Christie's auction house hired to appraise DIA collection

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In a statement released Monday, Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr announced that the city has contracted with Christie's auction house to appraise the value of the Detroit Institute of Arts' collection. Orr's announcement comes one week after news broke of a recent visit by representatives of the auction house to the museum. At the time, the office of the emergency manager evaded questions of who had hired Christie's and pointed to creditors as the impetus for the assessment.

The dishonesty of those statements has now been exposed, though Orr continues to deny that any sale of the DIA's assets is imminent. He has commented that the auction house will "advise the City on ways in which a restructuring could monetize or create value from the asset without a transfer of ownership." The auction house is reportedly being paid $200,000 for the assessment, which it estimates will be completed this fall.

As the WSWS reported last week, there are a number of forms that a sale of the museum's assets could take short of complete liquidation. These could include the privatization of all or part of the collection, or a sharing agreement with a private institution. Regardless of the method, however, there can be little doubt that preparations are being made to transfer the public wealth of the DIA's art collection into private hands.

Additionally, the sale of the DIA's artwork and other city-owned assets—including the Detroit Zoo, Belle Isle, and the Coleman Young International airport, among others—will be used as a cudgel to extract concessions from the city's public workers and pensioners, who are facing an unprecedented attack on their pay and benefits.

In response to Monday's announcement on the Christie's valuation, the Detroit Institute of Arts released a statement applauding "the EM's focus on rebuilding the City, but would point out that he undercuts that core goal by jeopardizing Detroit's most important cultural institution."

The museum's statement also cited a formal opinion released in June by Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette, which asserted that the DIA's collection could not be sold to satisfy debts. No confidence should be placed in the attorney general's opinion, however, as it could be easily overturned in federal bankruptcy court. In addition, Schuette should not be mistaken for a defender of the public trust, as he was instrumental in preparing the legal framework for the City's bankruptcy filing in the first place.

A petition that appeals to Kevyn Orr to spare the DIA prepared by a group called Save The DIA was launched online and received thousands of signatures in a matter of hours after Monday's announcement. While this is no doubt an expression of outrage over the proposed sale, appeals to Orr and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder will fall on deaf ears, as their statements on the matter have made clear.

The Detroit Institute of Arts is the second largest municipal museum in the United States and houses an invaluable and extensive collection. It is a manifestation of the flowering of the Enlightenment ideals of public education and democratic access to culture which stretch back to the opening of the Louvre during the French Revolution.

In that struggle, works of art were seized from the aristocracy and placed on public view for the enrichment and education of the population. The return of the aristocratic principle in the proposed sale of the DIA's artwork is an assault on the social right of working people in Detroit and beyond to access these cultural riches.

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