

# Students, professors denounce threat to the Detroit Institute of Arts

“It is like selling the soul of the city”

Our reporters  
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Students and professors at Wayne State University spoke out Tuesday against the threatened selloff of paintings, sculptures and other works from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). Auctioning off the publicly owned artwork is one of the options being considered by the city’s emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, as part of his plan to restructure Detroit on behalf of Wall Street creditors.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are organizing a protest on October 4 to oppose the sale of the DIA’s artwork and mobilize the working class to defend the right to culture, along with decent living standards, pensions and public services, which are also under attack.

Wayne State University is only blocks from the world-renowned art museum and both lie within the city’s historic cultural district. Nearly 30,000 graduate and undergraduate students attend the public university, which along with the nearby Center for Creative Studies, offers a variety of fine arts, design and art history degrees to the mostly working-class and middle-class students who attend.

Asked about the threatened sale of the DIA’s artwork, Professor Dora Apel, the W. Hawkins Ferry Endowed Chair in Modern and Contemporary Art History at Wayne State University, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “This is a total atrocity. It’s the looting of the DIA, not unlike what happened to the national museum in Baghdad when the US invaded Iraq.

“The DIA’s artwork is held in public trust and the idea that there is some kind of quid pro quo—that the sale of artwork would be used for paying pensions—is

ridiculous and something that was even debunked by the *Wall Street Journal*. Instead, it’s related to other kinds of attacks: on higher education, for example, the cutting of funding to major universities, and even the scrapping of 10,000 historical and archival items by the emergency manager in nearby Highland Park to make way for some bureaucratic offices.

“To sell off the most valuable works would be to destroy one of things that makes Detroit a great city. Some 600,000 people visit the DIA each year. It’s the fifth largest encyclopedic museum in the country, to diminish it would be devastating.”

Professor Apel, the author of an upcoming book, *Detroit Ruin Imagery: The Fear of Global Decline*, drew a connection between the threatened sale of artwork and the attack on workers’ pensions and other social rights.

“The *Detroit Free Press* published an article that purported to explain the decline of the city. If only the previous mayors had cut jobs and benefits deeper, it said, everything would have been all right. In fact, the companies have been deindustrializing the city for decades—as early as the 1950s—to get away from the unions and bring wages to the rock bottom. Now we are reaping the reward.”

Depriving large sections of the population—especially the working class—of culture, Apel noted, was “part of a horrendous national phenomenon, which includes cutting the arts and humanities in the public schools and secondary education. It’s not just philistinism, but a lack of any understanding of the need for critical thinking, a real anti-intellectualism.”

Rather than a basic right available to everyone, she said, “Art and culture are more and more being seen as

commodities to attract and support entrepreneurs.” She added, “Cities all over the county are watching what is happening in Detroit. Pontiac has already sold off its public assets and outsourced workers to private corporations, which pay them less.

If they successfully cut pensions and selloff public assets in Detroit, it will happen everywhere.”

A number of Wayne State students also spoke with the WSWs. Bryce, a senior studying biology, was incensed at the idea of selling off the art, as well as at the emergency takeover and the bankruptcy of the city generally.

“Isn’t the bankruptcy supposed to be for the purpose of solving the city’s problems? Instead they’re using it to gut the city. It’s going to devastate Detroit. In particular, I can’t believe they are going after the pensions.” He agreed that counterposing the selloff of the art to the pensions and other cuts was a false dichotomy. “We shouldn’t have to give up anything, including the art. It’s the banks that should take the losses. They deserve it for contributing to the city’s poverty.”

Bryce said he has “lost faith in the current government system. We have to fight against this. If we keep leaving things up to the corporations, society will never change for the better. It’s going to continue to be the top one percent or so controlling everything in their own favor.”

Denise, a doctoral student, said, “For a major city, it’s important to have public art. The art in that museum speaks so much to our quality of life. I also think it’s important for the education of children to be exposed to the global works of art in the DIA. The viewpoints of different artists from throughout the world and throughout history is important to see.”

Tyree, a senior studying geology, told the WSWs, “I think it’s a bad idea to sell the art. Art is meant to be seen by the people, and it’s really nice to be able to go to the museum for free.” He added, “They shouldn’t be able to take the pensions either. People worked their whole lives to earn that. The rich think they can get away with taking anything.”

Brian, a Wayne State chemical engineering student, commented, “The art belongs to the people. They need to be able to appreciate these works. When I go to the DIA I get inspired to create something positive myself.”

Mehak, a junior studying psychology, said she recently brought friends visiting from Pakistan to the DIA. “It’s the pride of our area,” she said. “I definitely oppose the selloff of the art, and I’ll be attending this demonstration for sure.” Mehak said she agreed with the conception that access to art should be a social right. “The people will certainly be worse off without this art.”

Tierra, an accounting student, told the WSWs, “It shows they don’t understand the value of art and the time it took to create it. “I live in Shelby Township [in suburban Detroit] now, but I grew up in the city. It makes me frustrated and mad to see the things they are doing in Detroit. I think if the art were sold it could start a bad trend.”

Adrian, a freshman, was just now learning of the plans to sell the art. She was opposed to it, saying “I go there a several times a year. I like the art there. Last year I went with my art class—at East Detroit High School—to see the Faberge exhibit. They told us about each of the eggs, how they were made and when and for whom. I also took my little brother and sister there just a couple of weeks ago.”

“It’s not right. It’s a tragedy,” said Josh, a communications major. “We knew Detroit was in trouble, but we didn’t expect them to sell off major things that are part of the culture here.

“Art in Detroit, like the [Diego Rivera] industry murals, shows the people of Detroit how we started out. ... Detroit is more a blue-collar town than Chicago or New York City. It is like selling the soul of the city.

“It just shows how everything is run by money, how everything has a price on it. Those art pieces are priceless to the people of Detroit.”



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