

## RUSH & MOLLOY

BY GEORGE RUSH AND JOANNA MOLLOY

# Crucified Santa triggers crossfire

A painting of a crucified Santa Claus has New York's Catholic League crying blasphemy. The oil work is currently on display in a front window of the venerable Art Students League on W. 57th St. Titled "Santa on the Cross," the painting shows the usually jolly St. Nick, hanging lifelessly on the cross, with Christmas presents at his feet.

The painting — by Robert Cenedella, who did the mural of 150 famous faces at Le Cirque 2000 — has been stopping passersby since it was mounted last Monday. Now, the watchdog Catholic League has asked the art school to take it inside.

"The painting... is unnecessarily offensive, especially at this time of year," wrote William Donohue, president of the anti-defamation group, in a letter to the school Friday.

The artist says he meant the painting to be a satire on the commercialization of Christmas.

"I'm not the one who replaced Christ with Santa Claus," Cenedella argues. "I'm not anti-Christ or anti-religious."

Cenedella, who teaches at the institute, says he's gotten calls and letters from people who love and hate the work, which he painted in 1988 for a show at the New York offices of the Saatchi & Saatchi ad agency. The agency ended up taking it down.

"Had the artist chosen to put Santa Claus in a noose, his original intent would have been expressed in a way that does not denigrate, however unwittingly, a symbol held sacred by millions of Americans," Donohue wrote in his letter to art school director Joanne Kuebler.

Kuebler told us the school planned to leave the artwork right where it is.

Donohue is not one to give up easily. It was his group that pressured 34 commercial sponsors to boycott "Nothing Sacred," the critically hailed ABC drama about a priest. Pressing ahead, Donohue said he's planning on waging "all kinds of hell," so to speak, against Warner Bros.' "The Butcher Boy," in which rocker Sinead O'Connor plays the Virgin Mary, and Miramax' "Dogma," in which "the prophets are drug addicts."

He's more favorably inclined toward DreamWorks SKG, having been invited by exec Jeffrey Katzenberg to talk about the studio's animated Moses movie, "The Prince of Egypt."

Says Donohue: "As opposed to [Disney chief Michael] Eisner, Mr. Katzenberg is a model of good behavior."

### MORE GRAVE MATTERS

Two weeks after deceased disgraced diplomat Larry Lawrence was disinterred, a columnist is claiming that late ABC newsman Frank Reynolds also may not deserve to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Providence Journal-Bulletin writer Philip Terzian complains that his father, a World War II naval officer, was blocked from the hallowed ground, while Reynolds was a shoo-in. "On a whim, I called my senator, Pete Wilson of California, to inquire about Reynolds' particular qualifications," Terzian writes. "Wilson's assistant, the late Otto Bos, kindly reported back the anchorman's distinction: Frank

Reynolds was a friend of First Lady Nancy Reagan."

But Reynolds can rest in peace. While it's true Nancy got President Reagan to approve Reynolds' Arlington burial, a military spokesman told us, "He's entitled to a burial" there, because Reynolds won the Purple Heart during the war.

### IMPACT PERFORMERS

They didn't even dive into the mosh pit, but two celebrities are in trouble for projectiles they sent hurling from the stage.

Rod Stewart is being sued for \$75,000 by a woman who attended his March 1996 concert in Auburn Hills, Mich. Candace Conroy claims she was hit in the head, suffering facial, neck and mouth injuries, by a flying soccer ball Stewart kicked into the audience. Stewart's lawyers didn't return calls.

David Hasselhoff is also an allegedly dangerous man — with his hands. The "Baywatch" lifeguard is named in a lawsuit filed in L.A. Superior Court brought by a woman who was injured during a taping of the "Rosie O'Donnell Show" in February. Judy Downey Fortson claims she was struck in the eye when Hasselhoff came on stage and threw a stack of cards depicting his Speedoed self into the audience. Hasselhoff's publicist and Time-Warner spokesmen had no comment.

### AIR POWER

Hard to believe, but the Sporting News has named an athlete as its "Most Powerful Man in Sports" for the first time ever. The pick is no surprise: Michael Jordan, who wears the crown Rupert Murdoch, Michael Eisner, Dick Ebersol and other mogul types have sported in the past. What does raise eyebrows is Jordan's praise of one of his 12 sponsors over another.

Nike, which pays Jordan zillions a year to be a human billboard for its logo, is suing Oakley, the eyewear company, for showing Jordan in an ad wearing an Oakley hat. Is he taking sides? Oakley pays Jordan just half a million for the privilege, but it's Oakley chair Jim Jannard — not Nike's Phil Knight — whom Jordan lauds. "My idea of power," says the superjock, "is somebody like Jim Jannard. He makes the decisions for



## Crossfire Over Artwork

Artist Robert Cenedella's painting of a crucified Santa Claus hangs in a window of Manhattan's Art Students League. A Catholic-civil-rights group says the work, titled "Santa on the Cross," is offensive and has demanded the school take it down.



*Marylou Whitney has a new driver!*

**MUSH:** May-December newlyweds Marylou Whitney, the 71-year-old heiress, and John Hendrickson, 32, announce to the world in their Iditarod Christmas card that Marylou "has a new driver." Now if only the pair could give New Yorkers a Christmas/honeymoon present — by stopping development of her virgin Adirondack land, and selling it, at a fair price, to Gov. Pataki's negotiators.

his company. I just make suggestions."

### ITEMIZING

What next for David Bowie — the Home Shopping Network? The gracefully aging glamrock star is hawking his lithographs on the Internet. You can buy Bowie's self-portrait for \$240 signed, \$80 unsigned via the Web site [www.bowieart.com](http://www.bowieart.com). His litho of Iggy Pop is more dear: Signed works are \$320 a pop, as it were...

### SURVEILLANCE

Revlon billionaire Ronald Perelman and ex-wife Claudia Cohen, the "Regis

and Kathie Lee" gossip, sure have an amicable divorce. The two shared a tiny table at Rainbow & Stars the other night — the sky-high cabaret lounge that's a rather romantic hang-out. But Perelman's steady lately is Eleanor Mondale...

Capeman producer Dan Klores and his co-publicist wife, Abbe Goldman, welcomed a demanding new client.

*Galerie Rienzo*

DEALERS IN FINE ART

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