

Opinion



Fashion designer John Galliano. JACQUES BRINON — AP

Be Our Guest

Why would the Met honor someone who praised Hitler?

By Tamar Major

Like most New Yorkers, I love the Met. I raised my three children in Manhattan and would take them to the Met often. I loved turning them into art lovers from an early age and never took for granted the privilege of having some of the world's most magnificent art as part of our city.

In my professional life, I direct Yad Vashem's foundation in the United States, whose mission is dedicated to remembering the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. I am also the child and grandchild of Holocaust survivors.

That is what makes what The Met just did so painful.

This week, John Galliano withdrew from a planned retrospective of his work at the Met, after donors and Jewish leaders objected and City Council Speaker Julie Menin called the exhibition a "gut punch" to the Jewish community.

But the exhibition's death does not answer the question it raised. The most prestigious cultural institution in America chose to honor a man who said he "loved Hitler," in the city that is home to more Jews and more Holocaust survivors than any other in the country, and it took a public outcry to stop it. The withdrawal is not the end of this story. It is the beginning of holding an institution accountable. The Met owes New York an answer: how did this happen at all?

I am not here to judge Galliano. Whether he has done the work to repent for his words is his own reckoning. He paid a real price at the time. Dior fired him. A French court convicted him. He spent years outside the industry before returning to Maison Margiela. Personal redemption is possible, and no one should be eager to declare it out of reach.

But a retrospective at The Met is not a second

chance. It is an honor. When a museum of this stature devotes an exhibition to a living figure, it is not merely displaying his work. It is elevating him. It is telling the public: here is a person to look up to.

An institution cannot make that gesture and treat the recipient's history as a footnote. Yet that is how this exhibition was framed. The Met's own materials called Galliano "one of the most inventive and influential designers of the past four decades" and reduced his antisemitism to "derogatory conduct."

The Met heard from Jewish leaders as this exhibition took shape. The reality did not sink in. This was not malice. It was a lack of sensitivity to the people for whom "I love Hitler" is not a celebrity scandal but the sound of their families' childhoods. It should not have taken public pressure for the museum to hear them.

There is still a right way for this to end. Not with quiet relief that the exhibition resolved itself, but with a plain acknowledgment to survivors and their family and to the Jewish community at large, that planning it caused real pain, and a commitment to do better in the future.

Bestowing an honor is a deliberate decision, and every institution should think carefully about what that means. There are real consequences that institutions must understand before they act, not after. This is especially true when the people who bear those consequences are Holocaust survivors, their children and grandchildren and none of us should have to explain why "I love Hitler" is disqualifying.

New Yorkers deserve better, we deserve institutions that understand that without being asked.

Major is the national director of Yad Vashem USA Foundation.

BE OUR GUEST

'Hiroshima' fallout now 80 years later

By Nicolaus Mills

This year marks the 80th anniversary of John Hersey's "Hiroshima," his sympathetic story of six Japanese men and women who survived the first of the two atomic bombs America dropped on Japan during World War II.

What still surprises me is the immediate interest in Hersey's account, which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in August 1946, then months later as a book. The timing of the article and book should by all rights have had a chilling effect.

In 1946 Americans, still carried bitter memories of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, President Roosevelt had labelled it "a date which will live in infamy." Now Hersey was asking Americans to care about people we had thought of as enemies for five years.

In 1946 Hersey was well known for his World War II novel, "A Bell for Adano." It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1945 and if he had chosen to write about a war victim such as Anne Frank, Hersey would have escaped controversy.

As it was, Hersey's book received an angry challenge from, among others, retired World War II Secretary of War Henry Stimson who in 1947 argued the atomic bomb was a "unique instrument" for getting Japan to surrender.

Today, "Hiroshima" is considered a masterpiece of the new journalism, the epitome of reportage that reads like a novel.

Hersey's opening pages set the tone for his book. He begins with a matter-of-fact description of what the six men and women who are his subjects were doing at 8:15 on the morning of Aug. 6, 1945, the time the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

Miss Toshiki Sasaki, a clerk at the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant.

Dr. Masakazu Fujii was settling in to read his newspaper.

Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura, a widow, was staring out her window.

Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a German Jesuit priest, was reading a Jesuit magazine.

Dr. Terufumi Sasaki, a young surgeon, was carrying a blood specimen for a Wasserman test.

The Rev. Kryoshi Tanimoto, a Methodist pastor, was preparing to unload a cart of clothes.

What binds these six men and women together is how unremarkable they are at this moment. They do not realize that they are on their way to becoming hibakusha, the Japanese term for those who experienced the atomic bomb.

Hersey tells their story in four chronological chapters, starting with the appearance of the bomb as "a noiseless flash." Forty years later Hersey returned to Japan to detail how his hibakusha had coped with their experience of the bomb in their various lives.

Nakamura initially had difficulty getting a good job as a result of the prejudice in Japan against atomic bomb survivors because so many of them suffered from a variety of ailments.

Dr. Fujii went on to build a very successful medical practice, but at the end of his life an autopsy revealed his brain had atrophied and he had liver cancer.

Like Hersey's other four subjects, they were never free from the events of Aug. 6. Hersey does not tell us what we are to make of their unwelcome tie to the past, but in focusing on the citizens of one of America's major World War II enemies, Hersey asks us to think long and hard about what it means to be a victim of war — no matter whose side you are on.

As we struggle to make sense of the war in Iran, Hersey's demand on our consciences has not faded, nor has the relevance of Hiroshima.

Mills is author of "Winning the Peace: The Marshall Plan and America's Coming of Age as a Superpower."