

Los Angeles museum visitors oppose sell-off of DIA artwork

“More people should be educated about art today, not less”

Dan Conway and Danielle DeSaxe
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As part of the continuing campaign to defend the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke on Saturday with visitors to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

LACMA is the largest museum on the West Coast of the United States, receiving an average of one million visitors each year. Its permanent exhibitions contain artwork from nearly every corner of the globe spanning some 12,000 years of human history.

In the course of a single hour, museum patrons can view masterworks by Monet, Rivera, Kandinsky, Pissarro and Rembrandt, along with 10th century Song dynasty landscapes from China and an extensive collection of art treasures from the Pacific Islands and Japan. The museum is also next door to the famed La Brea tar pits, which museum visitors can visit free of charge as part of their regular admission.

While several visitors had not heard of threats to sell off artwork at the DIA, nearly all were nonetheless opposed to such an idea. Each expressed appreciation for the important role art and culture had played in their own personal development and were fearful of the implications of a selloff of the DIA's artwork.

Marcus is an art student at the University of Southern California. In response to a question about the value of art for society, he said, “I think a wide spectrum of people should see art because everyone is artistic in their own way. Whether you come from a background of singing, painting, drawing or photography, art should be made available to everybody, as opposed to being limited to this one room owned by an individual. It should be available to the general public.”

Marcus also spoke of the significance of people today viewing works of art that are hundreds or even

thousands of years old. “It's the struggle. It says something about the portrayal of the struggle of people back then, such as artists who were painting during the Great Depression and things of that nature. These works deal with 2013 because people are still struggling financially right now. I think art is universal and it lasts years beyond the time it was created.”

Daniel is a young artist who just graduated from the University of California, Davis. He spoke of the immense difficulties artists face in producing their work and maintaining their integrity as artists.

“It's very, very hard to be an artist today. I do a lot of ceramic sculpture, and it's very difficult as my family doesn't have the money required to support this effort. You need to buy materials, find a studio and do all of these crazy things with clay. Firing clay also uses up an enormous amount of heat, which can become extremely expensive as well.

“So the only way for young artists with limited means to meet these expenses is to apply for grants and residencies, which is a good way to get your foot in the door and do work even if it's only for a month or two. Sometimes the residencies provide the material and sometimes the artist still has to provide it.

“Grants and residencies often put limitations on what you can produce as an artist. Since you have to live and make money, and thereby keep producing as an artist, you often have no choice but to work within those limitations.

“I once did a cityscape for the Boys and Girls Club of Stockton. I was happy to do it as it sold at an auction to raise funds for city kids, but at the same time I had to ask myself if this is where I wanted to be as an artist. I see it all the time, where artists have to do this kind of

work repeatedly and end up being the complete opposite of the type of artist that they set out to be.

“And my situation isn’t unique. I have tons of artist friends who have brilliant concepts who never get the funds and materials to see them realized.”

When asked what he thought about the selling off of artwork from the DIA, Daniel was of the opinion that it would be extremely detrimental to the working class population in Detroit.

“This will be a tremendous loss to the cultural life of the city. There is a tremendous difference between looking at art online or in a book versus actually seeing it in person. It also means a great deal to me as an artist to actually see the individual brush strokes in a painting, for example, and it provides you with an intimate connection with the artist like nothing else can.”

Tracy is an urban planner and lifelong resident of Los Angeles.

“As you say, this isn’t simply an economic question, but a political and cultural one as well. Their plan is to remove this art so that people can’t see it for their own profit. It’s pretty amazing.

“The claim that Kevyn Orr’s making, that the artwork must be sold or retirees will have to eat cat food, is a ridiculous lie. One way or another, they’re going to try to sell off the art, and cut pensions and benefits. It’s part of the same program.

“Also, we here on the West Coast aren’t immune to the attack on the arts. Music and arts programs at high schools and even universities have been cut for years. When I was little, my uncle used to take me to the Hollywood Bowl every summer and I feel I’m a much more well-rounded person because of it. People need to see this art and they need to have access to it at as young an age as possible.

“It’s very sad and we’re all paying the price for living in what’s essentially an oligarchy.”

Julie, another visitor to the LACMA, was also opposed to the sell-off of DIA art.

She said, “I share the opinion that the art shouldn’t be sold off. Especially since once these works are lost, there’s really no getting them back. Living in Los Angeles, I can only imagine the tragedy of losing something like LACMA or the Getty, or MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]. It would take a terrible toll on our society.”

Nathan and Denise, students at nearby El Camino College, were also visiting the museum.

Denise said, “The selloff of DIA art is a tragedy. Artwork should be for the entire public and not just the rich.”

Nathan agreed. “Art educates people about history and about different cultures and I feel like more people should be educated about art today, not less.”



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