
When Vatican Art Goes on the Road

To the Editor:

Henry Kamm's Nov. 22 news story about the outcries in Italy against the traveling exhibition of masterpieces from the Vatican Museum (to open at the Metropolitan on Feb. 2) prompts these comments on the problems inherent in exhibitions of this sort.

Let it be said at once that there can be no doubt of the integrity and competence of the officials involved, or the extraordinary measures that will be taken to protect these great works on their four-leg, yearlong journey. Admittedly, the risk of major loss or damage is slight, but everyone close to the profession knows that minor damages are much more frequent than is commonly realized.

The scholarly community generally regards such risks as acceptable under two kinds of circumstances: when the works to be transported are otherwise unusually difficult of access, that is, in distant or closed countries or collections, and when it is important that the works be seen together for purposes of comparison. In the case of the Vatican exhibition, the stated purpose of which is simply to illustrate the Vatican's collections and their history, neither of these criteria obtains.

It is not widely known that such major traveling exhibitions are made possible in America, in large part, through a Federal subsidy in the form of the Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act, which guarantees coverage in the event of loss or damage. The cost of insurance, at today's valuations of such art treasures, could not possibly be met by the participating museums.

Applications for coverage under this enlightened program are screened by an appointed advisory panel. Unfortunately, the indemnity act does not enjoin the panel to weigh the risks such exhibitions entail, regardless of shipping precautions. Moreover, the panel members come entirely from the museum profession, whereas there should also be strong representation from other segments of the art community, including criticism, conservation and academic scholarship.

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