

Visitors to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art condemn the sale of DIA artwork

A WSWS reporting team
3 October 2013

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to visitors at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan about the threat by Detroit's emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, to sell off the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts to pay the city's wealthy bondholders.

The Met is the largest museum in the United States with more than 2 million pieces of artwork in its collection. It contains extensive pieces of European art since the Middle Ages, one of the world's prize collections of ancient Greco-Roman sculpture and vases, and significant reliefs from the Near East, as well as African, Asian, Byzantine, Islamic, and Oceanic, art. The museum attracts millions of visitors a year.

Reporters for the WSWS spoke to visitors at the museum last weekend, and while many didn't not know of the threat to sell the masterpieces of the DIA, there was universal shock and outrage that Orr could even contemplate such an action.

Kurt Ankeny, a painter from Ipswich, Massachusetts, said, "The selling of the DIA's artwork is another example of the profit mindset. These bondholders take a risk, but they are constantly getting bailed out. And these are the same people who are taking away the right of the poor and the middle class to live a decent life because they don't think the working population contributes enough to their profit-minded society.

"Honestly, I think most of these trust fund managers and trust fund babies and people with egregious amounts of disposable income see art only as a trophy and an investment. As an artist and following the art world, this is what you see. There are some people with money who are interested in art, but there are far more of these people who see art objects as a way to gain status and at the basic level turn a quick profit. As an artist, this offends me. The attempt to sell the artwork of the DIA is an opportunist grab for art objects that are off the market.

"Selling the art work of the DIA is also another instance of the onslaught of broken promises by public organizations like the city and the state. These are the same supposedly public organizations who are constantly trying to renegotiate

public workers' contracts.

"I am also offended by what the rich are doing to young artists in today's world of art. Time and time again, I see them ruining young artists by gaming the system. They buy a young artist's work early in their career at cheap prices. Then they hype the young artist, thereby inflating the prices of their work and turning a profit at auction. The rich make their profit, and then the hype fades. The young artist is left with a prematurely inflated reputation, which is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. For an artist to lower his prices is usually to commit career suicide, but if you don't, you are stuck with prices based on an artificially inflated reputation, and you can't sell your work to survive as an artist.

"The young artist then has two options. They can try to regain their reputation by creating pretty baubles to attract investors or they can stick to their integrity and eke out a living with art that may not sell.

"The rich are doing serious damage to the future of art by removing the pieces from the DIA. So much of the education of an artist comes from looking at the works that come before them. Not only are they taking away that resource for artists, they are betraying the trust with the public in whose name the collection is held. This includes breaking the trust of members of their own class who donated some of these works to the public in perpetuity.

"I make paintings that are representational with the tools of abstraction. I paid my 25 cents to go to the Met in New York today. I also went to the galleries in Chelsea. It is a dangerous precedent in Detroit. I'm not sure they will be successful in auctioning off the DIA artwork. People don't like this. This is not a healthy society."

As she was sitting on the steps of the Met, Charli Stackhouse, a writer, said selling off the DIA's collection would "devalue where the art comes from. There is art from the 1800s. If you sell that we will lose where we come from, and then what will our kids have? It goes to show that the first thing that goes is always the arts. This will have a domino effect."

Her friend, Alaine, added, "We work with kids in a theater

program, but it is the same idea of exposing kids to art. Art is an outlet for kids, and when they are exposed to art, it gives them the chance to re-create art.

“I saw a report on Bill Maher that prisoners who work in art programs are less likely to go back to prison after they are released. If a kid is exposed to art, they might avoid going to prison in the first place.

“Selling art from a museum is like taking a bite out of our culture.”

Paul Coffee moved to New York City from Canada six months ago. “I am against closing museums like the DIA,” he said. “We appreciate having the opportunity to go to the museums. And I like history. It is good to do things that are good for the mind. I like how the museums rotate their art to other museums in other cities. It is another form of education and entertainment. It is a place to come where there is no commercial influence.”

A student from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Vanessa Norris, said in defense of the DIA, “Art should stay in the museums so it can be viewed by the public. It is a big part of our culture. It looks back thousands of years.”

Kerlyne Hyppolite, a nursing student, told us, “Art was one of the major components of education back then when I was at school. We had art classes all the time, and you had to know a lot of artists and certain works. You had to know the history, how it affected it, how did it change history. But where is that all going now? If it’s completely gone, then what are our kids going to do? How is our kids’ creative side going to be developed? The first place they used to do so was through art.

“I think we are a society that’s in danger—the working class, that is. The working class built these companies up, and then with the money that we make, including the retirement, the wealthy make the decisions. Why does it seem we’re moving backward when technology is moving forward? If we all choose not to go to work one day then guess what? Those wealth-minded people and aristocrats are going to have to come down off of their high horse and come to work and do what the ‘little people’ would have done that day.

“It’s only really 1 percent of the population that’s truly wealthy--wealthy in the sense that it’s been passed down from generation to generation. That old money it keeps circulating within their community. But ours gets taken from us and circulated into theirs as well. They keep growing and growing and we keep shrinking and shrinking. But when are we going to say, ‘that’s enough’?

“Something is going wrong. Our families would love to go to the museum to learn more about artwork and have the kids have the right vision. But they can’t because they don’t

have the money.”

Nadia Riley, a psychology student at Teachers College of Columbia University, explained her view of the attack on the DIA: “I feel a lot of the times, people are being one-minded, sticking to their capitalist values, as in Detroit, where they are not being mindful of the effects of the decisions they are making that are hurting lots of people. Art is for the people, to inspire, to connect people in the communities. What is civilization without art?”

In other parts of the country, the sentiment was the same. When informed about the plans to sell off the works of the DIA, Cynthia, who volunteers at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, said, “Art belongs to everyone. We have works here that are hundreds of years, some thousands of years, old. They represent some of the best achievements of civilizations. Sometimes all that is left of early peoples is the artwork they produced. It tells us a lot about how they lived, communicated, their beliefs. By seeing how others viewed the world it helps people understand the world we live in.

“I think art and not just paintings, but music and theater, and it should be available for everyone. It was wrong how Andrew Carnegie made his millions, but at least he wanted it to be used by the people. Now, the museums are being cut out from the lives of the working class and poor.

“It costs almost \$100, when you include tickets, parking and very little food, for a family to come to the museum. Not many people making minimum wage are able to spare that.

“It makes me sick to hear that artwork is going to be sold off to pay off the bankers. We have already given them hundreds of billions. More money needs to be spent on art and education, libraries and other things that help the people.”



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