

The threat to sell off the works in the Detroit Institute of Arts

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The threat by Detroit's unelected financial tsar, Kevyn Orr, to sell off the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, or major pieces from it, to help pay the city's creditors has provoked widespread anger and revulsion.

The DIA is a beautiful museum, from its 1920s' beaux-arts building to the breathtaking courtyard of Diego Rivera murals and its collection of more than 65,000 works. It is a source of legitimate pride to Detroit's population.

If Orr has his way, works by Van Gogh, Delacroix, Degas, Monet, Hals, Rubens, Correggio, Hogarth, Rembrandt, Courbet, Bellini, Titian, Velasquez, Bruegel, Cassatt, Whistler, Homer, Eakins and many others could go on the auction block to satisfy the greed of Detroit's wealthy bondholders.

No doubt, investors are already salivating over the possibilities in the present inflated art market for making fortunes over the priceless art collection.

The claim by Kenneth Buckfire, the investment banker hired to oversee the plundering of Detroit, that "the cultural and emotional value of the DIA's treasures must be weighed against the needs of 700,000 largely poor residents of Detroit who desperately need safe streets and a capable city government not drowning in debt" is cynical and contemptible.

If the modern-day Vandals in business suits have their way, Detroit residents will have neither "safe streets," public services and jobs *nor* a significant art museum, while asset-stripping creditors, lawyers, politicians and consultants will walk away with their pockets bulging.

What the US and the world have witnessed in recent years is the return of the aristocratic principle. According to our present-day rulers, in Detroit, Greece (where the Acropolis was briefly up for sale in 2011)

and elsewhere, all important social policy and official decision-making should be subordinated to making sure that a handful of individuals go on accumulating immense wealth. Turning Jean-Jacques Rousseau's phrase upside down, the present motto is "The very rich constitute the human race."

The working population, in the eyes of the financial aristocracy, are riff-raff who have no rights. Art is for the super-rich to buy, sell, view or dispense with at their leisure.

According to this logic, whether the people have hospitals, libraries, schools or museums will increasingly depend on the whim of this or that multi-billionaire. While the population waits, cap in hand, society's great ones—the Warren Buffetts, Bill Gateses, Mark Zuckerbergs and others—will consider bestowing, or not bestowing, favors and gifts as they see fit.

Theorists of the "social contract," like Rousseau and John Locke, who influenced the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century, argued that only the will of the people gave legitimacy to government. The modern museum or gallery, accessible to the public, emerged as a product of these democratic revolutions.

The first major public art museum, the Louvre in Paris, came into being as an event of the great French Revolution. The imprisonment of Louis XVI in 1792 meant that the royal art collection became national property. French revolutionaries viewed the museum's opening in 1793 as a demonstration of the superiority of republican government over "the administration of despotism."

Museums proliferated after the Russian Revolution of 1917, which made the collections of the old nobility accessible to the population to enjoy for the first time. The Bolshevik regime also decentralized and

democratized art collections and took them out into working class neighborhoods and provincial cities.

In the US, the emergence of public museums in the first half of the 19th century was bound up with the struggle for public education and other progressive causes, conceived of by their advocates as the best defense against European-style tyranny. “The late 1800s,” following the Civil War and the destruction of the slavocracy, “were a boom time for American museums,” one commentator notes.

The Detroit Institute of Arts, founded in 1885, has come under attack by reactionary forces more than once before. Rivera’s murals, “Detroit Industry,” which illustrate automobile production and place the workers at the forefront, came under attack in 1933 from reactionary Catholic priest Father Coughlin as blasphemous, materialistic, communistic, etc. Workers mobilized to defend the murals, and 10,000 people visited the DIA on a single Sunday.

In recent years, the DIA has found itself at the mercy of state and city budget crises. The politicians declare “there is no money” for education, health care and culture, even as the financial markets are awash with cash and corporations hoard tens of billions.

The American ruling elite is crude, predatory and criminal. Whatever does not funnel money into its bank accounts is reckoned useless. In any event, the powers that be have every interest in desensitizing the population and inuring it to violence at home and abroad. Art always represents a danger from that point of view. Better, all in all, to lock it away or sell it off!

That goes for *all* sections of the elite, not simply the hedge fund managers and the like. The Democratic Party, the trade unions and the desiccated remains of American liberalism will not lift a finger to defend culture. In Detroit, black Democrats are leading the charge.

The popular feeling aroused by the threat against the DIA already points to the fact that the only constituency for art, as for democratic rights, is the working class. Many Detroit residents, although they may not realize the full implications of the situation, sense they are being deprived of something by the rich and powerful. And they are right.

In its program, the Socialist Equality Party includes “The Right to Culture” as one of the basic social rights of the working class: “Access to art and culture is a

basic component of a healthy society. Yet, like everything else, it is under relentless attack. ... The subordination of culture to the profit motive has led to an immense degeneration.”

The threat to sell off the art works of the DIA, whether it is carried through or not, is a declaration by the powers-that-be of their determination to steal everything from the people, to reduce it to a benumbed mass without rights or knowledge, to ruin the country and its institutions in order to protect their vast wealth. The rich will have to be dealt with, through the building of a mass movement consciously aimed at doing away with their selfish, irrational and destructive system.



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