

School District of Philadelphia considers selling off artwork to cut deficit

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8 November 2013

The School Reform Commission (SRC), a Pennsylvania state-appointed body charged with overseeing the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), announced last month that it had contemplated the auctioning of an art collection which is held in the school district's name in order to fund a \$300 million budget shortfall.

"We are considering selling the art collection because we must look at every revenue source possible to assist us with putting more resources into the classroom," said SDP spokesman Fernando Gallard to NBC-Philadelphia last month.

The 1,200-piece collection had adorned the hallways of Philadelphia-area schools such as Woodrow Wilson Middle School in Northeast Philadelphia, assembled by former principal Charles Dudley during his tenure at the school from 1928-1950. The collection features works by Thomas Eakins, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and impressionist Walter Baum, among others.

The artwork had been on display in Philadelphia schools until 2004, when then Superintendent Paul Vallas had the paintings moved to an unknown storage facility. At the time the artwork had been appraised at roughly \$30 million by the district, though the SRC has now estimated the value as being much less: \$8 million if replaced, \$1.5 million if sold.

According to the web site Philly.com, the SRC had designated an unnamed firm as late as last month to sell 60 of the collection's "priciest" works, only later backing off upon the discovery that the financial sum the artwork would fetch was substantially less than expected.

It has since been reported that a portion of the district's artworks have gone missing from storage, with their records being inexplicably deleted from the facilities' registry in 2009.

The attempt to sell the artwork comes against the background of the SRCs' passing of a "Doomsday" austerity budget for the SDP. The \$2.4 billion budget falls \$300 million short of the school system's minimum operating needs. The shortfall has required the layoffs of more than 3,000 faculty members, including teachers, as well as the elimination of sports and arts programs.

Although the SRC ultimately decided to hold off on selling the art during a board hearing held in October, its attitude toward the artwork itself was callous. "It just doesn't feel right to do this," said SRC council member Joseph Dworetzky, referring to the outrage it would provoke among the population. Likewise, Dworetzky emphasized that the money the works would fetch on the market would "not... solve our problem."

The differential in price quotes from 2004 to today caused Erin Davis, an officer from the district's financial division, to remark that she does not "know art, I don't sell art," and the task of auctioning the most valuable pieces from the collection was simply a "project to manage."

Supporters of keeping the artwork in the public domain spoke at the proceeding:

"This collection has historical richness," said Marilyn Krupnick, a former teacher at Wilson, to Philly.com, also remarking that the removal of the artwork had "ripped out the cultural heart of the school district."

"What a teaching tool," she added, saying that though in her time teaching at Wilson she had encountered many "tough kids... not one child had ever touched the artwork" or "destroyed anything." Of the disappearance of some of the art from storage, she remarked, "nothing surprises me anymore... I want to know who the culprit or culprits are. This is

disheartening.”

In contrast to the teachers, parents and students who rightly view their access to the artwork as a matter of the right to culture, there are no such considerations within the city’s ruling strata. As the previous price quote taken in 2004 shows, the intention to sell the artwork has long been on the agenda, and will be placed on it once again should the opportunity present itself.

The threat to artwork in the Philadelphia School District comes in the context of a broader assault on the working class’s right to culture. In Detroit, which has seen the closure and underfunding of countless schools in its district, unelected Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr has said the sale of thousands of priceless paintings from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), in an effort to pay off the city’s financial creditors, is on the agenda.



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