

Christie's appraises the Detroit Institute of Arts collection for possible sale

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Detroit Institute of Arts director Graham Beal last week confirmed reports that officials from Christie's auction house visited the museum in early June, most likely to appraise the value of the museum's collection in anticipation of the city's bankruptcy filing, which occurred over a month later, on July 18.

The office of Kevyn Orr, Detroit's unelected emergency manager, denied reports that the auction house visited the museum at his request, and suggested that one of the city's creditors may have ordered the appraisal. On the morning of Detroit's bankruptcy filing, Orr called the sale of the DIA's collection an "open item for the future."

Despite Orr's public evasions, there should be little doubt that plans to liquidate the artwork of the DIA are currently being negotiated, if they have not been agreed upon already.

Founded in 1885, the Detroit Institute of Arts is the second-largest municipal art museum in the United States. It houses over 65,000 works of art, which encompass an incredible range of period and medium. The collection ranges from well-known works by Picasso, Renoir, Van Gogh, O'Keefe, Bruegel, and Caravaggio (among many others), to early Islamic art, Native American craftwork, a stunning mural by Diego Rivera and an extensive collection of culturally-significant puppets, including the iconic Howdy Doody marionette.

Far from being, as *Forbes* contributor Tim Worstall writes, merely "some paint daubed pieces of canvas," the DIA's collection is an irreplaceable expression of human intellect and creativity.

The sale of such a large and significant public collection is entirely without precedent. The only case that comes close is the collection-sharing agreement reached last year between Fisk University's museum

and the private Crystal Bridges Museum founded by Walmart heiress Alice Walton.

In that deal, Crystal Bridges purchased a 50 percent stake in Fisk's Stieglitz collection. Artist Georgia O'Keefe donated the collection to Fisk with a stipulation that the collection never be sold. In exchange for transferring the collection for display at Crystal Bridges every two years, the deeply indebted Fisk University museum received \$30 million. The legal framework for the sale of a collection like the DIA's, in violation of the public trust, may well have been laid in this instance.

The June appraisal of the DIA's collection by Christie's follows an inventory ordered by Orr earlier in the year that estimated the value of the museum's collection at several billion dollars. In the event of a sale, an estimate of value done by the museum itself would not necessarily reflect the market value of the art and both seller and any potential buyers would conduct an independent evaluation by an auction house.

Regardless of the origin of the order to assess the value of the DIA's collection, its occurrence indicates a definitive step in the direction of a sale.

There are different forms the sale of the DIA's assets could take. An outright sale of a number of pieces in the museum's collection, referred to as deaccessioning, would inevitably flood the world art market, resulting in a decrease in the sale price and a significant cut on the return.

Several paintings in the DIA's collection have been valued at \$100 million or more, including Van Gogh's *Self Portrait*. Given these extremely high values, it is doubtful that any of the museum's most prominent artworks could be purchased by other public museums and would therefore most likely find their way into the private collections of billionaires.

Another potential scenario involves the city charging the DIA approximately \$20 million per year in rent over the next ten to twenty years. This proposal would in effect negate the \$22 million millage for operating costs passed unanimously by voters last year. It would force the museum to eliminate programs, cut back on conservation and gradually deaccession artwork over a longer period of time, essentially resulting in death by attrition.

Outright privatization of the museum could also occur under the terms of the city's bankruptcy. In the meantime, the DIA has secured its own bankruptcy lawyer and is courting wealthy patrons who may be willing to purchase the art and then donate it back to the city.

Whatever form a sale of the DIA's artwork may take, what is certain is that Detroit's creditors will have their pound of flesh while the workers of the city will be left with nothing. The oft-repeated con that the sale of artwork could help float unfunded pension obligations is just that: a lie. Any money made on the sale of artwork will be funneled into the pockets of the banks and away from the workers and retirees whose pensions and benefits will be slashed regardless.

Art critics and writers have spoken out against Christie's decision to assess the DIA collection, some of whom have denounced the auction house as "vultures." Culture journalist Judith Dobrynski wrote on her blog *Real Clear Arts*, "Sure, business is business, but let's remember here that it is not the Detroit Institute of Arts that has mismanaged the city and led to the bankruptcy. ... Is Christie's so hard up that it will take any business, no matter how reprehensible? That's sad."

No one should be surprised at the behavior of Christie's auction house, however, as its very lifeblood springs from the hoarding of the world's cultural patrimony by social parasites. Christie's is the world's largest fine-art auction house and is controlled by French billionaire Francois Pinault and his son Francois-Henri Pinault.

The elder Pinault claims many friends in French ruling circles, including former President Jacques Chirac. Francois-Henri is well-known both for his marriage to actress Salma Hayek and his patronage of the art-world darling and charlatan, Damien Hirst.

The Pinaults hold a controlling interest in a number

of other "lifestyle" companies including Samsonite, Converse shoes, Puma, and Vail Ski Resort, among others. In 2012, Christie's reported more than \$3.5 billion in sales, up 11.5 percent over the previous year.

The threat to sell off the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts points to the anti-social parasitism of this social layer, which is willing to drag human culture back centuries for the purpose of its own enrichment and aggrandizement.



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