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SOCIETY

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The "Dancer" stirs an artful clash of church and state

The people of the peaceful town of Redding in Northern California have always been conservative, and proud of it. Many of these good, honest, hard-working folks probably don't think much of most "modern art" — perhaps for good reason. But the probationary, one-year installation in 1999 of an abstract sculpture named Dancer right in front of Old City Hall Arts Center, now an art museum, near the middle of downtown Redding kicked up more than a normal amount of aesthetic controversy. Actually, the clash did not have much to do with art, that "human effort to supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature" as Webster puts it. It was more about religion. When word got out that Dancer was a contemporary rendering of the Hindu God Siva, a few Christian townpeople got really riled.

Dancer was purchased from Sonoma County artist Bryan Tedrick by Viva Downtown Redding (VDR), an organization dedicated to the artistic revitalization of

Redding through a program called Art aRound Town. According to an article written by Scott Mobley in Redding's local newspaper, the Record Searchlight, Larry Liebscher, a Redding Police Department financial crimes investigator and a staunch Christian, wrote a letter to the Mayor of Redding about the sculpture. Liebscher claimed that the ten-foot-tall statue, which won the People's Choice Award at the California State Fair in 1999, might "serve as a gateway for evil and demonic entrance into the downtown Redding area." He also asserted that such art was "not at all consistent with the conservative, family values Redding strives to rigorously be known for." City officials, he said, should remove Dancer as soon as its one-year lease expired. Liebscher protested that keeping the sculpture on city land violated the separation of church and state. The issue went to a five-member Community Services Advisory Commission, a panel of the City Council. Their attorney argued that separation of church and state was not an issue here, because the piece in question was a work of art. The Commission then voted unanimously on June 14, 2001, to grant VDR an extension on its lease, allowing Dancer to be displayed on city property four more years.

The controversy intensified. "It's OK to not like Siva," wrote Searchlight editor, Jim Dyer, in an editorial entitled 'Dancer' Should Be Viewed Solely as Art. "But when folks make the leap to say that a sculpture in

front of Old City Hall is something evil that is harming our community, I sprint to jump off that boat." Later in the same editorial he asserts, "Raging against the Siva sculptures of the world in today's environment does a great disservice to the witness of a religion."

Through a sequence of reader-editorials featured in an ongoing Searchlight column entitled Speak Your Peace, there issued forth a chain reaction of quarrelsome assertion and rebuttal, pitting conservative Christians against liberal art lovers. Art Isberg bemoaned the exhibition of Dancer as promoting Eastern religion, proclaiming along the way that America is the moral conscience of the planet. Reader Patrick J. Tyson countered, "Most of the planet's population is not and never has been Christian. Mr. Isberg is opposed to the public exhibition of religiously themed art only when it is inspired by any religion other than his own." The only Hindu to publish a comment was Irajā Sivadas. Sivadas gave a concise definition of Siva from the Hindu perspective, emphasizing that Siva is not a God of destruction and would thus bring no harm to Redding.