

Delaware Art Museum sells masterworks to pay construction debts

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“For cruel ’tis,” said she,
“To steal my Basil-pot away from me.”

– John Keats, *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*

On June 18, the Delaware Art Museum, home to a unique collection of English Pre-Raphaelite and American realist art, sold one of its signature pieces, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*, by William Holman Hunt. Last week the museum officially released the names of two more masterworks that are to go up for sale: Alexander Calder’s *The Black Crescent* and Winslow Homer’s *Milking Time*. *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*, a favorite among visitors to the museum, is the only painting by one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the Delaware’s collection. Its loss marks a devastating blow to the museum.

The sale follows the precedent set in Detroit, where the Detroit Institute of Arts is facing efforts by Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to privatize its collection as part of a deal to pay the city’s debts. The precedent set by the Delaware Art Museum will in turn likely intensify pressure on the DIA, as well as other museums throughout the country, to sell their paintings and other works of art.

The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), which represents hundreds of major museums in North America, categorically denounced the Delaware museum’s actions and sanctioned it, suspending loans of art and other collaboration with the museum by its members.

“The Association of Art Museum Directors is deeply troubled and saddened that the Delaware Art Museum has deaccessioned and sold a work of art from its collection to pay outstanding debt and build its operating endowment,” wrote the organization in an official statement following the sale of *Isabella*. It added that, “With this sale, the museum is treating works from its collection as disposable assets, rather than irreplaceable cultural

heritage that it holds in trust for people now and in the future.”

The Delaware trustees responded to this criticism with callous indifference. “The good news is that people who support us don’t really care about what they say,” said the museum’s CEO Michael Miller, a former pharmaceutical executive, referring to the museum’s multimillionaire donors’ and trustees’ contempt for the views of one of the leading cultural institutions in the country. *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* sold at Christie’s auction house in London for \$4.25 million, far short of the auction house estimate that it would fetch between \$8.4 and \$13.4 million.

“Selling works from the museum’s collection, even as the only perceived alternative to closing its doors, is a dangerous precedent that could have a domino effect on museums across the nation,” Maxine Gaiber, former director of the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, told the *Wilmington News Journal*.

Following the disappointing price for Hunt’s masterwork, the museum’s trustees voted to sell four or more other works by October.

The museum’s trustees claim they are selling off the art to pay \$19.8 million in debts stemming from an expansion of the museum in 2005, and to restore the museum’s endowment. The expansion plan was plagued by mismanagement and went disastrously over budget.

“None of the board members or Miller, former chief financial officer for DuPont Merck Pharmaceutical Co., has a professional arts background,” the *News Journal* reported.

The trustees include David G. Bills, a senior vice president of DuPont, and Richard J. Immesberger, Executive Vice President of Trust & Wealth Management for WSFS bank and the former President of Trust Business at UBS bank.

The *New York Times* described CEO Miller in the

following terms earlier this week: “Mr. Miller, 64, is not likely to be called a connoisseur. As he himself put it... ‘I know nothing about art.’ He joined the museum staff seven years ago, after retiring from DuPont Merck, a pharmaceutical company that he helped found. Asked to name a work at the museum that he likes, he replied: ‘Jeez. I never thought about that. Well, I actually like Picasso, but we don’t have any Picassos.’”

Early last month, visitors to the museum were perplexed to find Alexander Calder’s mobile, *The Black Crescent*, which had hung gracefully over the museum’s East Court, missing.

In somewhat similar fashion to the giant red Calder mobile in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, the piece had been a centerpiece of the Museum. Local elementary school children would take field trips to see the delicate black sculpture, and make their own mobiles from coat hangers, string, and construction paper. *The Black Crescent* “is not hanging,” Miller told the *News Journal*. “I can’t say whether it’s gone or not.”

Last Thursday the museum confirmed that *The Black Crescent* was also heading for the auction block, joined by Winslow Homer’s masterwork, *Milking Time*.

The standout treasure of the museum, Wilmington native Howard Pyle’s *Marooned*, remains hanging, but, as it was bought with the Museum’s own funds, it likewise is in danger of being sold. *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* depicts a scene from the English Romantic poet John Keats’ poem of the same name, itself adapted from the *Decameron* of Boccaccio. The poem depicts the mourning of its heroine, Isabella, whose lover, Lorenzo, was killed by her brothers because their love interfered with the family’s plans to marry the heroine to “some high noble and his olive trees.”

Isabella exhumes Lorenzo’s body and buries his head in a pot of basil, “which her tears kept ever wet.” Lorenzo’s killers learn that the pot contains evidence of their crime, and dispose of it and go into exile. Isabella, stripped of her only consolation, pines away.



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