

Portuguese government tries to auction 85 works by Joan Miró

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The government of Portugal is proposing to auction great works of art to balance the state budget. In Detroit, as the WSWs has reported, the unelected emergency manager has similarly threatened to sell off a portion of the collection at the Detroit Institute of Arts to pay wealthy creditors.

The Portuguese government has asked Christie's art auction house of London to sell 85 works by the great Catalan Spanish painter, Joan Miró (1893-1983). The sale is expected to supply some €50 million [\$US68 million] to the country's empty treasury—a small sum in contrast to the international financial aid of €78 billion, sought and obtained by Portugal in 2011. To secure that amount, Portugal had to commit to a programme of strict austerity measures.

Portugal's budget deficit and overall debt exploded to €211 billion as a result of the 2008 bank bailout. This amounted to 130 percent of the annual economic output, more than twice as much as the European Union stability limit of 60 percent. Experts believe that the country will never be able to repay the debt. Nevertheless, the government is planning to withdraw from the European bailout fund in June and return to financial solvency via further loans from capital markets. The sale of the Miró works is supposed to contribute to this stratagem.

Although a Lisbon administrative court approved the sale of the Miró paintings, sculptures, drawings and collages, the auction was called off at the last moment. The court rejected an injunction against the sale, although the Portuguese attorney general's office recommended suspension of the transaction. Due to the "legal uncertainty", however, Christie's became nervous about developments, especially since significant opposition to the sale was mounting in the highly indebted country. As *Spiegel Online* reported,

parties interested in the artwork were already gathering in London, when the auction was cancelled.

Many Portuguese have vehemently objected to the sale. Gallery curator Carlos Cabral Nunes initiated an online petition campaign, and opposition parties lodged a parliamentary motion condemning the sale. The motion was rejected on January 17, however, due to votes from the conservative government of Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho.

The Miró works were originally in the possession of the Banco Português de Negócios (BPN, Portuguese Bank of Business), which was nationalised during the financial crisis due to its enormous losses and bailed out with taxpayers' money. The Portuguese state took over €700 million of the bank's debts and then sold this debt—but not the Miró works—to the Angolan-Portuguese Banco BIC.

According to Christie's, the Miró works constituted one of the "most comprehensive and impressive collections of the...deceased Catalan artist ever offered for auction". The works for sale encompass seven decades of his artistic career. Press reports disclosed that the BPN had purchased them for €34 million from a private collection in Japan in 2003 and 2006, and never revealed their existence to the Portuguese public.

The most expensive painting, "Femmes et Oiseaux" ["Women and Birds", 1968], was alone estimated by the auction house to be worth between £4 and £7 million sterling [between \$US6.6 and \$11.5 million]. Another large oil painting, untitled and depicting black silhouettes on a blue background and a green creature with one green and one red eye, is expected to fetch at least £2.5 million. Comparatively inexpensive are a number of drawings, each of which will probably be sold for about £10,000 (€16,000).

Various cultural and citizen movements strongly

oppose the sale of the artwork, because the private bank was bailed out with taxpayers' money and the population thus has a right to the Miró works, which should be exhibited in a public museum. Portuguese artist groups have objected to the huckstering of an art treasure that Christie's extols as "one of the most expensive and impressive collections" of Miró's works that have ever been put to auction.

Another objection is not that art is being flogged off as a commodity, but that all the works will be offered for sale on the same day and thus at prices below their true value. The so-called Socialist deputy, Ines de Medeiros, therefore proposed that the collection be sold in stages.

"Bringing nearly 100 Mirós at a stroke onto the market will depreciate the collection, as well as all the other Mirós that are currently marketable", she said. "It's simply stupid to sell all those Mirós in one go, as though they were manufactured goods. It's the worst way in the world to do business".

Cabral Nunes, organiser of the online petition, argues that keeping the collection in Portugal could generate just as much finance within two years as the sale of the works might bring in. The APOM musicological society argues that the works would be able to generate a great deal of wealth in a country like Portugal, which attracts so many tourists.

The 53-year-old artist, Ana Perez-Quiroga, said: "Things have reached a point where we maybe should think about selling the chairs we're sitting on... It would really be a wonderful thing to have this collection in Portugal. It's not every day that you've got 85 works of art by Miró on your hands".

Selling publicly owned artworks has long been frowned upon, and is prohibited by various codes of ethics agreed to by museums and museum directors. The development of the financial crisis and increasing public debt, however, in combination with the insatiable greed and rapacity of the financial aristocracy, have led politicians, business leaders and the media to demand the shattering of this "taboo".

According to a column in the *Huffington Post*, for example, whether a viewer sees an original or a copy of an art work in a museum is irrelevant; if the original pleases "a rich collector more and he is ready to pay more money to own it, then away with it and there's no harm done".

Such cynical arguments betray contempt for the vast majority of the population, since they concede to the super-rich the right to hoard art as an investment and deprive the public of direct access to art treasures. Works of art are a vital part of a society's collective heritage and, regardless of their current market value, must be retained by the public and made accessible to the people.



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