

Art May Be Too Provocative for Town

Officials Worry Breast-Feeding Virgin May Offend Tourists

(June 4) - In the small northwest Arkansas town of Eureka Springs, an old retaining wall has been transformed into a public art gallery. But the type of paintings displayed there has prompted some angry complaints.

The current exhibit, which has been up since September, includes a painting of a bare-breasted Virgin Mary nursing the baby Jesus. Above her head it says, "Does this halo make my face look fat?" Another work features beloved children's book character Alice in Wonderland hanging out with the "Drag Queen of Hearts" — a man in women's lingerie.

"To me, it's just obscene," visitor Margaret Miller, 50, of Owensville, Ind., told the **Arkansas Democrat-Gazette** after viewing the Alice in Wonderland painting, titled 'The Temptation of Alice.'

"I would not want my children here with me or my grandchildren," she said.

Eureka Springs' economy depends heavily on tourism, and town officials aren't sure these images are what visitors want to see when they stroll around downtown.

"We market this community as a vacation

spot," city council member Joyce Zeller told **FoxNews.com**. "We want everything in public property to fit in with that marketing idea."

Charlotte Buchanan created the project, known as **The Artery**, in 2004. The paintings, by local artists, line a 150-foot-long retaining wall on First Street. The current exhibit's theme is popular icons in religion and culture. 'Icons — From Soup to Saints' includes 27 paintings, all 8 feet by 14 feet.

"It's just this year that the subject matter got offensive, and we started getting phone calls," Zeller told Fox. "We said, 'Wow, we need to do something.'"

That something is proposed legislation that would require each piece of art be scrutinized by six members of the city council and six members of the city arts council. They would decide whether it is appropriate for public display at The Artery.

"In the public eye, that is city property, the city condones anything that is going up," Mayor Dani Joy told FoxNews.com.

She told the Democrat-Gazette she has fielded several complaints from tourists.

"People would call in and say, 'How could you as a city let that happen?'" Joy said.

Artists say the proposal is a terrible idea — and an infringement of their free speech rights. Policing art will only end up strangling creativity, they say.

“You’ll end up with a billboard rather than art,” said Nancy Foggo, a local artist. “It’s something that is commercial rather than artwork.”

Another local artist, John Rankine, said town officials were overreacting.

“The art is provocative,” said Rankine. “It’s nothing you have to shield your children from in horror.”

Buchanan, the project’s creator, said some people will find something inappropriate in every artwork. “Depending on your emotional background, you could see something offensive in your spaghetti,” she said.