as an improper burden on the freedom of expression. This effectively nullified the offence, which he believed had long lost any social relevance. The situation became ever more complicated, and perhaps strengthened Te Papa’s position, when divisions appeared among Catholics themselves, some of whom – particularly Catholic Action diehards – called for the Pope’s mass dismissal of New Zealand bishops for their allegedly lukewarm response. Opinions also shifted in Te Papa’s direction following the attack on the visitor host; Superville remembered calls from ‘Catholics who stated that while they may not like the exhibit, they did not condone violence’.<sup>35</sup>

## Fifteen to one

The Te Papa corporate records contain 15 boxes of letters condemning *Pictura Britannica*, and just one of supporting letters. These have not been systematically counted and several, judging from their sealed enclosures, have obviously never been read, but they probably number almost 2000. Early letters – and periodically ones from important senders – are marked as replied to, but by the end of the first week of March, the museum was clearly run off its feet. Both sets of letters provide revealing insights into New Zealanders’ beliefs – about religion, morality and the function of a national museum, and occasionally about contemporary art. Their perusal threatened to be a soul-destroying task for this author, who appreciated Justin Paton’s witty verdict: ‘a ceremony of shrill complaint and rote indignation, scripted and performed with the lethal predictability of a midday soap opera’. But it was more than that. The vast correspondence contains more than a ‘few signs of intelligent life’;<sup>36</sup> at times, it is poignant, indeed moving, to read the views of hundreds of remarkably literate, sincere, principled, engaged and sometimes enraged New Zealanders. Contrary to Wedde’s claim, they did not come from ‘a very specific religious community’,<sup>37</sup> but included many Christian denominations, Muslims, Hindus, agnostics and even atheists.

The overwhelmingly negative response to *Pictura Britannica* in Te Papa’s corporate records powerfully affirms historian John Stenhouse’s thesis in his important article ‘God’s own silence: secular nationalism, Christianity and the writing of New Zealand history’ (2004). Here, he explained how ‘Many New Zealand historians constructed progressive, teleological histories that depicted a dark religious past giving way, gradually but inexorably, to a brighter, more enlightened secular present’.<sup>38</sup> Stenhouse criticised them for having all ‘too often offered generalizations about New Zealand Christianity based on inadequate arguments and insufficient evidence’.<sup>39</sup> In a later, more populist presentation of the same arguments, Stenhouse went on to argue that ‘For most of our history, Christianity has been more widespread and influential than many historians, especially in recent years, have acknowledged ... Arguments to the contrary should probably be understood as, in large part, attempts to use history to marginalise or silence religious believers’.<sup>40</sup> Although Stenhouse did not address this particular controversy, it almost uncannily mirrors his general arguments. Objectors to the *Virgin* often stressed that they were not Catholics or even churchgoers, yet their sense of morality was outraged by the work. With few exceptions, defenders of Te Papa steadfastly upheld their sense of the

‘enlightened secular present’ and in turn seemed outraged by their far-from-silent opponents. If not quite constituting a culture war, the letters certainly represent a major culture battle, reflective of that historical moment.

## The case against

One of the earliest letters addressed to Wedde and Sotheran epitomises the objections of many writers to the *Virgin*. Mary Schultz, from Wellington, expressed her ‘disgust at the sacrilegious and blasphemous’ treatment of the ‘Holy Virgin Mary – the Mother of my God’. The museum showed ‘a great lack of understanding and sensitivity to the beliefs of others’. Schultz perceived double standards in operation, as Te Papa was ‘supposed to mean “our place” ... how can it be when on the marae in our museum you depict all cultures and beliefs, yet you blatantly defile our belief in the Mother of God’.<sup>41</sup> This point, frequently repeated in other letters, was echoed by Cardinal Tom Williams, who argued:

Justification for the exhibit will undoubtedly be claimed on the grounds of artistic merit or freedom of expression. Such justification would be rejected were the figure to be that of the Prophet Muhammed or Princess Te Puia [*sic*]. Civility, decency and sensitivity to the beliefs of minority groups would prevail. It is strange that seemingly only Catholics are excluded from such consideration.<sup>42</sup>

Both Schultz and Williams demanded prompt action, the latter urging the removal of the exhibit without delay. Paul Rieger, Mayor of Palmerston North, amplified the Māori argument, asking: ‘Can you honestly say that you would have allowed a similar affront to an equally sensitive cultural value of Maoridom? It is not simply a question of what you find offensive, but rather to demonstrate appropriate respect for values you must know others hold.’<sup>43</sup> Rieger’s point would be repeated many times, but there were few if any letters where correspondents used this as an excuse for Māori-bashing. Indeed, David Shroff, from Wellington, noted Te Papa’s ‘enormous and proper respect ... paid to our unique Maori culture’, while denying this to Christianity.<sup>44</sup>

Another frequently expressed reaction that deepened objectors’ feelings was a sense of betrayal. Amanda Sutherland of Wellington told Sotheran:

I have spent the past month telling people how proud I am that this great nation of New Zealand has such a magnificent building to house our national treasures. You cannot imagine the extent of the disappointment I felt when informed that you had chosen to ignore repeated requests to remove from exhibition the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in such a desecrated state ... ‘Our Place’. I think not.<sup>45</sup>

The two-week gap between the museum’s triumphant opening and that of *Pictura Britannica* exacerbated this feeling, abruptly ending the honeymoon between Te Papa and many members of the public. We may speculate whether feelings would have been quite so intense had *Pictura Britannica* opened there a year or two later. And would a public inured to controversial art shown at the City Gallery Wellington have reacted just as fiercely had the exhibition been held there, as originally intended? From what was said, the answer here would certainly have been negative.

The Wellington poet Chris Orsman, who described himself as an ‘ordinary Catholic’, wrote twice to Sotheran, setting out his objections: ‘The issue here is one of cultural sensitivity – not art and censorship ... If Te Papa is indeed to be “Our Place”, why gratuitously offend that significant minority of New Zealanders – Roman Catholics – who have themselves contributed so much to the art and culture of this country.’<sup>46</sup> Like many others, he vowed not to set foot in the museum until the offending work was removed. Orsman was clearly not satisfied with the form letter received from Brewer:

As a poet, and one who has friends who are painters, I’m used to the idea that art is multi-layered, and functions at different levels of meaning.

As a Catholic, however, both the Kovats piece ... and ... *Wrecked*, offer a visceral and gross offence to my values and beliefs, both to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and to the Mother of Jesus.<sup>47</sup>

He added that by continuing to display these works, Te Papa was marginalising ‘the beliefs of a significant minority’ and showing itself to be ‘insensitive to the culture and beliefs of Catholicism’. Orsman believed that Te Papa’s attitude reeked ‘of Anti-Catholicism – a prejudice that Time magazine pointed out some years back as “the most respectable of prejudices” and, therefore, the most hypocritical’.<sup>48</sup>

Sue and Michael Ryan, both staff at Massey University, and unlike most other, more squeamish correspondents, addressed the condom and the supposedly phallic connotations of the work:

A condom which can indeed be defined as a symbol of sexual responsibility has only one place where it should be and that is firmly upon a male penis. It is totally beyond our comprehension how the Madonna can be regarded as a male penis. Where is the connection or have we missed something here? ... Reducing Mary to a phallic symbol by enclosing her in a condom is not only offensive but sacrilegious.<sup>49</sup>

Representatives of the Salvation Army and the Anglican Church entered the fray. Raeline Savage contrasted 'this wonderful museum' with the Salvation Army's concern 'at the distasteful, even offensive ... items of "art" displayed in the exhibition'.<sup>50</sup> Murray Spackman, Archdeacon of Hauraki, found it 'almost unbelievable, that in this day of cultural and spiritual sensitivity', the *Virgin* was 'so blatantly paraded'. He asked rhetorically: 'Would a Maori ancestral carving, shrouded in a condom, be given even a moment's consideration for exhibition? I think not! Would a work of "art" which debased the Koran be considered appropriate for exhibition? I think not! It may well be to ask for tolerance – but tolerance by whom?'<sup>51</sup>

Len Boyle, Catholic Bishop of Dunedin, reiterated the theme of betrayal, saying: 'I thought the title given to our National Museum, "Te Papa" was a wonderful name to pull New Zealanders together at a place we could be proud of, but now 'It was a great disappoint[ment] to see our national museum for which we have held such high hopes to display exhibits in a way which cuts offensively deep into the hearts of people because of their religious beliefs.'<sup>52</sup>

In *The Press*, University of Canterbury law lecturer David Round condemned 'the vile insult' to the 'Mother of God' and her Son, 'and to all who practise the Christian religion'. He added: 'Nor, for that matter, is it art, to produce which more is needed than an adolescent desire to shock. No other religion or interest group would be so contemptuously treated. Nothing remotely impolite to Maoris would ever be displayed.' The impassioned Round proposed, 'Perhaps Christians should occupy the building.'<sup>53</sup>

Round's colleague at the English department at Canterbury, Gordon Spence, was equally offended 'by the disgusting exhibit in your museum'. Citing Dante's prayer to the Virgin Mary in the *Paradiso* part of the *Divine Comedy*, he called the artwork 'an offence not only against a religion but also against the art that produced the image of the Virgin Mary in the age of faith. An attack on the highest

art is an attack on the best in ourselves'.<sup>54</sup> Another English literature scholar, Peter Whiteford, from VUW, believed that Te Papa's 'bewildering failure to understand the nature of religious symbols and religious art' was compounded by 'distressing insensitivity and mulish obstinacy' its refusal to remove the two contentious pieces.<sup>55</sup> In turn, the University of Auckland law lecturer Bill Hodge felt that, whatever their status, Te Papa was an unsuitable venue for them. He castigated the museum for having 'deliberately chosen to exclude and insult a clearly defined minority. Such an attack on Catholic doctrine ... may have a place but not in NZ's national museum'.<sup>56</sup>

Gul Zaman, of the South Auckland Muslim Association, wrote a letter of complaint to Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, copied to Te Papa:

You, as head of the present government, must know that freedom of expression, whether verbal, written or in an art form, does not give an individual or an institution the license to denigrate or act with absolute impunity. Muslims, as many practicing Christians, take strong exception to this aberration on your part in not instructing the chief executive of the Museum to remove the blasphemous exhibit forthwith. She must realize that the Museum is built at the expense of the people of the nation and she is but a servant of the public. If she is unable to differentiate ... 'art' from ... trash then I humbly suggest she finds another employment, preferably in a massage parlour.<sup>57</sup>

Further protests came from Wellington's Faith in Action Group, which represented Bahá'í, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, Ringatū Church and Sikh communities. Faith in Action complained that the two exhibits 'are not only causing a lot of mental suffering to large members of our community but also denigrating two of the truly great people of our time'.<sup>58</sup> Several weeks after the exhibition closed, Karun Lakshman of the Ethnic Council of Wellington, sympathised with their distress. Lakshman was concerned that 'the Museum, calling itself "Our Place" chose to stage an exhibition which offended one section of the community. This time it was the Catholics, who will it be the next time – the Jews? the Buddhists? the Hindus?'<sup>59</sup> There were enough tensions in society without adding to them. An impassioned denunciation came from K. Gurunathan, the *Kapiti Observer* columnist. Although not addressed to Te Papa, his article was

forwarded by correspondents. He lambasted ‘An elite group [who] have set themselves up as cultural gods and guardians of the ... public space ... The artists having issued licences to the artists to use the publicly funded space as a high ground from which to piss on the sacred values of Christians.’<sup>60</sup>

No one was as outspoken in print as Gurunathan; by contrast, many letters consistently impress with their politeness and even sometimes their warmth. Sutherland, for example, asked: ‘Please remove this Affront to Christians’, while the well-known Christchurch trampers Pat and Christine Barrett signed off, ‘God Bless you Cheryl.’<sup>61</sup> Although Superville and her colleagues encountered not infrequent abuse on the telephone, relatively few correspondents – who were probably a better-educated demographic – were carried away in their outrage. However, one anonymous writer told the museum management, ‘I hope you rot in hell’,<sup>62</sup> while another warned, ‘I CURSE YOU AND THE BUILDING for not removing the offensive “art”. God is watching.’<sup>63</sup> An Upper Hutt resident donated Te Papa a homemade plastic hei tiki and condom assemblage (present location unknown), while ‘Art in a Nutshell’ posted the museum a ‘Genuine African Elephant Bullshit’ paperweight. An Auckland correspondent gave vent to his personal anger towards Sotheran, telling her: ‘Personally for me it is hurtful and is an insult to my Catholic face. How would you feel if it was something dear to you would be placed on public display covered by a condom ... Would it be OK, bitch?’<sup>64</sup>

## Politicians, Māori and schools object

The first of several letters from politicians came from Labour MP Ross Robertson, who ‘had great hope for the success of Te Papa ... but like many ... I am deeply hurt that in your first feature exhibition you have chosen to grossly blaspheme and offend a sacred symbol of our Christian faith’. Liberalism had been taken too far ‘by allowing someone to scream an obscenity from the heart of our cultural store-place’.<sup>65</sup> The early-career National MP Gerry Brownlee echoed his colleague and found the two offending works ‘certainly not appropriate for a museum whose focus is the positive aspects of New Zealand’s diverse cultural mix’. The art community should not expect taxpayers to provide ‘more and more for what appears to me to be their own personal indulgence’.<sup>66</sup> Wyatt Creech, Minister of Education, had

received numerous complaints from his constituents. While he felt Te Papa ‘has justly earned the reputation for being protective to Maori culture’, here the museum seemed to be ‘showing no respect at all for the cultural sensitivities of other New Zealanders. Feelings are strong’. Rightly or wrongly, ‘many people very strongly object to this decision ... They see something very precious to them being desecrated’. Noting that Te Papa was ‘in an early stage in its life’, Creech believed that a ‘protracted dispute like this cannot help but stain the public perception of the museum’.<sup>67</sup> Belinda Vernon was more measured than many of her parliamentary colleagues, and requested information about the internal processes of the museum when selecting an exhibition.

Later in the exhibition’s run, Paul Swain conveyed his concern at the lack of accountability, and believed ‘in this case museum authorities have not spelt out clearly why they have decided to run an exhibition that clearly causes offence to a large number of people’. Like Vernon, he wanted Te Papa to outline its criteria ‘before it decides to exhibit ... art works’. Unusually robustly for a Labour MP, he asserted, ‘It is clear to me that Te Papa would not show an exhibition that portrayed ... pornography, violence against women or a display that paid homage to Adolf Hitler. I am also certain that an exhibition which involved a great Maori leader or chief with a condom would not be acceptable to the museum.’ Swain expected a ‘frank, crisp, reply’, free from ‘waffle as an art form’,<sup>68</sup> but his letter does not appear to have been answered.

Some correspondents had problems with the ‘Britishness’ of the exhibition; sometimes this looked like cultural insularity, with one reference, for example, to ‘a questionable foreign exhibition’. Brian Carrell, Anglican Bishop in Palmerston North, expressed understandable concerns ‘when the Museum of New Zealand deliberately selects ... overseas work, then places them on public display in what it promotes as a place that belongs to and reflects the treasures of the nation, and then closes its ears to a hurting public voice’.<sup>69</sup> Another Anglican, Rodney Dunlop, Regional Dean of Mawhera, struck an emotional note, telling Sotheran, ‘The public display of art of this nature suggests ... that it is all right to trample on the feelings of others.’ Christian convictions, ‘which have undergirded so much of what we cherish and value in our nation, are being increasingly ridiculed and treated with disdain’.<sup>70</sup> A retired Catholic school principal, Monica Costello, sensitively told Sotheran:

I am saddened, and feel for you, that the strong revulsion expressed regarding ‘Virgin in a Condom’ and the ‘Last Supper’ piece has impacted on the general good feeling towards the major achievement of Te Papa as a national discovery place. I do share that revulsion, and sense of insult to a friend ... to Mary, Mother of Jesus, and ‘te whaia o te ao’, as a favourite Maori hymn puts it.<sup>71</sup>

Costello added that she was sorry *Pictura Britannica* was being held at Te Papa, ‘taking from so much that is ... creative and enlivening and expressive of human diversity and dignity’.<sup>72</sup>

Although most complainants cited so far were Pākehā, there was no shortage of Māori objectors. Ten days after the exhibition opening, Minister of Māori Affairs Tau Henare and three New Zealand First colleagues asked Te Papa to remove the *Virgin*. Henare, Tukoroirangi Morgan, Tutekawa Wylie and Rana Waitai issued a joint statement declaring, ‘We empathise with the Catholic community’s sense of outrage’.<sup>73</sup> P.B. Toi, Archdeacon of the Te Rohe o Rangitikei-Manawatū, was succinct in his charges, saying both the *Virgin* and *Wrecked* ‘are offensive to our people’, who were ‘deeply disappointed that Te Papa can no longer be considered as truly “Our Place”’. The Art Exhibition has destroyed for us this wonderful concept.<sup>74</sup> Matiu Mareikura, President of Te Kaunihira Matua o te Hui Aranga (Central Council of Māori Catholic Clubs), went for the jugular when he wondered ‘if the museum would have the courage to drape a condom over one of the carved tekoteko and argue that this is art. WOULD YOU DARE I think not’.<sup>75</sup> More nuanced objection came from Father Phil Cody, described by the *Sunday Star-Times* as ‘the Wellington Maori chaplain’, who claimed that the *Virgin* was ‘deeply offensive to Maori’:

It attacks a special person at the heart of the faith from the beginning of Aotearoa. Mary is seen as the Mother of Life, much as Papatuanuku cares for her children ... She is an ariki, a chiefly person with a special interest in the plan of things ... To dishonour her is to wound someone at the centre of belief of Catholic Maori.<sup>76</sup>

Protests also came from the education sector, with letters and petitions signed by school boards, principals, teachers and students alike. Whiteford wrote his letter as chairperson of the trustees of St Brendan’s School, Upper Hutt. He warned that the school would ‘avail itself of the unrivalled educational opportunities which Te Papa has to offer, but it does so with some unease’.<sup>77</sup> The principal

of St Columba’s School, Hamilton, complained that ‘The publicity surrounding this offensive display is distressing for the 360 students at our School’.<sup>78</sup> Several students from Bishop Viard College, Porirua, also complained, including seventh-former Antoinette Jones, who argued: ‘if it is Our Place we deserve a say ... we are the Lord’s people and it is sad to see you make a mockery of what we stand for’.<sup>79</sup> The staff of St Michael’s School, Remuera, simply wrote: ‘We are extremely saddened for the children we teach’.<sup>80</sup>

## Presbyterian contortions

In his *New Zealand Listener* article, Paton regretted ‘the tribalisation of the public’, and for all their frequent heartfelt qualities, these letters confirm this phenomenon. Simon McLeay, the Presbyterian minister of St John and St Philip, Papatoetoe, struck a lonely but intelligent note when describing his mental quandary. Although ‘vehemently opposed to the censorship of free thinking’ and any ‘vested interest group vetoing that, Christian, Maori, Muslim or any other’, he believed that ‘this display should not be housed in a national museum. It is a highly controversial exhibit, and in our culture we have developed art galleries to exhibit such works. I also believe that part of Te Papa’s intent is to unite New Zealanders in expressing our unique contribution to the world, not to divide us.’ Yet ‘on second reflection’, McLeay felt that Kovats’s ‘cheap piece of sensationalism ... makes a point for me’.<sup>81</sup> He continued:

I understand that the Roman Catholic hierarchy forbid the use of condoms for the faithful. I also understand that in many parts of the world Christian men have acquired aids [*sic*], maybe from a blood transfusion, maybe from a prostitute. The Roman Catholic hierarchy seem to be saying that if that husband and wife in this predicament wish to have sex (a not unreasonable desire) they must not use a condom; the wife in this circumstance is almost certain to also be infected with aids. The virgin in a condom expresses for me that situation, that a condom is a God-given protection in this situation that should be used to protect the faithful wife. Mary symbolises to me the thousands of faithful women who need to be protected from the result of their husband’s sin or misfortune.<sup>82</sup>

McLeay was in a dilemma, not wishing to censor the work but believing it had crossed the line in its inappropriateness for a national museum. He has been quoted at length here because his musings were, if anything, more convincing than what Sotheran, Murphy or indeed Kovats herself said in defence of the work. But McLeay's was an isolated voice in the controversy. A somewhat more conservative variation on his views came from the retired Anglican Bishop of Waipu, Peter Atkins, who distinguished himself from 'Catholics who venerate Mary', but believed she 'is to be respected as a symbol of deep devotion for many people in New Zealand' and 'cannot be overlaid with any other symbol which is not sympathetic to its holiness'. He wrote with feeling about his 'many years on the Council on HIV/AIDS' and stressed how 'Those of us who were Christian on that Council worked for many years in the community to help people respect the condom as an important factor in controlling the spread of disease. Your exhibition of this so called work of art has trivialized this medical aid and will make the task of education even harder.'<sup>83</sup>

### Is it art?

A rarity among the letters of objection is any sustained or serious analysis of the artistic status of the *Virgin* and *Wrecked*. Contemporary art, as Harper wrote, is 'no longer about making beautiful things with acclaimed technical prowess',<sup>84</sup> but most of the public failed – or refused – to grasp this. They persisted in seeing art in Platonic – or Kenneth Clark-like – terms, exemplifying 'the best in ourselves', as Spence put it, and aspiring towards beauty. The Ryans stressed how 'good art uplifts, inspires and speaks to all'.<sup>85</sup> The *Virgin*, by contrast, seemed small, cheap and squalid; hence the reaction of Mary Barker, from Prebbleton: 'there is nothing in that tacky little statuette draped in cling wrap worthy of elevation in your magnificent new museum'.<sup>86</sup> Attempts to elucidate the work by Murphy or Kovats were dismissed as risible 'Post Modernist artspeak' by Bernard Moran, of Family Life International.<sup>87</sup> Lloyd Williams, vicar of St Margaret's Church, Kawerau, believed that the 'two exhibits in Te Papa are not art but propaganda pieces'.<sup>88</sup> George Lazaridis, President of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Wellington, went further: 'the Virgin Mary exhibit to me is not art under any circumstance and to think so one must

be insane. The last supper painting [sic] is a ripoff with a disgusting twist to it and again I question the artistic merit in this'.<sup>89</sup>

Repeatedly, objectors put the words 'art', 'supposed works of art' and 'so-called art' in quotes, questioning the pretensions of the two works to this status. Ross Robertson wrote scathingly of 'the cynical rubbish masquerading as modern art'.<sup>90</sup> Richard Brand, team priest at St Barnabas' Church, Fendalton, believed that any discussion of whether the controversial displays were "art" or not' missed the point of the real issue: 'Te Papa acknowledging the reality that a very significant number of people are offended'.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, Bill Hodge recognised that 'of course the exhibits are "art" and ... would have a place in a private gallery where cognoscenti choose to go, or in a sophomore university show of student work'.<sup>92</sup> Here, he implicitly echoed the belief of several critics that Kovats and Taylor-Wood had displayed little more than adolescent cleverness. 'Immature pranksters' was the withering description by the secretary of St Michael's Greek Orthodox Church in Wellington, Demetrius Christoforou.<sup>93</sup> 'Hardly clever, just provocative', was another such reaction. Maria Lawrence went further than most in analysing the perceived offensiveness of the *Virgin*: 'The exhibit says little about what Catholics or Christians think about sexuality but screams with the ignorance of one who has, as yet, missed the point of Mary's life and deeds and example and her role and place in theology. The artist reveals her ignorance and parades her narcissistic prejudices under the guise of Art'.<sup>94</sup>

Merle Smith, secretary to the Tawa-Linden Baptist Church, was upset by the disrespect of *Wrecked* towards Leonardo's *Last Supper*: 'to depict in this fashion the one whom Christians love and worship is offensive in the extreme'.<sup>95</sup>

One of the very few practising artists publicly hostile to the *Virgin* was the veteran Canterbury painter Bill Sutton, who was an agnostic:

I am disgusted at the attitude of the chief executive ... in justifying the continued display of an object she now knows to be grossly offensive to many New Zealanders, regardless of their religion. It has no artistic merit whatsoever, but is cheap propaganda engendered not by artists but by theorists who, like cuckoos, lay their eggs in the nests of others.<sup>96</sup>

As a former council member of Te Papa's forerunner, the National Art Gallery, Sutton felt this keenly. However, his views cut little ice with Wedde: 'the view of a traditional artist like Bill Sutton is no more surprising than responses from "traditional" commentators to varieties of conceptual art made through the 1960s and 70s where the idea was more important than the crafted object'.<sup>97</sup> This leads us to consider the case for the defence of the *Virgin*, *Wrecked* and Te Papa.

### 'I hope we won't give in to them'

The supporters of Te Papa's decision to exhibit – and then to refuse to withdraw – the *Virgin* and, to a lesser extent, *Wrecked*, repeatedly upheld the 'principle of free speech and artistic licence'. If 'disgust' was the most common word used by opponents of the works, then belief in 'freedom' and opposition to 'censorship' were repeatedly invoked by their supporters. Several Christians, including church ministers, wrote in support of Te Papa. The greatest support, however, came from prominent members of the New Zealand art world, such as the patron, collector and Te Papa Board member Jenny Gibbs, who wrote twice to Sotheran. She was 'appalled at the stress & pressure you and [y]our staff must be under' but was 'absolutely thrilled at the stance you have taken and how you dealt with it on the 6 pm news ... There is a small minority who preach peace and practise violence and intolerance. The idea that we should permit a diversity of views seems a foreign notion to them.'<sup>98</sup>

Gibbs forwarded a message from Rudi Fuchs, Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, who was 'immensely sympathetic and totally supports your stand ... These people think they can use violence & intimidation to censor different viewpoints – I hope we won't give in to them.' Fuchs wrote after one of the attacks on the exhibit case, calling it 'a grave act of undemocratic judgement to which I must protest'. His belief that 'The Museum is about seeing [with] different eyes conflicting things so that they can be compared' was one of the stronger 'pro-*Virgin*' arguments.<sup>99</sup> He was echoed here by the Christchurch arts advocate Marianne Hargreaves, who deplored the vandalism: 'My

choice to view it is as valid as those who choose not to'.<sup>100</sup> Artist Dick Frizzell, whose retrospective exhibition had recently been cancelled by the Waikato Museum of Art and History at the behest of a small number of Tainui kaumātua (elders) because they considered it insensitive to display his work alongside tribal treasures, was understandably a staunch Te Papa supporter. He praised Wedde for his 'fabulously argued, clear and cogent' stand. At Frizzell's similar, then recent interview with Radio Pacific, he was 'even asked what would happen if I stretched a condom over a tiki! And I answered pretty much as you did ... you can't argue on hypothetical maybes.' He was 'pleased to hear that the offended have been invited to come onto the mar[a]e and discuss the issue', though in the event this invitation never properly materialised.<sup>101</sup>

Murphy wrote Sotheran a lengthy and thoughtfully considered letter that merits extensive quotation, reiterating the advice she had recently given to Te Papa staff:

My position is that it is always a matter ... for an exhibiting institution to decide about the nature of a situation it faces, and how best to handle it ... Cultural institutions have crucial responsibilities and tasks today to try to promote tolerance and spaces of difference in a society, and the values of tolerance and sensible mediation of debate are ... important for us to promote and defend. Such a stance includes ... a concern and respect for many different feelings within a community. We have always sought to acknowledge this right up front... We have sought the widest consultation (in some instances) in advance of staging possibly difficult or contentious material that might occur within exhibitions from time to time.<sup>102</sup>

Although undoubtedly hampered by its tight exhibition time frame, Te Papa had failed to do the last. Murphy continued:

It is surprising how much animus can be raised around that tiny, delicate sculpture at certain times, while it can sit quietly in an art exhibition unremarked upon and unprotected at others. I think much of the animus is raised around the title ... rather than the actual form of the sculpture itself...

I wish you to know that I admired the courage and commitment with which Te Papa has supported this exhibition. Moreover I stand by you in the principle

that you must make the ultimate decisions, according to the best information and judgements available to you, as to what you are presenting as works of art, and how you are managing their interpretation and reception.

It is most regrettable that some elements in the community currently are determined to take as much aggressive action as possible to 'close off and close down' the exploration of thoughts with which they do not agree, even when works/cultural artefacts are presented in what is emphatically a symbolic sphere of engagement ...

Please do express to your staff and Council our deepest concern that such an untimely uproar has been generated by this small sculpture. It is clearly due to forces quite beyond the unusual audiences to whom such a work is addressed since its presence is treated very differently at different times.<sup>103</sup>

Art critic John Daly-Peoples wrote sympathetically to Sotheran, saying he was 'dismayed at the sort of pressure that you ... must be putting up with', although this indicated 'the continuing power of art in all its myriad forms to shock. However, what must have been difficult to have predicted was the intensity of the anger and intolerance which the exhibition has generated.' Like many other supporters, Daly-Peoples admired Sotheran for having 'acted admirably and with considerable courage'. He asserted – without any foundation – that 'I have not the slightest doubt the great majority of New Zealanders support the stand that the museum is taking', and repeated the mantra of 'freedom of expression and belief'. Daly-Peoples added – like several other supporters – a dash of clichéd history, accusing Catholics of their 'long tradition of executing anyone who disagreed with them in the most painful of ways', an identical phrase later used by the Auckland lawyer Julian Miles in a message to Sotheran.<sup>104</sup> They both enjoyed sterling support from Vic Jenks, an 85-year-old freethinker who wrote of Te Papa's 'embroilment with the Christian Bigots who have launched such a concerted, vitriolic and unjustified attack'.<sup>105</sup>

Kovats's own letter to Sotheran was succinct, sensible and sensitive. She thanked her for ably handling a difficult situation and believed the statements that she and Paul Brewer had issued about her work were 'excellent and put the museum's case extremely well'. She continued: 'It is

always gratifying to know that art stimulates debate and can tackle difficult issues but for an artwork to generate this level of trouble is extremely uncomfortable.' Kovats realised the importance of discretion and carefulness, as 'the last thing I would want to do is inflame the situation any further'.<sup>106</sup>

A press statement by Chris Saines, Chair of Museums Aotearoa, was also carefully phrased: 'One of the more challenging roles for the museum in the 1990s is to be a forum for public debate.' Saines clearly positioned the association behind Te Papa when he claimed: 'Museums would be less than professional if they censored works and ideas which endeavoured to make a considered contribution to contemporary life. We need to be responsible enough to present contentious ideas in ways which can enlarge, not shut down, such debate.' The work at the centre of the current debate was working in precisely this way: 'This is not, after all, Art in the age of Michelangelo, but Art in the age of AIDS.'<sup>107</sup> Paula Savage, director of City Gallery Wellington, issued a press statement along similar lines that argued, 'If restrictions are imposed on artists and the public display of their work we begin to lose the freedom of expression necessary to protect other democratic freedoms.'<sup>108</sup>

Michael Burch, from Paremata, took a secularist sideswipe at the 'Christian fundamentalist rightists that have that appalling certainty of their own righteousness that makes me want to vomit. What right do any of them have to impose their blinkered, joyless vision of creation on those of us who don't happen to share their particular set of superstitions?'<sup>109</sup> While the label 'rightist' was inaccurate in describing the politics of many opponents, it was appropriate for many Catholic Action members, as well as their evangelical Protestant ally Graham Capill, leader of the socially ultra-conservative Christian Heritage Party.<sup>110</sup>

## 'Jesus was a rebel, Mary a solo mum'

Letters from practising Christians soon followed, with Mary McGlone telling the *Evening Post* that she was 'struck at how holy the Virgin appeared' in Kovats's sculpture, 'as if the light of her sorrowful look was shining through the transparency' of the condom. She explained: 'As a Catholic I believe the fact that she has chosen to appear here within the context

of all the fears and concerns this exhibition is reported to reflect should be viewed as a triumph, not a desecration'.<sup>111</sup> Barry Doig, minister of St David's Presbyterian Church, Invercargill, was more grounded, believing that 'if a Museum like Te Papa can encourage us to listen and think, then in my view it has a real place in our society ... the Exhibition should continue'.<sup>112</sup> The Dean of Dunedin, Jonathan Kirkpatrick, went further, telling Sotheran that she was 'doing a magnificent job', and offered help in articulating any further statements as she was obviously 'under tremendous pressure at the moment'. Kirkpatrick explained that 'There is a battery of theological thought and expression ... regarding the offensive nature of the Christian Gospel and the sweet sugary Virgin Mary images which have for centuries masked the true radical nature of what the real Virgin Mary was'.<sup>113</sup>

Theologian George Armstrong took a similar line in an *Evening Post* article memorably entitled 'Jesus was a rebel, Mary a solo mum' (Fig. 4). He argued: 'Christianity

was born of offence and blasphemy, as defined by the established order and religion of Jesus's and Mary's day. If the Bible paints such a picture, the current pious protest is an unchristian gesture of a particularly rude kind'.<sup>114</sup>

A sharp rejoinder to Armstrong's reasoning came from his more conservative colleague Brian Carrell, who warned Sotheran that he was 'not a good person to quote as "another Anglican perspective"'. He is considered a maverick within the Anglican Church, entitled to express his personal viewpoint, but not to represent Anglican views. He is much used by the media because of his radical and iconoclastic outlook.<sup>115</sup>

The writer Keri Hulme memorably denounced 'the noisy "christian" clowns making a spectacle of themselves', and exclaimed 'gah! In 1998! In our country!' at the legal charge of blasphemy. She claimed that in New Zealand 'the vast majority of people are either atheist or agnostic or uncommitted to any religion' and that 'we have a proudly secular condition'. Hulme admired Sotheran for 'not



Fig. 4 George Armstrong, 'Jesus was a rebel, Mary a solo mum' and other articles, *Evening Post* (Wellington), 23 March 1998 (Pictura Britannica, Te Papa Exhibition files, 1998, Te Aka Matua Library, Te Papa).

buckling under bizarre attacks from a tiny group of people (do they ever think that there are a huge number of us who are affronted by their attempts to stop *us* from seeing this – or any – exhibition?)<sup>116</sup>

Artists and the art world showed solidarity behind the exhibition. Besides Gibbs, Daly-Peoples and Frizzell, artists Stephen Bambury and Peter Siddell, literary agent Michael Gifkins, architect Ivan Mercep, art dealers Peter McLeavey (a practising Catholic) and Sue Crockford, art collector Warwick Brown, art historian Francis Pound (a lapsed Catholic) and 12 art history students at the University of Auckland all rallied to the cause. Pound congratulated Sotheran's performance on *Holmes* on 10 March, for 'sticking to your guns', a phrase also used by Christopher Johnstone, former director of the Auckland City Art Gallery. Pound believed that the controversy 'is good for art: it shows the power of contemporary art... PS Paul Holmes was on your side very blatantly. All hot & bothered'.<sup>117</sup> Brown found 'the range of ideas generated by the Virgin in a Condom challenging and relevant to serious problems confronting the world today caused by religious dogmatism ... The same points apply to the "Last Supper" piece, although I think it is lightweight compared to Kovats' work'.<sup>118</sup>

Robert Leonard, director of Artspace, Auckland, who had recently been critical of Te Papa's populist character, became a new ally over *Pictura Britannica*: 'It is absolutely crucial that museums and galleries operate as spaces where a variety of contrasting views can be aired.' He added that people do not visit museums 'simply to have their prejudices validated ... "Pictura Britannica" is a fantastic art exhibition and we are very lucky to see it in this country'.<sup>119</sup> Wedde did not entirely welcome this newfound support: 'Te Papa was then seen by default or otherwise to be using the Contemporary Art orthodoxy bible, so to speak. We at Te Papa had seen the light. The superior piety of this response didn't surprise me at the time'.<sup>120</sup>

The Labour MP and Anglican Tim Barnett, the then partner of Jonathan Kirkpatrick, was the only politician to offer staunch support to Te Papa in letter form. He congratulated Sotheran for having taken

the only feasible position in regard to the highly emotive debate on the two artworks. I barely start to imagine the effect on you and your fellow staff of the ensuing pressure. You have my absolute support. Of course, the protestors have a package of other hates, including abortion, homosexuality and sex education, all of which are quite capable of driving them to un-Christian levels

of negative emotion. I suspect that many of them would find the bicultural commitments of ... Te Papa equally threatening. Te Papa can probably never hope to be much of a place for them and do its job for the wider community! I fear that well-meaning liberals like me have also, by our public silence, left you isolated.<sup>121</sup>

Barnett's suspicion of conservative Christian opposition to biculturalism was not confirmed by the evidence of the letters received from objectors, although his point about the silence of 'well-meaning liberals' might have been justified. In the absence of documentation, it is impossible to establish this.

David Clark, a future Labour politician who was, at the time, a recently ordained Presbyterian minister, also supported Te Papa and delivered a sermon on the theme at St Luke's, Remuera. His line of argument was not dissimilar to Armstrong's and required intellectual subtlety on the part of the congregation to appreciate:

Is it not the ... mixing of holy and unholy that is also the basis of the concern of our protesting friends at Te Papa? Symbols of Holiness, sacredness and divinity – it is feared – will become tainted if they are mixed and 'diluted' with the everyday ...

The Blessed Virgin – a symbol of heavenly purity – is in direct contact ... with a condom – a symbol linked for the protester with earthliness and sexual desire ...

What seems clear is that throughout the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as challenging the Pharisees' fear of putting all apples in one basket. Jesus undermines the presupposition that mixing with rotten apples creates nothing other than more rotten apples.<sup>122</sup>

Far fewer children wrote supporting Te Papa than those opposing it, but an exception was Fabian Hartwell, from Levin, an 11-year-old fan of the museum: 'It is a shame that there is so much controversy over the statue of Mary in a condom but personally I don't have any objection to it'.<sup>123</sup> Although not one organised school party visited *Pictura Britannica*, Superville remembered a group of teenage schoolboys who were 'dead keen' to view the controversial Virgin. Their reaction when confronted with the object was, however, one of anti-climax and disappointment: 'Is that all there is to it?'<sup>124</sup>

Defenders of Te Papa and *Pictura Britannica* espoused causes of liberalism and diversity, but as Barnett remarkably admitted, there was evidently 'no place' for their opponents in the national museum. The latter were repeatedly

identified as a 'small minority' and excoriated for being 'vitriolic', 'blinkered', 'ridiculous', 'rightist' and more. A liberal belief in the 'freedom of ideas' nonetheless went hand in hand with firm support for the art world establishment and Sotheran's position in its hierarchy. What she said went, and what Whiteford condemned as her 'mulish obstinacy', her supporters admired as courage. The latter were, perhaps obviously, far more sensitive to the immense pressures that Sotheran and her colleagues experienced, which their opponents would probably have regarded as self-inflicted and avoidable. Although probably better educated per capita than their opponents, Te Papa's supporters nonetheless repeatedly betrayed historical and religious ignorance, disguising the latter by professing their – and their country's – proud secularism. As with the protesters, rarely was any sympathy or understanding of one's opponents evident. A glowing exception, however, was Tawa-Linden Baptist Church congregation member Bruce Murray, who expressed a 'dissenting view' from his co-religionists:

The resolution was debated and put in properly, and I have no quibbles with that, for Baptists have a very long history, going back to the 1600's, of acting in such a democratic way ... [I]t was stated that the events at the Museum over recent times are distressing to many. We are distressed and saddened that some Christians are very upset, and that they can feel that their faith has been denigrated by two particular exhibits. We are also equally distressed and saddened that you and other members of your staff have been both abused and threatened. That is most certainly not a Christian way to behave and brings us all into disrepute ... though we do not give our wholehearted approval to the display of these two artworks, we recognise that the artist's right to freedom of expression within the law ought to be protected and safeguarded.<sup>125</sup>

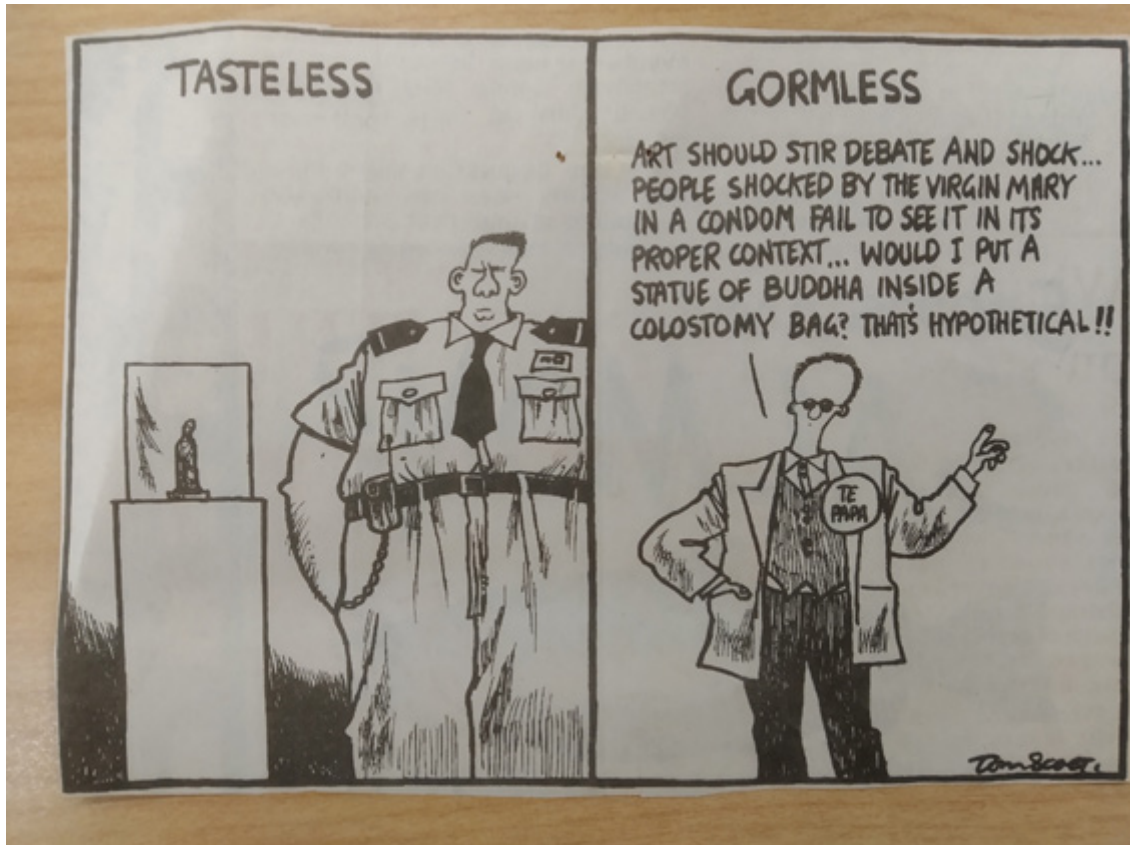


Fig. 5 Tom Scott, *Tasteless; Gormless*, *Evening Post* (Wellington), 11 March 1998.

## What the papers said

The controversy, particularly over the *Virgin*, was gift-wrapped for media enjoyment (Fig. 5). Paton was distinctly unimpressed by their handling of the story: ‘the media [were] ever willing to peel away art’s complexity and extract ratings-friendly nuggets of sensation ... journalists ended up interviewing participants about an “outrage” that the media helped coax into being’.<sup>126</sup>

One such example was the self-styled, ‘punchy’ *Sunday News*, then in Rupert Murdoch’s News International stable. Under the headline ‘So sorry ... British apologise for condom artwork’, the newspaper persuaded John Dowling, a British Council employee, to blurt out some injudicious words about the *Virgin*: ‘I’m sorry it’s come to New Zealand’.<sup>127</sup> As *National Business Review* media commentator Tom Frewen noted, the newspaper then failed to report this was a personal view and that Dowling was a Catholic. For all its seriousness, Frewen’s article, entitled ‘As the controversy grew papers gleefully reran *Virgin* pictures’, immediately prompted the irreverent response ‘Well, they would, wouldn’t they?’ Frewen dwelt more on the publication of letters from religious objectors than on reporting or editorials, ‘their volume a reminder of the lobbying strength of organised religion and their content typical of its historic intolerance of rival organisations’. This ignored the personal revulsion that many correspondents felt above all else. He did, however, usefully observe that ‘There was not one complaint about the way newspapers ... kept publishing pictures of the statue every time they got a new angle on the story or enough letters to justify an illustration.’ Frewen cited as a further example the *Evening Post*’s front-page publication of *Wrecked* (Fig. 3) on the basis of ‘one complaint – from Christian Heritage Party leader Graham Capill’ – but which provided ‘another useful circulation booster’.<sup>128</sup>

Although Frewen referred to ‘the newspapers as [the] allies’ of the protesters,<sup>129</sup> the evidence did not always confirm this. He omitted to mention that the *Evening Post* editorial, which supported Te Papa’s right to exhibit such works, closely corresponded to his own permissive outlook:

The ... important question is whether art which gives offence should be publicly displayed. And even allowing for the fact that artists may deliberately provoke controversy ... the answer must be yes, simply because the alternative is incompatible with a free and open society. If statues and paintings are banned because they give offence to a minority, where is the line to be drawn? Do statements of opinion then become subject

to censorship? That is the risk society takes when it endorses suppression of unpopular beliefs or provocative works of art. Whether they realise it or not, all minority groups within a free society – Marian Catholics included – are ultimately protected by that freedom.<sup>130</sup>

Te Papa’s communications office could not have put it better. The editorial concluded by referring to the cost of visiting the exhibition, observing that ‘people are free to register their distaste ... by simply staying away. And they can save themselves the \$12 admission fee in the process.’<sup>131</sup> Not only did this echo the views of several Te Papa supporters (e.g. ‘People who don’t like *Virgin in a Condom* don’t have to look at it!’) but, as discussed below, the low attendance figures for the exhibition confirmed that people indeed stayed away.

Eight days later, in a further editorial entitled ‘Free expression is a fragile right’, the *Evening Post* put this case still more strongly:

The raging controversy over the ... *Virgin in a Condom* ... demonstrates just how fragile is the right to freedom of expression, even in a supposedly mature democracy ... The Christian groups opposed to the exhibit are entitled to take offence. They have a right to protest peacefully ... but their rights stop short of demanding the statue be withdrawn from exhibition, for that is an infringement of the rights of others.

It added that New Zealand was ‘a secular, pluralist society ... based on respect for people’s rights to live according to their own beliefs, provided there is no interference with the rights of others’. The editorial castigated the politicians Henare and Banks, ‘who have sided with the religious protesters’ and ‘need a refresher course in the fundamentals of democracy’. It warned: ‘It is but a short step from banning artworks to burning books, an activity much favoured by Hitler’s bully-boys’.<sup>133</sup>

The *Daily News* (Taranaki) was less strident, counselling ‘a need for both sides in this debate to watch for hypocrisy’. However, ‘if the risk of causing offence were to become a reason for banning public display of art works, there would be few left hanging on gallery walls’.<sup>134</sup> *The Press*, by contrast, was highly critical of Te Papa, and particularly of Sotheran, who it claimed was

on dubious ground when she contends that the object has a message that has aroused debate and that therefore it has proved its artistic validity. That is tosh. As Mr Capill asserts, sparking controversy does not, of itself, guarantee validity ... Deep offence has been taken.

The museum offered at first perhaps unintentionally a gratuitous insult towards a primary image of the Christian religion. It has compounded that offence by its refusal to withdraw the exhibit.<sup>135</sup>

The editorial nonetheless backtracked slightly, recognising that there was a case for the work staying in its place: 'Removal of art should arise from more than just some people finding it nasty and ill-conceived. Otherwise freedom of expression is compromised.'<sup>136</sup>

The *Bay of Plenty Times* was likewise critical of Te Papa's 'unfortunate lapse' in failing to foresee the situation and had thus 'undermined its early triumph'.<sup>137</sup> The editorial continued:

Questions of intrinsic worth apart, the real issue is whether gratuitous offensiveness has a place in our museums and art galleries. It is true, as the administrators at Te Papa have pointed out, a fine line has to be trodden to avoid the slippery slope of censorship. But they appear to have overlooked the fact that rights carry responsibilities. Freedom of expression requires a certain sensitivity towards the deeply held beliefs of others.<sup>138</sup>

In an editorial entitled 'Museum got it wrong', *The Dominion*, which had been consistently harsh on Te Papa's populism, now attacked its 'politically correct elitism' and double standards over Māori taonga. It added: 'Christian demonstrators are entitled to take the view that some in the art and museum world treat Christianity and its icons as a soft target, to be attacked with impunity.' The newspaper believed that the 'museum went courting controversy' because it knew this 'would mean publicity and publicity would mean visitors. If the Virgin in a condom was in any way intended as a marketing exercise it becomes harder to defend the judgment in including it in the exhibition'.<sup>139</sup> Te Papa repeatedly and vehemently rebutted such charges. The editorial bleakly concluded:

On balance, the museum made a misjudgment in exhibiting the Virgin and the modified Last Supper ... But the demonstrators have ensured that [they] will not be withdrawn from exhibition. Now that there have been protests, a museum staff member assaulted and the display case damaged, withdrawal would simply invite similar actions in future over controversial exhibitions in the hope of achieving the same result.<sup>140</sup>

The *Otago Daily Times* singled out Te Papa's senior management for blame: 'If the officials who made the selection did not anticipate the works would arouse

indignation from people with sincerely-held religious beliefs, then they should not be holding their jobs.' It believed that there should be room for both artists creating works 'that may be controversial, even offensive' and for lawful protesters, but unfortunately some of the latter 'have overstepped these boundaries and in two cases the law will take its course'.<sup>141</sup> Its conclusion was similar to that of the *Evening Post*: 'the great issue at stake here, of freedom of expression, cannot be abandoned simply because some exhibitions are controversial. To abandon that principle would be to invite a return to the dark ages.'<sup>142</sup>

Paul Little's wittily titled *New Zealand Listener* editorial 'Unlike a virgin?' took a refreshingly whimsical approach. Amused by Holmes's confusion of the biblical Madonna with the singer, he suggested, 'If more rock stars were encased in condoms, the world would be a marginally better place.' Little felt that the ensuing controversy had not 'offered much in the way of surprises, as knees more accustomed to genuflecting have jerked the length of these islands'. He considered mounting a small protest himself: 'The impetus sprang from annoyance that the custodians of our taonga could find space for such a banal and pedestrian piece, and the certain knowledge that the inevitable fuss would divert attention from the works of real merit in the exhibition.'<sup>143</sup>

Little was 'mystified' that some critics found *Wrecked* 'the more offensive of the two works', as its inspiration by Leonardo was so familiar it was beyond parody: 'We know there is no way that that tragic repast would have borne any resemblance to the Renaissance artist's representation of it. So, do the offended believe that da Vinci's paintings is sacred, inviolable?' He concluded in broad agreement with the *Evening Post*, praising Te Papa for 'refusing to move the offending works' and thus 'standing by its art'.<sup>144</sup>

## Opinion pieces

The controversy inevitably stimulated numerous op-ed articles by regular or sometimes guest newspaper columnists. One of the latter was Susan Abasa, lecturer in museum studies at Massey University. Her *New Zealand Herald* article 'Art rage sign of healthy debate' distanced itself from the immediate controversy and instead asked the following: 'What is it about some contemporary museum programmes which enrage and inflame? Do we want museums to be places where issues of our time can be debated openly? Or do we prefer them to be only a temple for the adulation of the rare, the precious,

and the venerable?<sup>145</sup> Abasa implicitly favoured the former, endorsing Te Papa when she stated: 'If our museums are to be a relevant force in shaping society then they must engage in controversy from time to time.' She then asked further rhetorical questions: 'At what point does... critique become overwhelming and damage the institution irrevocably? Is it when staff receive threats or when an exhibition is forced to close? Or is it when Governments bow to political pressure and reduce or withdraw funding?'<sup>146</sup>

The *New Zealand Herald* journalist Graham Reid considered the *Virgin* in the wider context of contemporary art. John McDonald, of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, told him that he considered the work 'the most facile I've seen in a long time', while Reid's *Herald* colleague T.J. McNamara found its 'gestural nature ... old fashioned', and 'its simplistic effects come from its allusions to levels of interpretation in those areas'. Peter Shand, lecturer in studio theory at the Elam School of Fine Arts, was more accommodating, telling Reid that by being 'so open to interpretation, the piece allows for a more open discussion than if it had had a closed, prescriptive intent'. Reid himself took a sceptical view, noting how artists 'can become curiously mute in debates about their work ... the suspicion is that if the ideas were so important to court opprobrium, they might avail themselves of the opportunity to address it in another forum, unless all they ever wanted was the controversy and ambiguity'.<sup>147</sup> This line of argument perhaps unfairly overlooked Kovats's wish not to aggravate the controversy. Reid then discussed the neglected question of artistic skill, receiving an unequivocal response from McNamara: 'We are in a period which is deliberately anti-skill, where we mustn't be beguiled by virtuosity and are expected to accept from an artist what we wouldn't accept from a carpenter.'<sup>148</sup>

McDonald confirmed this when he said of contemporary artists: 'they are happy not have any real skills because [this] belongs to a different world view. What they're interested in is in manipulating the spectacle of contemporary culture and becoming like pop stars.' This might have been applicable to Damien Hirst but less so to the more introverted Kovats. Under further questioning from Reid, Shand defended contemporary art from the accusation of being 'intellectually bankrupt'. If anything, it was the reverse: 'For most people it is too intellectually and conceptually motivated', which meant that 'a lot of people felt left behind and instead of trying to catch up will go backwards to what they know and like'.<sup>149</sup> Many *Herald* readers were probably encountering these ideas for the first time, and Reid deserved some credit for presenting them, however minimal their impact on actual responses to the offending works.

## Christian perspectives

The *Evening Post* commissioned three Christian perspectives on the *Virgin*, with its inevitable photograph occupying centre stage (Fig. 4). The most controversial and unorthodox article of the three, in which George Armstrong claimed that 'Christianity was born of offence and blasphemy', has been briefly quoted above. He asked: 'Could Kovats' work have some truth to offer which could enrich or recover the Church and society's understanding of its real and original message? If the zealously protesting "Christians" were to question themselves and the adequacy of their form of Christianity with a like zeal, light might yet come as well as heat.'<sup>150</sup>

Armstrong believed that it did, and obviously found it ironic that 'An art work, redefining an image which recovers some of Christianity's original offensiveness, is itself denounced by self-proclaimed Christians.' He concluded by asking, 'Could an art work which intimately links Mary and condom help save Christianity and society from its lostness? Like Jesus or Mary themselves, these far-fetched figurings may not turn out to be the ultimate losers.'<sup>151</sup> Armstrong's problem was that his theology was so distant from the protesters' convictions that his 'figurings' were destined to remain far-fetched. Ingenious though his argument was, it bore little relationship to what either Kovats or her contemporary art champions had to say about the sculpture's meaning.

The two other articles, by Joyce McBeath, an Anglican and writer on religious affairs, and Dave Crampton, a Wellington Christian performance poet and writer, were more conventional. McBeath observed sorrowfully: 'One wonders why there is such antagonism to Christians expressing their horror over the desecration of the sacred symbols of their faith – have Christians no rights at all.' Te Papa had, however, unwittingly 'done Christians a great service – it has woken them up and united them as never before'.<sup>152</sup>

Crampton was more pragmatic, emphasising that 'it's not the art-work that's the problem but where it is displayed'. He differentiated between an art gallery ('a place for the exchange of ideas') and a museum ('a place that reflects our culture' and identity). Te Papa was clearly the latter, which meant that 'art that can cause offence' was inappropriate there.<sup>153</sup> Crampton said nothing about City Gallery Wellington as the original venue intended for *Pictura Britannica*, but surely he – and others – would have accepted it.

The voices of protesters attending a prayer vigil outside Te Papa on Mother's Day (Fig. 6) inspired Denis Welch's lively *New Zealand Listener* article. Opinions came over in a raw, outspoken way that complemented the more polite tone of many formal letters. Welch quoted a 'very angry middle-aged man', who considered the *Virgin* 'a disgrace to the country'. A young man argued: 'If it was a Maori thing ... or a gay thing that was being offended, if there was a Nazi thing in there, people would get really upset and it would be stomped on'. A 'Catholic Action man' demanded an apology from Te Papa. A priest took a Catholic fundamentalist line – surprisingly rare in the correspondence – when he asked: 'What is a condom? A condom is an instrument of mutual masturbation ... In it, you do not have the true flowing of love and life.' Another Catholic man told Welch 'in our country – that's Iraq – Muslims, they respect Mary'. A Greek Orthodox Cypriot woman took Kovats to task: 'There's some anger inside her, something she has suffered. Maybe she has some psychological problem.' Another priest struck a millenarian note: 'This is the day of Satan and his demonic angels. This is the day that has been prophesied', while yet another claimed, 'To use a condom is to laugh in

the face of God.' Welch gave the last word – and hinted at his own sympathies – to a young woman passing by ('They're missing the point. They just don't understand the context the work's in') and a young man ('It's a free world').<sup>154</sup>

The police chaplain Canon Gerald Hadlow, in his Rotorua *Daily Post* column, felt above all 'saddened' by the furore surrounding the *Virgin*. He found Sotheran's explanation of the 'safety' of the condom 'incomprehensible. This view seemed to suggest that the satisfying of the human sexual appetite takes precedence in our behaviour and that the condom is a symbol of safety', which he found astoundingly naive: 'The most that can be said about it is that it is marginally safer than not having one at all'. The old-fashioned Hadlow demanded: 'what had happened to good taste and more importantly good manners. Perhaps these are irrelevant bourgeois shibboleths that can have no place in modern society.' He concluded: 'This particular display in Te Papa may be a "statement" of sorts, but art it is not.' Hadlow believed that many people who were puzzled by the Christian outrage over it 'don't grasp the place of Mary in the Christian view of faith'.<sup>155</sup> To some extent the letters defending Te Papa confirmed this.



Fig. 6 Protest about Tania Kovats's *Virgin in a Condom* exhibit at Te Papa, Wellington, 1998 (photograph: John Nicholson, *Dominion Post*. Photographic negatives and prints of the *Evening Post* and *Dominion* newspapers., EP/1998/0740/7, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington).

A final clerical opinion published in the exhibition's dying days came from Penny Jamieson, Bishop of Dunedin, in the *Otago Daily Times*. It differed somewhat from that of her dean, Kirkpatrick, who had unequivocally supported Te Papa. Jamieson was one of the few people outside a museum context who connected the current controversy with its predecessor in Melbourne over Serrano's *Piss Christ*. She quoted Murphy's public statement about Kovats's sculpture, which 'eloquently and simply encapsulates Catholicism, contraception, abortion, safe sex and sexual identity', but dubbed this 'bogus profundity'.<sup>156</sup> Jamieson continued:

It is clear to me that both these pieces were intended to offend. The claim to the contrary by the artists and the exhibitors is simply naïve. Both pieces did offend and both were attacked by Christian groups who, perhaps not surprisingly, rose to the challenge and took their axe to the exhibits ... In our pluralist society, so the director of Te Papa tells us, tolerance and neutrality are of the essence. But this is a recipe for a valueless and irresponsible society.<sup>157</sup>

She then suggested, 'we can perhaps be less afraid of both giving and receiving offence' and put in a plea for reasonableness in her temperate conclusion: 'the search is on for ways to live together with differences that neither trivialise nor ignore the pain that the differences inevitably bring'. Jamieson recognised that 'it has taken the eclecticism of the "Virgin in a condom" and the response it has generated to point this out'.<sup>158</sup>

## Matching the curtains

One of New Zealand's best-known journalists, Rosemary McLeod, published two articles on the controversy. In the first, 'Virgin in a condom matches curtains', we see some of her celebrated acerbic wit when she proposed the sculpture, 'the ultimate show stopper', should occupy pride of place in 'your own living room':

Elegance demands something truly contemporary. Something with wit and charm, something inexpressibly chic. A Virgin Mary in a condom, say.

A social statement. 'Wow. Like deep man ...' That's what they'll all be saying when they beg entry to your own personal temple of culture. 'Wouldn't it make you THINK – about life and death, and why we're in the universe – and does God exist and all those other great metaphysical questions?' they will add, gazing in rapt wonder at your triumphant acquisition.<sup>159</sup>

McLeod was enjoying herself, not unfunnily, at the expense of Te Papa, an institution whose populism she constantly attacked; at contemporary art and its pretensions; and perhaps a little at 'protesting Christians and Muslims'. Her sympathy for the last was, however, hinted when she said the purpose of such art was 'to make some people look ignorant and bigoted and others look open-minded and clever'.<sup>160</sup>

McLeod's second article, 'Turning offence and mockery into an art form', came down firmly on the Catholics' side, 'the only people emerging from the whole fracas with any dignity ... also the only minority whose beliefs can be freely mocked and ridiculed these days', echoing the views of Williams and Orsman. She continued, 'Mocking Christians is one of our national sports. It doesn't take a heap of courage to do it. What would take real courage would be to mock Maoris or lesbians, two groups who would be certain to fight back'.<sup>161</sup>

McLeod then repeated the well-worn point about a putative hei tiki sheathed in a condom. Her impact was weakened by a serious factual error, somewhat surprising for an award-winning investigative journalist. At some stage in the reporting of the controversy, Kovats's age when she made the *Virgin* was given as 17, not 26. Too much of McLeod's argument depended on this: 'the precocious posturing of a 17-year old girl'; 'No amount of smart-alecking can disguise the kid's intention ... [She] did it to offend'.<sup>162</sup> The same error crept into Armstrong's article, which was, however, less compromised by it.

Several other columnists tackled the subject. Agnes-Mary Brooke's article 'Hailing dross as art denies truth' indicated the drift of her argument and her hostility to 'trivial exhibits' that are "'conceptual" triumphs'.<sup>163</sup> Alan Duff borrowed the idea of a recent Garrick Tremain cartoon – in which a gleeful nun plonked a huge condom on the head of a humiliated museum visitor host (Fig. 7) – by proposing 'Te Papa People need the condom'.<sup>164</sup>



Fig. 7 Garrick Tremain, cartoon, *Otago Daily Times*, 12 March 1998.

Duff attacked ‘the self-righteous Te Papa lot fiercely defending their “right” to offend Catholic sensibility ... Because you know they’ve got double-standards’. Although much of the content by this notoriously politically incorrect author was predictable (‘we’ll never see a Maori carving inside, say, a vessel of vomit, or faeces, calling itself art’), Duff stumbled on an important point when he dared, ‘you lot in your showy palace to display anything offensive to Muslims. Anything. And see what happens.’<sup>165</sup> When the satirical French weekly *Charlie Hebdo* eventually did something similar, the consequences were indeed tragic.

Joe Bennett’s article ‘There’s not too much sense on either side of this arty argument’ argued that ‘the grandees of Te Papa have allowed their exhibition space to be hijacked by a paltry piece of propaganda and the protesters have reacted

honestly but irrationally.’ No admirer of the *Virgin* as a work of art, Bennett cheekily imagined God’s reaction: ‘frankly I cannot see an omnipotent being getting too bothered about Kovats’s thing. Over the past 2000 years, after all, God has come in for a lot worse and is quite capable of looking after himself.’<sup>166</sup>

Two of the most perceptive articles were, perhaps not surprisingly, written by arts professionals: Jenny Harper’s ‘Sheepish, apologetic tones from Te Papa’, in the *Evening Post*; and Justin Paton’s ‘Virgin on a faultline’, in the *New Zealand Listener*. The latter had the subheading ‘Te Papa wouldn’t preach, but there were some things that need saying’. Both are discussed later in this article, which now focuses on Te Papa’s response to the controversy as events unfolded in March and April 1998.



Fig. 8 Cheryll Sotheran at Te Papa, December 1998 (stuff.co.nz).

## Sotheran and Williams

Following Cardinal Williams's brief letter to Cheryll Sotheran (Fig. 8) of 2 March urging the removal of the *Virgin* without delay, which meant that 'our splendid Museum' would no longer be tarnished by anti-Catholicism,<sup>167</sup> she wrote an extensive reply. She tried to assure him: 'The devotion of Catholics with respect to the Virgin Mary is not in question from our point of view. Nor is it our intention to put forward stereotypical arguments of artistic expression as the rationale for the work and the exhibition. The issue for us is one of context.'<sup>168</sup>

Sotheran hoped this would enable Williams to understand the work, the exhibition and the role of the museum better. First and foremost, 'The museum must act within its role as forum [*sic*] to allow challenge and debate, offered and taken seriously by all protagonists.' This would apply to all cultures and belief systems, and it was wrong to see 'this incident as an isolated anti-Catholic vendetta, for in its intention it is profoundly not'. The offending work was part of 'a serious exhibition', a key element of

which was 'the serious intent of the artists' to convey 'a wide range of concerns and fears, celebration and grief held by a large group of young artists about contemporary life in Britain'. While some artists used humour to express themselves, Sotheran emphasised that Kovats emphatically does not: 'The work was not made, nor was it placed in this exhibition, out of a spirit of mockery or blasphemy, as you assert.' She then quoted the artist's 'articulate comments', which had 'as much right to be part of the debate as your strongly held views'.<sup>169</sup>

The virgin is a different sort of space or utopia. She is the good breast, the safe parent, the most wonderful space imaginable. She is the single most formative place of female identity/sexuality in Western culture. She owes this status to her passivity, her acceptance, her obedience, her purity and her grief. Her body is the site of the most intimate and intense speculation. Thousands of people every year say they have seen and spoken to her. I cannot fully estimate the response of an audience to this symbol.<sup>170</sup>

In which case, Williams might well have wondered, why sheath her in a condom? Murphy had attempted at least a partial answer in her reference to the sculpture's eloquent encapsulation of Catholic issues, which Sotheran quoted for the first of many times. Next, Sotheran argued that 'Challenging established belief systems and expressing social concerns using compelling visual images has been part of human life and culture throughout history'. Kovats was working 'within that tradition, just as you work within yours', he was firmly told. The role of the museum was to 'allow those challenges and expressions to be made accessible to the wider visiting public'.<sup>171</sup>

Sotheran appealed for 'reasoned debate and not the violent and abusive threats I have received in recent days from some of your constituents'. She then made the discussion more personal, perhaps attempting to appeal to Williams's sense of family values. She and her colleague Wedde were, respectively, 'good parents to several children'. Their parenting had not been good because of any religious belief, but because of the love it gave. This love involved a 'recognition that children have to be free to develop their own sense of values and their own belief system – just as the young artist at the heart of it all is doing'. The nurturing of freedom, she continued, 'is hard and often involves a drawing back or challenging of one's own beliefs. The Museum has a similar duty – to grant freedom, self-determination and responsibility to its audiences and the communities and experts, including artists.' Sotheran believed that under her leadership, 'in responsibly confronting this debate, we should be concerned more about the matters seriously raised by this young artist, about the ways in which young people engage with, grapple with, the grave issues of contemporary society and culture, rather than the mechanisms of display and visual vocabularies they freely choose.' She and her colleagues had 'thought long and hard over many years as museum professionals about this issue', and 'we have not taken it lightly at any stage'.<sup>172</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no recorded written reply from Williams, but he was probably unimpressed. In an inconclusive telephone conversation several days later, Sotheran insisted that she would not remove the offending exhibits, while Williams 'was not going to ask Catholics not to protest' against their continued inclusion.<sup>173</sup> Williams then left for Rome on business, and in his absence other bishops, particularly Peter Cullinane of Palmerston North, entered the fray.

On 5 March, Paul Brewer issued a media release from Te Papa that repeated many of Sotheran's arguments, such as 'the idea of forum', as well as Kovats's and Murphy's statements. This was stepped up two days later following the first vandalism of the display case. In this second release, Kovats was quoted further on the offending condom:

For her, as for very many young people, the condom is far from a symbol of depravity, as it is taken to be by the Catholics who have complained. For Ms Kovats, the condom is seen as protection, a symbol of responsibility, as sign of willingness to take personal responsibility for her own sexuality and her own life. In these terms therefore, her alignment of the Madonna and the condom as both being signs of protection and protectiveness are both understandable and effective.<sup>174</sup>

Part of Sotheran's original draft was deleted. Here, she had maintained:

The removal of the art work under pressure from a particular interest group would be censorship. This is reinforced by the fact that the group as a whole has not shown any interest whatsoever in attempting to see or understand the work, or take on board the existence of another world view that, even within their own church, can see that this art work both acknowledges with reverence the enduring significance of the Madonna, and her continuing symbolic power as a protection for young people as they seek solutions to the very real sexual challenges of their lives.<sup>175</sup>

This was wisely never made public, as it would probably have inflamed the situation further in its provocative attack on a Catholic-led boycott of an exhibition that required a \$12 admission payment in the first place. The suggestion that Kovats showed 'reverence' towards the Madonna would have defied any critic's sense of credibility. The draft was, however, important in reflecting the mindset behind Te Papa's steadfast refusal to withdraw *The Virgin*, and when public attention turned to *Wrecked* in an *Evening Post* article of 9 March, that work too.

On 7 March, *The Dominion* quoted Wedde confirming that 'it was extremely unlikely that the ... statue would be removed, including during Easter. The museum had to be a free space for ... artistic expression'. Already Wedde was retracting on Sotheran's original intention of avoiding 'stereotypical arguments of artistic expression as the rationale for the work and the exhibition'. He then invoked the arguments of censorship that would be repeated many times: 'We have to be, as far as possible, clear of censorship

issues of that sort, and while this is an extremely sensitive and emotional subject, the museum has to be available for the expression of divergent views.’ ‘Management of disagreement’, perhaps a euphemism for damage-limitation control, would now be the priority.<sup>176</sup>

## A public forum?

Despite mounting tensions, Te Papa made tentative moves at about this time to hold a public forum where concerned parties would articulate their views. Williams later claimed that the board made such an offer on 10 March, which was immediately accepted by the Catholic bishops. Te Papa engaged Colin McKenzie, of Conflict Management New Zealand, at a cost of \$3500 to facilitate the forum, and this was reported in the *Evening Post*. On 15 March, despite the confirmation that ‘Virgin statue stays’, Sotheran was quoted in the *Sunday Star-Times* as saying she ‘would consider holding a public forum on the issue next week’.<sup>177</sup> However, a board decision on 18 March explicitly ruled this out. Despite this, the leaders of Catholic Action complained in an open letter of 6 April that Te Papa ‘has persisted in informing protestors and the media that it is making genuine attempts to organise such an “open forum”’. They accused the board of ‘stalling on making a decision knowing full-well that much of the Christian community goes on “retreat” over Easter [10–13 April] and the Exhibition completes its run on 26 April’.<sup>178</sup>

Catholic Action was correct: Te Papa had been praised by Little, for example, on 21 March, for ‘hosting a public forum to discuss the controversy’, which ‘shows confidence that art issues are worth taking, and will be taken, seriously there’.<sup>179</sup> Williams was not informed of the decision until 1 April, and in a sermon a week later, he told the packed congregation at Wellington’s Sacred Heart Cathedral that ‘the Board did not carry out its undertaking’.<sup>180</sup> Cullinane confirmed this: ‘Our sense of powerlessness and frustration was heightened when the agreed debate was delayed for more than three weeks’.<sup>181</sup>

Te Papa did not challenge Williams or Cullinane. How can its apparent bad faith be explained? Coverage in the museum’s corporate records is sparse; certainly, tensions were high in mid-March, with not one work but two now creating public anger. A prayer vigil on 14 March involved some 1000 protesters; a telephone poll of 4473 people conducted by the *Evening Post* at the same time revealed that a resounding 80.5% of those surveyed believed that the ‘two

works’ should be removed from display at Te Papa.<sup>182</sup> Soon afterwards, a rattled Sir Ronald Trotter, chair of the board, was reduced to asking: ‘But where do you start making judgements about what should be exhibited or not?’<sup>183</sup> Both the format and appropriate participants for any forum were, moreover, in the hard basket. McKenzie informed Pat Stuart, Director of Strategic Planning: ‘There are no easy answers to the question about who should be involved. We have struggled with this issue over the last few days’.<sup>184</sup> In an undated press release draft, probably written in early April, Stuart admitted: ‘Te Papa has struggled to find a way to establish dialogue with all interested stakeholders in an environment in which the many views generated can be heard fairly and rationally. It would appear that this is not possible’.<sup>185</sup>

This author recently asked Wedde if the police had advised against holding such a forum, given the threats of violence made towards him, Sotheran and Brewer, all of whom would have been appropriate participants in normal circumstances. He has no recollection of this. It does not seem far-fetched to suppose that, with the gravity of the situation and real fears of a public forum misfiring, bureaucratic stalling seemed an unheroic but necessary course of action. A compromise of sorts nonetheless materialised. Williams informed the Sacred Heart congregation that ‘to give credit where credit is due, the board had told the church last Thursday [2 April] that it had arranged a two a side debate on TV3 at 7pm on Easter Monday’.<sup>186</sup>

This very private forum – no members of the public were admitted – was filmed in Te Papa’s Soundings Theatre and broadcast live. Megan Lane’s report for the *Evening Post* was probably livelier than the debate itself. Both sides agreed to disagree, and adjudicator John Campbell ‘looked somewhat deflated’ afterwards. Sotheran’s arguments were safe and predictable, although Catholic Action called them a ‘hackneyed diatribe of garbage’. She explained that Kovats had ‘meant no offence’ and was ‘simply working through important issues in her life’. Sotheran warned museum visitors to ‘get used to it – contemporary art was provocative and controversial’. Theologian-filmmaker Stuart McKenzie, in support, scored ‘an early own goal’ by saying ‘firstly, Tania’s work is a work of art, secondly it is blasphemous’. He quickly added that it was ‘necessarily sacrilege’, forcing others to examine their beliefs, a line of argument that would have pleased Armstrong. For the opposition, Cullinane said that instead of encouraging serious reflection, the *Virgin* had ‘provoked kneejerk

reactions’, a not unreasonable summary. Muslim lawyer Rehanna Ali was more full-blooded, explaining that ‘we regard Jesus – peace be upon him – as a prophet and Mary as his virgin mother’.<sup>187</sup>

## ‘Sheepish, apologetic tones from Te Papa’

The bloodless TV3 debate would surely have been grist to Jenny Harper’s mill. The former Director of the National Art Gallery (1990–92) and former Director, Art and History at the Museum of New Zealand (1992–94) brought institutional and curatorial intelligence to her devastating *Evening Post* article, probably articulating the private thoughts of many Te Papa staff themselves. Harper memorably began: ‘Te Papa needs the current art-religion controversy like it needs a hole in the head.’ She went on to question its handling of the situation and how well equipped the museum was to present the visual arts. Had it been better prepared, senior managers ‘might have anticipated the controversy and made efforts to warn potential visitors and prepare Catholic authorities’. The way art was presented elsewhere in the museum, as an ‘illustration of a nationalist agenda’ – which had gone down brilliantly with the public – created a completely inappropriate mindset for experiencing *Pictura Britannica*. This resulted in the latter’s exhibits being ‘treated with derision and dismay’, a disastrous intellectual disconnect.<sup>188</sup> In another, later article, Harper reiterated: ‘Showing contemporary art in a populist space such as Te Papa will always be more contentious than showing it in a space understood by the public to be for art.’<sup>189</sup>

Although Harper commended the decision not to withdraw Kovats’s or Taylor-Wood’s works – ‘to do so would open the way to any number of items being deemed offensive’ – she claimed that the museum had failed to adequately explain why it had stuck to its guns: ‘Other than enlisting the artist [Kovats] who has had to speak for herself, they have so far only argued simply that Te Papa is a place which must function as a site of cultural debate.’ Harper complained, ‘No one with responsibility for the visual arts ... has written or spoken publicly in more than sheepish or apologetic tones’ about it. There was, moreover, a damning absence of debate. She asked rhetorically, ‘Why hasn’t the museum embraced this debate, recognising that art, and in particular contemporary art, has the power to incite, to grab

by the jugular ...? Why not argue publicly and passionately about the importance of art because it can say things in ways which crystallise our moment in history ... in ways that articulate our deepest fears and beliefs?’<sup>190</sup>

Kovats and Taylor-Wood had been let down and Te Papa had palpably failed ‘to act as an active, intellectual, productive and passionate advocate for the items in its care’. Being more gracious and conciliatory would not have gone amiss, either. Harper’s suggestion, made two weeks in advance and surely a brilliant Anglican compromise, was ‘a simple gesture such as closing the show over Easter’, which ‘might be well received’.<sup>191</sup> Cullinane had also requested such a ‘gesture of goodwill’, but both were ignored.

## Virgin on a faultline

Paton’s article drew partly on Harper’s arguments about the intellectual inadequacy of Te Papa, but it diagnosed a different problem: the impact of bureaucracy on art and art institutions. He wrote of the debate with irreverent gusto: ‘the tribalisation of the public, the plague of me-me self-righteousness, religious reaction, bad ol’ Kiwi anti-intellectualism, and an ongoing crisis about who and what art is for’, which had been ‘spectacularly fused by the opening of “our” new museum’. Paton believed that the interpretations one could give to the *Virgin* were ‘unruly, slippery, gleefully volatile’. It was the key job of a museum of art to ‘keep these meanings live and crackling’. They were, however, regrettably obscured by the new way of doing things: ‘there are these target markets and interest groups, you see, and there is this new museum that claims to represent them. *All* of them. That was the promise imbedded in Te Papa’s Brand – Our Place – “where all our stories can be told”.’ But of course no museum could conceivably represent all of the people all of the time, and ‘obstinate, eagerly offended [and] over-literalist’ though they were, the protesters ‘have zeroed in on the contradictions – a faultline of sorts – on which Te Papa was built’. Taking up Harper’s point, he argued that art, ‘unlike hi-tech displays of ready-made ... nostalgia such as “Golden Days” doesn’t tell cosy tales of national identity’ and could not be served up as one family-friendly product. In the current controversy, in the museum’s defence, ‘Te Papa’s commanders-in-chief left the sculpture on view and also asserted artists’ right to free speech’. But this merely highlighted ‘the extent to which Kovats has taken heat that the museum itself ought

to have absorbed'. Instead of saying 'Strong work. Chew on it!' and then intelligently aided digestion, Te Papa had resorted to clichéd 'institutional assertions about freedom of expression' and took on a 'spurious neutrality'. Paton thus bemoaned the way that 'the power of bureaucracy replaces the power of art'.<sup>192</sup>

Although Paton was not to know this, that bureaucracy had probably helped kill the public forum and had rendered meaningless Sotheran's 'idea of forum' that was 'critical to our credibility'.<sup>193</sup> Bureaucratic blandness in turn surfaced in Wedde's well-meaning response in *Focus on Faith*: 'My reaction isn't that important – it's not about beliefs of people in the museum; it's up to them to put on exhibitions and encourage debate and manage it sympathetically ... The museum's position is a kind of triangulation – often lost in the argument'.<sup>194</sup> Paton returned to the attack by lambasting 'administrators, certain they know what "we" want, [who] start treating art's audience as consumers rather than citizens, as a bunch of target markets rather than a community'. He concluded by saying that the two sides in the controversy paradoxically needed each other, 'the one to advertise its grievance, the other to advertise its tolerance'.<sup>195</sup> Meanwhile, art came out the loser.

## Conclusion: licking its wounds

The week after the exhibition closed, Bronwyn Simes noted the visitor count for *Pictura Britannica*. At 8926, the total numbers – less than two-thirds of them full-paying adults – were far below the expected 40,000 and stood in stark contrast to the 700,000 visitors – the anticipated annual figure – that Te Papa had enjoyed during its first three months. The British Council was not altogether wrong in expecting 'the exhibition will have a very high exposure', but this certainly did not translate into visitor numbers.<sup>196</sup> Christine Fitzgerald, Te Papa's Manager, Marketing Research, belatedly concluded that 'we expected it to appeal to those who had a particular interest in contemporary art and a rather narrow audience (high levels of formal education, predominantly Pakeha)',<sup>197</sup> but this was much less ambitious than when Simes and Wedde had enthusiastically taken on the exhibition several months earlier.

The reasons for *Pictura Britannica*'s failure have never been properly analysed. The *Evening Post*'s editorial headline 'Objectors can stay away – and save \$12' surely applied.

Whether this reflected distaste for the *Virgin, Wrecked* and the other art on show, whether the money was considered better spent on high-tech motion simulator rides elsewhere in the museum, or whether it simply seemed like a lot of money (which \$12 certainly was for many people in 1998) is impossible to gauge, but almost certainly all these factors applied. Perhaps, thanks to the frequent reproduction of the *Virgin* in newspapers, people felt little need to see it in particular, as there would have been little left to learn by a direct encounter. The last point was hinted at in Stuart's observation, made when the exhibition was still running: 'The controversy has heightened awareness and people ask where the [*Virgin*] is, but a far smaller number of people commit to the exhibition door charge to see it. The majority would look at the work if there was a free entry to see it'.<sup>198</sup>

That option, however, was never contemplated. A further possible explanation was a cultural one, summarised in Harper's view that 'ours has been, and in many quarters remains, a primarily monocultural, somewhat puritan population, one which does not readily embrace difference nor tolerate what it judges to be deviant'.<sup>199</sup> Later in her discussion, she referred to 'an unaware and inexperienced public'.<sup>200</sup> Not only did this mindset apply to the two offending artworks, but it would have extended to a wider suspicion of contemporary art and its perceived pretentiousness, which condemned the entire exhibition. With the sundering of New Zealand's long and close cultural and emotional ties with Britain, were 'concerns and fears, celebration and grief held by a large range of young artists about contemporary life in Britain' really of that much interest to a local audience?<sup>201</sup> A further significant reason for the failure of the exhibition was the widely held view, argued persuasively by Harper and Paton, that it was fundamentally miscast within a populist museum that celebrated national identity. Te Papa did not possess the culture, experience, foresight or even, as Harper suggested, the art expertise that a large gallery would have boasted. A stark contrast was provided by the Robert Mapplethorpe photography retrospective at the City Gallery Wellington (1995), which attracted an impressive 45,600 adult visitors and was a considerable financial success.<sup>202</sup>

It is possible to exaggerate the harm that *Pictura Britannica* did to Te Papa. There was nothing to confirm that Ken Benn, manager of the Massey University Master of Business Administration programme, was justified in claiming that the exhibition made New Zealand run the 'risk of perhaps

offending some of our much-needed trading partners, particularly strongly Catholic nations'.<sup>203</sup> And while the number of visitors to Te Papa fell to 12,500 on the day of the major prayer vigil (14 March), prompting the *Evening Post's* headline 'Protest trims visitor numbers', this proved to be only a small and temporary blip, with more than 14,000 coming the next day.<sup>204</sup> This suggests that the number of protesters vowing on principle not to set foot in Te Papa during the exhibition (or ever) was never particularly great, and that visitors voted with their feet elsewhere in the museum.

Sotheran herself was understandably shaken by the experience; some of her latent tensions surfaced in a uncooperative, indeed ferocious reply she wrote in June 1998 to Professor Martin Devlin of the Institute of Executive Development at Massey University when he requested material under the Official Information Act 1982 for a proposed research project on *Pictura Britannica*. She was 'unconvinced that [it] is of any academic merit nor that it has been undertaken in the spirit of objectivity and intellectual rigour one might expect from a reputable academic institution'.<sup>205</sup> Sotheran argued:

the exhibition ... is a minute element in a large and complex structure. It is inappropriate to evaluate the performance of the Museum in the context of a single component of its short term exhibition programme. Te Papa has already achieved a considerable measure of success by providing an integrated visitor experience including permanent and short term exhibitions, public programmes, commercial enterprises, and national and extension services.<sup>206</sup>

She was undoubtedly correct in this last assertion. Sotheran's personal drive, vision, institutional loyalty and toughness of character were all legendary. *Pictura Britannica* neither brought about her prosecution, nor her dismissal. On the

contrary, Te Papa's *annus mirabilis* of 1998 culminated with Sotheran's award of the title New Zealander of the Year by *North and South*, and in the following year she was created Dame Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her services to museum administration.<sup>207</sup>

What *Pictura Britannica*, and particularly the *Virgin in a Condom*, unintentionally achieved was to change Te Papa's character from early on. By occurring so early in the museum's history, the controversy strangled at birth some of the experimental and edgy aspirations that it might have aimed to foster. The often repeated ideal of the national museum as a 'safe place for "unsafe" ideas'<sup>208</sup> was rapidly replaced by a far more risk-averse regime, and perhaps with the succession of male chief executives that succeeded Sotheran, it remained thus. When this author suggested to Wedde that Te Papa had 'won the battle' in retaining both exhibition and exhibits intact until *Pictura Britannica's* closure, but had subsequently 'lost the war', he observed: 'There is some truth in this. [It is w]orth noting ... that the museum's most controversial exhibition, "The Parade", which drew the ire and scorn of many in the art establishment, was subsequently revised along more conventional display lines.'<sup>209</sup>

It went further than that. As early as the first week of April 1998, Stuart responded to a question about *Pictura Britannica* having influenced Te Papa's choices of exhibitions in the future: 'Te Papa's focus is to be a forum for the nation and it will continue to represent the cultural and social diversity of New Zealand.'<sup>210</sup> Nothing was now said about internationally sourced exhibitions. Confirming this, Harper observed that the power of the reception of *Pictura Britannica* 'seems to have had a profound and lasting effect of the programming of this museum. No major group exhibition of contemporary art, either from here or abroad, has featured in its programme since.'<sup>211</sup> This was written in 2005 and, sadly, still holds good today.

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- Pictura Britannica* Visiting Exhibition – Public Response – Objections (15 files) (1644339–1644353).
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## Notes

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