

Emergency manager considers selling off Detroit Institute of Arts collection

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Detroit's unelected emergency financial manager, Kevyn Orr, has asked for an appraisal of the collection held by the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) to determine whether the city could sell off the art works to help pay off Detroit's \$15 billion in long-term debt.

This outright provocation comes in the wake of Orr's announcement that he has set a six-week deadline by which time he will decide whether the city can survive its financial crisis without filing for bankruptcy.

Orr's spokesman, Bill Nowling, said that the DIA's collection, as a city asset, must be considered and valued. "We've got a responsibility to rationalize all the assets of the city and find out what the worth is and what the city holds."

While the monetary value of works of art is difficult to judge—their value is generally taken to be how much they sell at auction—lower estimates for the entire collection of the DIA are in the range of several billion dollars. The *Detroit Free Press* asked art dealers in metro Detroit and in New York City to review 38 of the greatest masterpieces held by the museum. The estimated market value was at least \$2.5 billion.

Among the pieces considered were Pieter Bruegel's "The Wedding Dance", Vincent van Gogh's "Self-Portrait" and Matisse's "The Window". These are estimated to be worth between \$100 and \$150 million each. It is not clear what the value of Diego Rivera's famed "Detroit Industry Murals" (1932-33) would be, as murals are not typically sold. If the Rivera murals were sold, however, they could easily be in the same price range. Additionally, the museum's building, including the Detroit Film Theater and grounds, is also an asset of the city that could be privatized if Orr decided on it.

Merely raising the possibility of selling the DIA's art collection is obscene and an attack on the cultural and social rights of Detroit's population. The barbarians are at the gate.

The emergency financial manager is not content with slashing the jobs, wages, benefits and pensions of city workers and cutting or eliminating city services in large parts of the city. If he has his way, Orr aims to rob the population of Detroit--and the global population--of one of the most renowned art collections in the US and deliver it into private hands.

The DIA was founded in 1885 and has long been considered a cultural treasure. For much of its history, the museum was the fourth largest fine arts institution in the country. It consists of 100 galleries and 65,000 pieces of art with work that comes from every continent and time period. The American painting collection in particular is considered to be one of the finest in the US.

There are questions as to whether the emergency manager can even sell the art. While Orr argues that the works in the DIA are assets of the city, DIA director Graham W. J. Beal asserted Friday that the art work is "held in the public trust" and thus is not eligible to be sold by the emergency financial manager to private collections.

An added complication is that not all of the works were purchased by the city. Some were donated to the museum with the explicit provision they could not be sold. It is unclear whether the emergency financial manager, a bankruptcy filing, or a combination of the two could override such provisions.

This issue has apparently been brought to the fore by Detroit's big creditors. Nowling admitted that, "The creditors can really force the issue. If you go into court, they can object and say, 'Hey I'm taking a huge haircut, and you've got a billion dollars worth of art sitting over there.'"

The notion that the bondholders will have to make sacrifices, in the present context, is also obscene. For the most part, their bonds are insured to the tune of billions of dollars. If the emergency financial manager decides to

push the city into bankruptcy, the bondholders will be minimally affected. Investors are eager to pick up the art for a song and make huge profits by selling it on the art market.

The WSWS spoke to visitors to the DIA Friday to see what they thought about a possible sale of the art collection.

Patrice Brinson was visiting the museum with her friend. A student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Patrice was upset about the proposal to sell the art.

“There is no way they should take away anything so fundamental as art. This is a key foundation for knowledge. It is difficult for me to conceive that they would do this.”

Patrice asked if there was something people could do, such as organize a picket or some form of protest.

Pha Reel, an artist, said he had one of his art pieces chosen for display in the DIA when he was in the 8th grade. “I think it is horrible that they are threatening to sell the art. This is a city built on art. It is known for its music and cars—all of which are forms of art.”

“I’m wondering if the problem is the corruption we see at the top.”

Carl Jones, a retired airline mechanic, was emphatic in his opposition to the threat by Orr to sell the DIA’s art works. He is a frequent visitor of the museum and often attends the Friday night events held each week.

“I’m definitely against it. If they sell the art no one will come to the museum. They are setting the city up for shutting down the DIA.”

Carl said he felt that what was needed was a movement by working people, against the emergency financial manager. “I think they should call a general strike like they do in Europe. Here the unions divide the working class against each other. I saw them do this at my job.”

“With the way things are going ... at a certain point the people will rebel.”



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