



Smithsonian  
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for  
American Art and Portraiture*  
*National Portrait Gallery*

Office of the Director

August 19, 2015

Ministers Taking a Stand  
c/o: Bishop E.W. Jackson  
P.O. Box 15022  
Chesapeake, VA 23328

Dear Bishop Jackson and Ministers Taking a Stand,

I received your letter regarding the legacy of Margaret Sanger and respectfully decline to remove her portrait from the museum.

The *Struggle for Justice* gallery brings attention to major cultural and political figures from the 19th century to the present day who have fought to achieve civil rights for disenfranchised or marginalized groups. We do not posit Sanger as a “champion” and “hero.” With the exception of sports figures, we do not refer to people in these terms.

Our museum is a place where people can learn about the men and women who have made a significant impact on this nation’s history and culture—both positive and negative. Sanger is included because, as the founder of the American Birth Control League, she strived to bring medical advice and affordable birth control to disadvantaged women at a time when even providing literature on women’s health infringed on “obscenity” laws. Sanger wanted to give couples the ability to control the size of their families. In her 1938 autobiography she wrote about the importance of contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies before they began.

Sanger opened a birth control clinic in Harlem in 1930 at the request of James H. Humbert, an African American social worker and community leader. The clinic was approved and promoted by many leaders within the African American community, including W.E.B du Bois. Later in the century, Martin Luther King Jr. accepted the Margaret Sanger Award and in his speech identified with her for their shared vision of health education and family planning.

In your letter you quote Sanger’s letter to Dr. C. J. Gamble on December 10, 1939, which many scholars believe is often taken out of context. As an advisor to the Negro Project, Sanger had wanted to employ only black doctors and medical nurses and involve church ministers in leadership roles because she recognized that some people within their community might—as indeed you assert—mistrust white personnel and associate the provision of contraception with racist sterilization campaigns in the Jim Crow South.

As we note on the label accompanying the bust, Ms. Sanger believed that through social planning, living conditions, as well as the human race itself, could be improved through scientific principles. Her association with the eugenics movement shadowed her achievements in sex education and contraception, making her a figure of controversy, one whose complexities and contradictions mirror her times.

There is no “moral test” for people to be accepted into the National Portrait Gallery. Instead, we try to draw attention to those who have made a significant impact on American history and culture, and that includes both the accomplished and reprehensible. We recognize Sanger’s advocacy on behalf of women’s health and education whilst acknowledging her sometimes deplorable beliefs.

The most admirable aspects of American culture are that we attempt to acknowledge past mistakes, engage in open and civilized discourse, and set a path towards a better future. Removing those people from the Portrait Gallery who have been less than perfect would deprive future generations of valuable lessons concerning personal ambition and achievement on one hand, and human imperfection and fallibility on the other.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Kim Sajet', written in a cursive style.

Kim Sajet  
Director  
National Portrait Gallery

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