

Glasgow city's art collection in peril

Steve James
29 January 2001

Glasgow City Council officials have opened talks with the Scottish Parliament, in an attempt to overcome the funding crisis threatening one of the largest civic art collections in Europe. It is likely that a temporary deal will be reached, under which Glasgow will receive extra finance pending a struggle for control of the city's museums between the City Council and the devolved Scottish Executive.

At present, Glasgow City Council directly oversees 13 museums and galleries, including the famous Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, the Burrell Collection, the Mitchell Library and the Gallery of Modern Art. Other important galleries in the city, such as Pollok House, with a collection of Spanish painting, and the Hunterian Museum and Gallery at Glasgow University are not run by the City Council and have separate sources of finance.

The Kelvingrove collection is housed in 20 galleries in a huge and ornate red sandstone building. It contains significant 17th and 18th century Dutch and Italian works, including some by Rembrandt, Frans van Mieris, David Teniers II, van Ruisdael, Botticelli and Canaletto. 19th and 20th century artists in the collection include Eugene Delacroix, Victor Vincenzo, Vincent van Gogh and Picasso, as well as a selection from the "Scottish Colourists" group. The museum also has a unique collection of armour and a now rather tattered natural history exhibition. Recent important exhibitions included the work of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Mitchell Library, founded in 1877 and named after the tobacco magnate William Mitchell, is the city's main reference library. The massive Burrell Collection was donated by the millionaire ship owner William Burrell in 1944. A building to house all its 8,000 sculptures, including Rodin's "The Thinker", paintings—including works by Bellini, Millet, Manet and Degas—drawings, stained glass and tapestries was

not constructed until 1983.

The present crisis affecting Glasgow's galleries and museums is one consequence of the drastic contraction of local services. Glasgow's Labour council has sought to offset a decline in revenue caused by budget cuts from central government and boundary changes, by levying a high council tax on householders. It has also been pushing through severe cost cutting measures, and so-called "best value" productivity drives in all departments. There has been a 30 percent drop in cash grants paid to the city's museum service since 1996, and a 32 percent cut in staffing. The museums attract more than three million visitors annually (one million visit Kelvingrove alone), yet at just 10 staff for every 100,000 visitors, staffing levels are less than half the national average.

Such cuts are also an expression of cultural vandalism and philistine indifference. The political elite increasingly regards large sections of the arts as superfluous.

In Glasgow's museum services, 11 out of 14 conservators—responsible for the painstaking maintenance and restoration of many priceless paintings—have been replaced by outside contractors and outright neglect.

One of the city's senior remaining conservators told the *Guardian* newspaper last year that she had no idea what condition most of the 3,500 canvases under the city's control were in and that at best only the most apparently urgent work was being carried out. Canvases at risk include Renaissance works by Montagna, Pessellino and Dossi. As a result of the recent Blake exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London, attention was also drawn to the poor condition of some William Blake paintings that had been borrowed from Glasgow.

Of 1.5 million items in the city's collections, the majority never see the light of day, as staff cuts prevent

them being displayed.

Glasgow's situation is by no means unique. There are approximately 3,000 regional, local and specialist museums in the UK. Many face mounting pressures to cut costs by losing staff, restricting opening hours, auctioning off collections or introducing/increasing entry prices.

For example, the education budget of Leicester's museum service is currently a paltry £8,000 and the city's costume museum at Wygston's House closed last year. Strangers Hall in Norwich, the earliest part of which was built in 1320, is now only open by appointment. A lead mining museum in isolated Wanlockhead, which includes a miners' subscription library opened in 1756, only narrowly avoided closure this year through private donations.

Local museums in London have also suffered a 24 percent cut in funding—in stark contrast to over £1 billion spent by the Labour government on the much ridiculed, deeply unpopular and now closed Millennium Dome.

Resource, the newly formed government body for distributing museum funding in England and Wales, claims that the arts are a victim of local authorities directing resources towards services they are obliged to provide—such as education—at the expense of museums and galleries. *Resource* cites a "Needs Assessment" document that suggests the rejuvenation of museums, not including local archives and libraries, would require £800 million.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact