British local councils petition government to sell off art works

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Last week two councils in the UK, Southampton and Croydon, wrote a joint letter to Culture Secretary Maria Miller pleading for a relaxation in the rules so they can sell art works to compensate for budget cuts.

Following the 2010 election, the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition cut funding to local councils by 28 percent in 2011-2015 and earlier this year announced a further 10 percent cut for 2015-16. Funding to art and culture was cut by 29 percent for 2011-15 and by a further 5 percent in 2015-16.

If Southampton and Croydon are successful, it will open up the floodgates for other councils, who have no statutory responsibility to provide art and culture services, to sell their own collections, much of which was given freely by artists or local philanthropists.

The councils are knocking at an open door. In 2011, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles urged councils "to take a good hard look at what they own" and use their assets to make up for budget cuts.

However, under current rules laid down by Arts Council England and the Museums Association, accredited museums can only sell art works if the money raised is reinvested into the collection the art work was a part of. Where councils have sold art to subsidise other services they have lost their accreditation and found themselves losing grants and other funding.

In 2006 Bury Council was expelled from the Museums Association for selling an L.S. Lowry painting, "A Riverbank" at Christie's auction house for £1.25 million to make up for a £10 million budget shortfall. Lowry was president of Bury Art Society and taught at the town's Arts and Crafts Centre.

The Labour Party council leader at the time, Wayne Campbell, claimed as justification that the authority thought it more important that "people come before a picture." There was, of course, no question of Bury Council opposing the dictates of government as far as Campbell was concerned.

Southampton Labour City Council is custodian of the city's £150 million, 4,000-piece collection, which is classified as having "special national significance." There have been previous attempts by both Conservative and Labour administrations to sell the city's art works in order to make up for a shortfall in private funding, which failed to materialise, for prestigious projects such as the Sea City Museum and the Cultural Quarter. Reports suggest that *Crouching Woman* by Auguste Rodin, one of the 19th century's most important sculptors, and *After the Race* by Sir Alfred Munnings, worth several million each, are earmarked for sale.

The Conservative-run local council in Croydon, London, wants to sell-off its collection of Chinese pottery (see pic 1) which is worth more than £13 million. Since 2010 the funding it has received from central government has fallen by 31 percent and a further 10 percent cut will be imposed in 2015-16. The ceramics, which date from Neolithic times to the 19th century, including Tang dynasty tomb models and Ming dynasty bowls, were left to the people of Croydon in the 1950s by local businessman Raymond Riesco "in perpetuity." Councillors are keen to sell the art as soon as possible because "any decline in the economic climate in Asia could lead to a decrease in the prices achieved."

Late last year, Tower Hamlets Council in east London attempted to sell *Draped Seated Woman* (see pic 2) by the socialist sculptor Henry Moore. The sculpture was inspired by Moore's experiences during World War Two. Londoners took to the underground

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railway system during air raids because there were insufficient official shelters and despite government attempts to stop them. Moore's experience of the "unbelievable scenes and life" he found there were expressed in drawings such as the Study for "Tube Shelter Perspective: The Liverpool Street Extension" (1940-41). He compared them to "a hold of a slave ship on its way from Africa to America, full of hundreds and hundreds of people who were having things done to them that they were quite powerless to resist."

After the war the London Country Council commissioned or purchased many works of art as part of the drive to improve housing and living standards. *Draped Seated Woman* was installed in a new housing estate called the Stifford Estate in Stepney on Moore's request.

All of this history was brushed aside as the Mayor of Tower Hamlets, Lutfur Rahman, a former leading light in the local Labour Party, who subsequently left and was supported by the Respect party of George Galloway and the Socialist Workers Party, announced plans to sell the sculpture for a possible £20 million. Rahman declared, "It is with considerable regret that I make this decision, but I have a duty to ensure residents do not suffer the brunt of the horrendous cuts being imposed on us."

The sale of the art work has been stalled because another London council, Bromley, claims ownership.

In the last two or three years other councils have also sold off their artworks including Bolton, which put up for sale 35 works from artists including Picasso and Millais in 2011; Leicester, which sold over 300 art works; and Cambridge. The University of London is considering selling some of Shakespeare's earliest folios to raise money, even though Sir Louis Sterling who donated the collection in 1956 stipulated they should have a "permanent home" in its library.

At the same time councils are selling off their public art collections, the Frieze Art Fair for the super-rich opens this week in London. Hundreds of millions of pounds will be paid for art works. As co-founder Matthew Slotover explained to the *Independent*, "the art world has not been as badly hit as people expected [by the global recession]." Unlike the rest of the society, "the rich have got a lot richer."

It is the effort of the super-rich to retain its wealth and reduce the working class to a state of pauperism that is the driving force behind the present crisis. The bankers have driven the country to the edge of abyss, and they want the working class to pay for it. Working people must reject the proposition that art works have to be plundered to fund other public services. The defence of art and culture is a basic component of a healthy society and is inseparable from the struggle to defend the living standards of the working class.

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