

Australia: National Gallery of Victoria patrons denounce selloff of Detroit masterpieces

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with people outside the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Melbourne about plans by the unelected financial manager of Detroit, Kevin Orr, to sell off part of the Detroit Institute of Arts priceless art collection in order to pay the American city's wealthy bondholders.

Founded in 1861, the NGV is Australia's oldest art gallery, maintaining a collection of 68,000 works of art, including pieces by major international figures such as Pablo Picasso, Rembrandt, Anthony van Dyck, Mark Rothko, William Blake and many others. The reporting team distributed WSWs articles to patrons of the gallery, located in Melbourne's arts precinct.

While most of those approached were unaware of the moves against the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) virtually everyone expressed their horror over plans to sell its art works. Many explained the importance of access to serious art, and noted the connection between the privatisation of art and the immense growth of social inequality.

Hinton Lowe, a retired former academic, said: "I don't think that any public property should be sold off to private hands, and especially art. It was created for the public and the common good and should not be sold off, especially when small groups of elites will make large amounts of money out of it. That's where the benefits always end up; it's for those small groups of people.

"The value of public art for the benefit of the public's consciousness is priceless and has probably been collected in Detroit for several generations. It's outrageous that it should be taken away out of the arena of public education...

"We've got some big problems in our society to

think about," he added. "One is that a very small part of the population enjoys the wealth and the privilege."

WSWS reporters pointed out the connection between the sale of the DIA's artwork and the international assault on the pensions, healthcare and other social entitlements of the working class.

"It's all the same," he replied. "It's to further and further concentrate wealth into the hands of smaller and smaller numbers... These galleries contribute to the common good, giving people opportunities to enrich their lives and imaginations and to develop the capacity for empathy. That's what it's there for. The last thing that the rich want is for the public to be educated, to wake up as to how they're being exploited and manipulated."

Adam, a painter, explained the impact that the NGV's collection had on his own creative work. "Artwork should be publicly available. Since I moved to Melbourne, having art works available to me—a Rembrandt in particular—has changed my world. How could someone, at just 22-years-old, have such an artistic and technical ability to do that? The Rothko in there, it hits me all the time. Having intimate, regular contact with these masters has changed my life."

Joe, who works in a private hospital dealing with autism sufferers, and **Jon**, a production manager, were on a two-week-holiday in Melbourne from America's Rhode Island.

Joe said: "It's just another example of that separation of classes in society. The wealthy are able to get those priceless pieces of art and, whether it's in their bathrooms or living rooms, they get to show it off to their friends, to a very select number of people. Kids will be robbed. There are not too many more of those

pieces lying round.”

When WSWs reporters pointed out that America’s ruling elite had a political interest in blocking workers’ access to culture, Joe replied: “That’s right. If you can keep the working class separated then you can keep your wealthy, your elite, on top. If you start educating the working people and providing basic cultural rights to everyone, the rich won’t have such a huge advantage, and that means they might lose power...”

“I’ve lost a lot of hope in the political front,” Joe added. “There’s no difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, except perhaps for special interests.”

Jon said: “I think at the moment capitalism is being abused and misused. There has been a power shift and a swing in power to the rich and it’s swinging way out of control. The gap between rich and poor is getting wider, and it’s picking up speed, it’s almost exponential.”

Joe related plans to sell the DIA’s collection to budget cuts occurring across the US, including in his own workplace. “Funding has been cut so far that you now have unsafe staff-to-patient ratios,” he explained.

“Previously, we had about 24 beds for autistic patients and we’d keep about 12 staff members on, which was already pretty risky. That’s been cut down to about eight. They’ve also imposed budget cuts where the highest paid doctors and clinicians have been let go, and they’re getting in new people to do the same job on half the wage.”

Michael Harding, a high-school English and History teacher from New South Wales, noted the positive impact of a personal encounter with art.

“These things are vitally important. It is one thing to view art on the Internet or in text books but another to see it in real life, to see what it really looks like and what the colours really look like, how big the pieces are, and to see them in an institution where they are sensitively displayed,” he said.

“It would be a great pity for such works to fall into private hands and be bought typically by people who have no interest in the art but are purely looking for financial gain. Some things are above money; man does not live by bread alone. I think these works shouldn’t be considered as items for sale...”

“The global financial crisis hasn’t come to an end and doubtless there will be more crises like this. Detroit

will be seen as a blueprint for other city councils. I think it’s morally wrong. These things are owned by the people, not just by the city council; they’re the people’s property.”



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