Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery Statement

The National Portrait Gallery represents and puts into context significant American biographies through portraiture. It was chartered not to be a hall of fame, but to collect and display portraits of individuals who represent the full spectrum of the American experience—the admirable and inspiring personalities, as well as others whose lives were complicated and complex. We are both a history museum and an art museum, requiring that we see the past clearly and objectively.

Margaret Sanger, founder of the American Birth Control League (1921), is included in the museum’s collection, not in tribute to all her beliefs, many of which are now discredited, but because of her leading role in early efforts to distribute information about birth control and medical information to disadvantaged women, as well as her later roles associated with developing modern methods of contraception.

Nonetheless, Sanger’s alliance with aspects of the eugenics movement raises questions about her motivations and intentions. The museum’s intent is not to honor her in an unqualified way, but rather to stimulate our audiences to reflect on the experience of Americans who struggled to improve the civil and social conditions of 20th-century America.

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