

The implications of privatizing the Detroit Institute of Arts

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The proposal by Chief US District Judge Gerald Rosen to set up a private trust, funded by various philanthropic foundations, that would buy the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and its art collection from the city of Detroit for some \$500 million is historically regressive and would place the priceless artwork in the hands of the moneyed elite.

On Wednesday officials of the DIA shamefully confirmed they were on board with the proposed plan, described as a “grand bargain” to rescue the museum and city workers’ pensions. We declare categorically that such a plan, even if it were come to fruition, would do no such thing.

In the first place, as the *Detroit Free Press* notes, “The plan will have to be confirmed by U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes and is likely to be contested by creditors looking to sell DIA art as a way of recovering more of the money owed to them by the city.” Creditors, joined by the unions, filed a motion recently demanding just that.

In any event, preparations to devastate city workers wages and pensions will go ahead, while this so-called compromise is used to try to lull the population to sleep.

Moreover, there is nothing “grand” about handing over the DIA to a private “nonprofit” and ending the century-long public ownership of the museum. Allowing the public to view the artwork would then be akin to an act of “charity” on the part of the wealthy. Higher admission fees (at present, entrance to the DIA is free to residents of three Detroit-area counties) and other limitations on public access would be the inevitable, antidemocratic result. Who knows what restrictions would be put on the character of exhibitions themselves, or which subjects the private trust would consider worth featuring?

The collection in the DIA belongs to the population of metropolitan Detroit, for whose benefit it was obtained and organized, not to the rich. The proposal to “spin off” the museum is part of the overall plan to place the full burden of the financial crisis on the back of the working population. The city’s debt to bondholders is itself illegitimate, the product of unscrupulous speculation, official corruption and outright thievery, and should be repudiated. Full and unimpeded access to the masterpieces of the DIA is a social right, along with decent wages, pensions, health care, education and housing.

The Rosen plan does not have a shred of legitimacy. It bases

itself on the oft-repeated official argument that “there is no money” for schools, libraries, museums and arts programs. This is a transparent lie—financial markets and corporate coffers are filled to overflowing with cash. The rich have never had it so good. Trillions of dollars could be made available if the corporate stranglehold over American life were broken.

The crisis of the city of Detroit is not a natural disaster, or an act of God. It is a product of the overall crisis of American capitalism and the specific decline of manufacturing and the auto industry, on the one hand, and of government policies and malfeasance that have benefited the rich at the expense of the city’s population, on the other. An unelected dictator threw the city into bankruptcy precisely so the wealthy could loot pensions and public assets like the DIA.

The threat to privatize the DIA has great significance. It would not only accelerate the assault on public funding of education and culture and pave the way for the destruction of whatever remains of the social and cultural gains won by the American population in the modern era, it would set a precedent with national and even global implications. Why not turn the New York public library system over to hedge-fund managers, or Michelangelo’s David to Fiat?

We have written numerous times before about the return of the aristocratic principle, according to which, “if the population is to have access to education, culture and technology, indispensable for life in a modern society, it will be at the whim of the very rich.”

Moreover, we have noted that there is “something intrinsically degrading and demeaning about philanthropy. A society in need of philanthropists is one rooted in inequality, in which the deprivation of the many is supposedly addressed by the largesse of the few.”

If Rosen’s plan were to be realized, the DIA’s artwork would pass into the control of the Ford, Knight, Kresge, Hudson-Webber, Mott and other private foundations. Each of these was founded by an immensely wealthy individual or family, whose riches were generated out of the exploitation of the working class. Why should these outfits, nothing more than the deceitfully benevolent face of corporate ruthlessness, have control over artwork that belongs to the people of metropolitan Detroit?

The establishment of American art museums in the last third of the 19th and first years of the 20th centuries occurred during the explosive development of modern industrial capitalism. In the aftermath of the Civil War, a genuine popular hunger emerged for culture and knowledge in a nation now liberated from the curse of slavery.

Socialists have no need to idealize the motives of the American bourgeoisie, which certainly wanted to convince the citizenry of the grandness of its social order and its own stature through constructing imposing institutions such as art museums, but a certain democratic sensibility informed the upper echelons of society. Economist Peter Temin comments that “Art museums were founded to educate the people’s taste, to help them identify with the values of the successful industrialists,” but adds, “There was a powerful faith in education of all sorts at the time; knowledge alone was enough to cure many ills of society.”

Moreover, in addition to the growth of the socialist workers movement, which posed an existential threat to capitalism, a democratic intelligentsia existed in America, whose leading figures spoke out against the depredations and degradations of capitalism.

The philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952), for example, in *Art as Experience*, based on lectures delivered at Harvard in 1931, defended the artist and the population against the dominance of the art world of his day by the wealthy. “The *nouveaux riches*, who are an important byproduct of the capitalist system, have felt especially bound to surround themselves with works of fine art which, being rare, are also costly. Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist.”

It is noteworthy that in preparing *Art as Experience* for publication, Dewey consulted with Meyer Schapiro, the art scholar and future supporter of Leon Trotsky, and already a man of the left. Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism is incompatible with and hostile to Marxism, but the philosopher spoke powerfully in his lectures about the significance of art and aesthetic experience, which produces “the sense of increase of understanding, of a deepened intelligibility on the part of objects of nature and man.”

Moreover, Dewey acknowledged the element of protest present in genuine art. “The first stirrings of dissatisfaction,” he wrote, “and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art,” which is “why the conservative finds such art to be immoral and sordid... Change in the climate of the imagination is the precursor of the changes that affect more than the details of life.”

Such ideas would be entirely out of place in the official discourse today. Almost no one prominent in the media or academia speaks out against the threat to dismantle or destroy the Detroit Institute of Arts—because, to be frank, leading figures in both fields feel a hundred times more passionately about seeing stock prices continue to rise than they do about the

ability of Detroit’s population to have access to art and culture. In many cases, they themselves belong to the “*nouveaux riches*.”

As we have noted before, the history of the DIA is bound up with the social history of the area. It became a Detroit city department in 1919, in the midst of the rapid growth of the auto industry. Under its gifted, German-born director William Valentiner, the DIA acquired priceless works in the 1920s and 1930s, becoming one of the important museums in the world.

The current DIA building was opened to the public on October 7, 1927, when some “ten thousand Detroiters descended on their new museum,” wrote Valentiner’s biographer, Margaret Sterne. In his address at the opening ceremony, Valentiner commented, “Art cannot be enjoyed continually from morning until night, but only at inspired moments that overtake us like the sudden impulses of sympathy which we feel towards others, and at the most unexpected times, especially when we are most spent and worn with the realities of everyday life.”

At the height of the Great Depression, Valentiner—who had himself been a participant in the German revolution of 1918-19—commissioned the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, a revolutionary socialist, to paint the monumental “Detroit Industry” murals. The Rivera court, in the center of the museum, is one of the most extraordinary commentaries on modern society and, in particular, the role of the working class.

The elimination of public funding for the DIA coincided with the collapse of the auto industry, a counteroffensive by big business against working people and the transformation of what was once called the American labor movement into little more than a police force for management. To the pig-ignorant American ruling elite, art is of interest today either for investment purposes or as a personal status symbol. Hedge-fund managers, speculators and other swindlers are currently buying invaluable artwork for record prices. Privately owned, boutique museums, not necessarily open to the public, are a growing trend. The proposal to unravel history and return the DIA into private hands is an element of the social and cultural counterrevolution currently under way.

Rosen’s reactionary privatization plan, along with the generally enthusiastic response of the entire media and political establishment, is another proof that the continued existence of the profit system represents the greatest threat to artistic life. The fate of culture is linked to the fate of the working class and the social revolution. We urge workers and young people to attend the February 15 Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA and the Bankruptcy of Detroit (detroitinquiry.org).



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