

New York museumgoers oppose the threat to sell DIA artwork

A WSWS reporting team
9 October 2013

The day after the Socialist Equality Party held the October 4 demonstration to oppose the selloff of the artwork at the Detroit Institute of Arts, supporters of the SEP spoke with visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the largest museum in the United States, about the defense of culture.

A team of WSWS reporters had discussions with a wide range of people from around the world, the United States, and New York City itself. Many were students and professionals, while others were workers or unemployed. Some knew about the bankruptcy of Detroit while many did not. All were upset that unelected Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr would even contemplate the sale of paintings to pay investors who control the city's debt.

We found that the Met's staff knew a good deal about the plans for a fire sale of the DIA's treasures and the most commonly used epithet for Orr's actions was "criminal."

Unsurprisingly, some of the angriest were visitors who lived in Detroit. One woman, who said she was from a family of three generations of autoworkers and was now supporting unemployed family members in Southeast Michigan, said, "We know what's going on. This is the gutting of a whole society. And we know who's doing it, too."

She gestured at the apartment buildings across the street from the Met on Fifth Avenue, which are home to some of the richest people in the world.

Others saw the attack on the DIA as a part of the general trend to slash wages, and degrade healthcare and working conditions, and strip working people of all of their essential social rights.

One mother of a middle-school student from the Washington Heights area of Manhattan complained that her child's school does not have music and art while

the school building has been broken up into several smaller schools that are crowded without enough facilities.

A couple from Britain compared the attack on the DIA to the Cameron Tory government's austerity program, to the dismantling of the National Health System.

An architecture student from the Borough of Manhattan Community College described how he is beginning to accumulate student debt but has a job that only pays \$8.00 an hour.

Harvey Manes, a member on the board of the Nassau County Museum on Long Island, said, "I think it is terrible. Art belongs to the people. It is not something that can just be sold to pay the bills. What if this starts to happen in other cities? There should be a federal law against museums selling their art."

Manes's friend, CC Car, added, "They can bailout the banks but not Detroit? Detroit gave us some of the best cars and music for decades. People worked all their lives there and now no one is helping them.

"If the government can hide completely unrelated legislation in the healthcare plan and tax us they definitely can bail out Detroit. Detroit does need to be restructured but not by selling art."

Matthew Aburlo, a media technician and journalist, said, "This is ridiculous. The Federal government could bail out the city like it did with the banks. If you start devaluing your art that is the end of your culture.

"The arts are always the first thing under attack. I remember in the 1980s, they vilified PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts, and then they kept cutting them. Now artists are forced to accept corporate cash to fund their art."

Asked about the political set-up that allows this, he said, "You see the corporations have bought out the

entire political body.”

Katherine Millray is a solicitor in the UK. She told the WSWS, “I think the plan to sell off the masterpieces of the Detroit Institute of Art is absolutely disgusting. I didn’t know about this until you told me. We love art. We went to the Louvre in Paris last May, and we went to the Vatican last year. Now people who come to the DIA will have nothing to see. It is such a shame what is happening. Generally, austerity has not affected Europe like this, but I think that Greece may be similar to Detroit.”

Jaymes Barnett was visiting the Met with friends and grew up in Iowa. He explained, “I think the influence of art and culture go well beyond what you can see. Art represents people and their moments through history and time. The people of Detroit deserve better than this.”

Crista Grauer and Katherine Kadish are both visual artists who were visiting the Met. Crista, who is from New York City, pointed out, “One of the travesties is that the selloff of art violates the purposes of the people who gave the art to the DIA. These purposes are for education, for the children and for enlightenment.

“This has been happening beyond Detroit. The New-York Historical Society here in New York City, which I think is funded by the city, has been forced to sell off some of its really great artwork. One was a quite famous work, if I remember.

“This has also happened at the Albright Knox Museum in Buffalo. The Albright Knox held the first showing of photography as an art form in the US in the very early days of the 20th century.”

Katherine, who is from Yellow Springs, Ohio, close to Dayton, added, “The Albright Knox Museum was forced to auction off its old masters in order to keep its contemporary art collection. The New-York Historical Society is still open, but it was forced to sell great artwork.

“Dayton is another so-called ‘failing city’ that has money problems. This could happen in Dayton or anywhere. Nothing is sacred.”

Joe Rundell, a student at Temple University Medical School in Philadelphia stated. “Once you sell them, they are gone. Once you sell them, you will never see them again.

“People will lose touch with the great art. It will be out of sight, out of mind for great paintings, sculpture

and art. I know a little about what is going on in Detroit, and I’ve heard about the asset sale. People from all over have visited the DIA museum.

“It also sets a precedent, and that is the other big worry. You don’t want to start this ball rolling. Other towns might get the idea and start doing the same. The cities could start doing it. In Greece, for example, they could be selling the Parthenon. Detroit is just the beginning. A number of cities are in the same situation. They are waiting to see if Detroit can get away with this.

“I just moved to Philly in August. I lived in Chicago. Both of these cities and the state of Illinois are in dire straits. The governors and mayors are saying the pension funds there are going to run dry in a few years, and I think they are looking at Detroit. This will be the precedent, and they will play their hands based on that. There are many cities like Detroit.”



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