

Residents, visitors denounce plan to sell treasures from the Detroit Institute of Arts

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Residents and visitors in large numbers voiced their outrage and dismay at the advanced preparations by Detroit's emergency manager Kevin Orr to sell off sections of the precious collection at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), for the purpose of reimbursing wealthy creditors. It was recently revealed that Orr had channeled \$200,000 of city funds to pay Christie's auction house for a detailed appraisal of thousands of works that constitute the core of the collection.

Museum officials, and its wealthy donors and patrons, are assisting Orr by seeking to mislead the public about the dangers and relying on behind the scenes maneuvers or court action. Apparently, DIA officials have issued strict instructions to staff and volunteers not to discuss the threatened fire sale with anyone.

Residents of the Detroit metropolitan area, as well as a number of visitors from out of town, expressed to us their deep feelings about the DIA collection and their indignation at the prospect of such priceless works as *The Wedding Dance* by Pieter Bruegel and Vincent Van Gogh's *Self Portrait* (1887) being placed in the private collections of wealthy investors.

There is a profound historical irony in the prospect. Towering figures such as Bruegel, van Gogh, Diego Rivera, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Max Beckman and many others, whose works constitute the heart of the collection, showed profound empathy for the oppressed in their work.

"Every time I go to the museum I feel refreshed," said Lee Snider, who works as a copy editor at the *Detroit Free Press*. "They are paying Christie's \$200,000 to appraise the art. Why else would they be doing that? They are going to sell it," he declared. "Some of my favorite pieces will go—the Bruegel, the [Jan] van Eyck [*Saint Jerome in His Study*, c. 1435].

"It is a tragedy really, the desecration of what I consider to be a sacred site.

"It is a special experience that paintings and sculptures can give you—a spiritually enriching experience. It is essential in my life. There is no doubt that my life will be incalculably less interesting, less rewarding and less fulfilled without art."

Trisha Hasch is a city planner for Raleigh, North Carolina. She set up her vacation to visit Detroit so that she could see for herself the story of a great American city that had been plunged into bankruptcy. She said she had to stop telling her colleagues where she was going because of their repeated protests against visiting such a "horrible" place.

"But the reality is very different from what you read," she said. "People here love the city and have not given up on it. Yes, there is decay and blight, but there is also optimism and a fighting spirit."

Originally from Milwaukee, she had grown up in the working class, the daughter of factory workers and was proud of it.

"We would not exist today in our current form of life without the struggles of the workers of 50 years ago," she said. "They had to fight for the right to have a family and to prosper. My father was a union worker until he joined management, and even then all of his friends were members of the union.

"Our whole country would not exist as it is without that struggle. Everything, all the advancements in life—college education, retirement, medical care—the entire quality of life depended upon it.

"City planning is about sustaining the quality of life. It is not about balancing the budget. Those factory workers put their kids through college. They are the economic engine of our country today. What does this mean for the future?

“There is a unity of life and society, all of human existence. The development of Henry Ford’s factories in Detroit was the first time that blacks and whites, in large numbers, worked together side-by-side. You cannot just dismiss that. The city is a big part of our history.

“The job of government is to improve the quality of life. Not just our quality of life, but the quality of life of people throughout the world. That is their job. Period.

“After the Vietnam War, I tried to help them start the ‘Department of Peace’ to replace the Department of War. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed. And to what end? Entire countries are being destroyed, decimated. We have to do something about it.”

Sebastian works as a driver for General Motors and is currently studying at the Michigan Actors Studio. He recently returned to Detroit from Las Vegas. “It is upsetting,” he said. “This is part of our history, and they are thinking of selling it all off.

“I am an actor and in general love all the arts. Arts are an enormous part of our culture. They determine how we teach, how we learn. It started on the walls of caves. Without a blueprint of how everything went down before, how do you go forward? This is the truth. What if I have kids, and there is no museum to take them to?

“These great works are not all meant to be locked up in a vault in some rich guy’s house. They are supposed to be a gift to the world, something that everyone can see and enjoy. It is not as if we voted on this. What we have is a dictatorship in Detroit. This is the beginning. And where does it end?

“They will sell the schools, the textbooks, anything with value. And it all ends with them telling you what you can and cannot do.”

“We are witnessing how capitalism works,” said Lila Wake, there with two friends. “There are cycles in the economy. When there is a recession, or depression, only the big cats make out all right. When jobs are destroyed, the rest of us are ruined.

“Karl Marx said that capitalism in theory could be fair; but historically, the starting point for the development of capitalism places the capitalist at an advantage. When I think about it, the capitalist can send his kids to school anywhere. They can get a good education and then a good job. But if you do not have an inheritance, you have a hard time in school; you

don’t do as well in the job market.

“The capitalists have the right to close factories and put their money in the stock market or some other investments. It is outrageous what has happened since the 1980s. People have to put their feet down.”

William Sharpe recently graduated from Lawrence Technological University in Southfield, Michigan. He said, “This is terrible. All the culture and history of Detroit is really important. Art is the way that we capture history and the emotions of people. The whole society loses when art is destroyed.”

Grahame Lynch commented to a WSWWS reporter, “These attacks are unprecedented. Once these paintings go—it’s permanent. The DIA is never going to get them back— *we’re* never going to get them back.”

“If this happens I don’t think art will die, there’s a history of resilience within the Detroit art world, but I definitely think they’re trying to send a message with this.”

Hillary told us: “I heard they weren’t really going to do it. I really don’t want them to sell it. They need to come up with another solution. The DIA is fun! It brings the community together and it’s educational. You take the art work away and it won’t solve anything—it’ll just reduce the quality of life in the city even more.”

Stephanie, from Shelby Township, Michigan: “I think this is awful. They want to ‘revitalize’ the city, but they’re going to sell off the artwork in the DIA? How does that make any sense?”

Her friend Jessica, from Troy, Michigan, also in suburban Detroit, told the WSWWS, “It’s not just in Detroit. It’s all over Michigan. In Troy they tried to close down the public library. Now they keep it closed on certain days because they can’t ‘afford’ to keep it open during the entire week.”



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