

UK's Croydon Council sells artworks

Paul Bond
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In an act of cultural plunder, Croydon Council in England has pressed ahead with the sale at auction of ceramics from its museum collection.

The Conservative Party-led council's action and its consequences signal a wholesale assault on cultural provision for working people in the borough, and heralds wider attacks on art and culture (see "British local councils petition government to sell off art works").

The council had been seeking a relaxation of government rules to allow the sale of the 24 most valuable pieces from the bequest of local businessman Raymond Riesco.

Riesco gave his collection of ceramic works, dating from Neolithic times to the nineteenth century, to the people of Croydon "in perpetuity" in the 1950s. Under current rules laid down by Arts Council England and the Museums Association (MA), accredited museums like Croydon can only sell works if the money raised is reinvested in the source collection. Where councils have sold art to subsidise other services, they have lost their accreditation and found themselves losing grants and other funding.

Croydon, with other councils, was seeking government permission to sell artworks to cover gaps in funding. Since 2010, Croydon's funding from central government has fallen by 31 percent. A further 10 percent cut will be imposed in 2015-2016. Croydon tried to justify the sale of the ceramics by saying it would reinvest the proceeds not in the original collection, but in the £33 million refurbishment of local arts venue Fairfield Halls.

There was an immediate reaction against the sale. The South Croydon Community Association applied for a judicial review on the grounds that the Council knew the sale to be in breach of ethical guidelines by not reinvesting the proceeds in the Riesco collection. The application was supported by Riesco's great

granddaughter, Jacqueline Wendleken, and the MA.

Charlotte Davies, head of the Community Association, dismissed the Council's claims to be funding the Fairfield renovation through the sale, saying, "The Council knows very well that any receipts will go straight into its general fund, with no guarantees whatsoever as to how that money is used in the future."

Conservative councillor Tim Pollard, the cabinet member responsible for culture, accused them of "jeopardising the future of Fairfield Halls," which he described as "one of Croydon's most important cultural venues."

Pollard made clear that the Council would not make any efforts to secure access to the highest cultural resources for local working people: "The ordinary people of Croydon do not benefit from highly expensive antiques that we currently cannot display without spending a substantial amount on upgrading the security of the Riesco Gallery. Fairfield Halls is in urgent need of refurbishment and caters to a much wider audience."

The application for judicial review had to be withdrawn because campaigners were unable to raise the necessary funds. In the meantime, the Council had appointed Christie's to sell the pieces at auction in Hong Kong. Christie's was able to obtain what the MA described as "surprisingly" fast approval for a permanent export licence to send the collection abroad.

The pieces went to auction on November 27. Christie's had valued the 24 items at between £9 million and £14.2 million, and the council expected to raise £13 million. Only 17 of the pieces sold, for £8.2 million. After payment of buyers' premiums to the auctioneers the council will receive perhaps 20 percent less than that.

Pollard was bullish, nevertheless. "We have come close to the £9 million and we still don't know what the final figure will be," he told press. He demonstrated

his philistine attitude to what he described as “highly expensive antiques” when he asserted, “The intrinsic value of the items is low, it is what people are prepared to pay for the scarcity value which counts.”

Croydon was determined on this sale, rejecting the MA’s overtures and advice. MA director Mark Taylor reported that the organisation had “tried to engage with Croydon Council to help them proceed in an ethical manner. We met with them in June and have been in regular correspondence with them, but they have not taken any of our advice.”

The MA threatened Croydon with disciplinary action for its behaviour. The Council responded by resigning from the MA. A spokesperson said the Council had “never received funding from the Museums Association and no longer being a member will not make any difference to the council being able to continue providing an excellent museum service.”

This is not true. MA president David Anderson explained last month that Croydon was in “clear breach of the Museums Association Code of Ethics.” This will create difficulties in obtaining loan collections from other museums. The Arts Council England’s (ACE) Accreditation Panel has removed Croydon’s Accreditation status for five years with immediate effect.

Scott Furlong, director of ACE’s Acquisitions, Exports and Loans Unit, said it was important the public maintain their trust in museums “to look after the collections held in their name,” and the Accreditation Panel “remain concerned that this trust may be seriously undermined if disposals from public collections are seen to be driven by financial considerations.”

ACE tried to advise Croydon ahead of the auction that the proposal to sell items from the Riesco collection did not “meet the nationally agreed standards of museum practice.”

There have also been calls for the Heritage Lottery Fund to refuse future funding. A report to Croydon’s Corporate Services Committee earlier this year noted that the Heritage Lottery Fund “have advised that if the sale resulted in the loss of accreditation that they may consider attempting to claw back some or all of their 1995 investment of £934k in the museum service.”

Croydon’s determination signals an escalation of the assault on culture and art in the name of meeting

funding cuts. A headline on the *Conservative Home* web site stated baldly, “Councils should sell surplus art works,” but this is a universal policy of the ruling class. Labour-run Southampton City Council co-authored Croydon’s letter requesting relaxation of the rules on selling artworks.

Although Southampton continues to deny press reports that it will sell artworks, Council leader Simon Letts has not ruled this out. “There are currently no plans to sell any artwork but this may be considered as an absolute last resort,” he said. In February, Southampton approved budget cuts of £16 million for 2013/2014.

The artist David Hockney has said he is on the verge of “giving up” on his hometown Bradford over suggestions that the Council might sell artworks in its collection, including some of his paintings. After learning that an auction house had placed a higher value on the city’s art collection than the Council’s insurers, Liberal Democrat councillor Jeanette Sunderland called for a sale to be considered to fund threatened frontline services.

Among the works discussed for sale are four important series of prints by Hockney and L.S. Lowry’s 1952 painting *Industrial Landscape (Ashton-under-Lyne)*. Sunderland has argued that an independent gallery might provide better access to the artworks currently in store. This is a dismissal of any public provision of culture and art, and a promotion of private galleries under the guise of access.

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. Securing the right to culture and all the social rights of the working class is possible only through a political struggle against capitalism.



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