Is it a dangerous precedent?: Detroit Institute of Arts tests out art market with van Gogh

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The revelation that the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) was considering earlier this year selling an 1886 still life by Vincent van Gogh produced headlines and generated concern last week. Although retiring DIA director Graham Beal insisted that the painting "is not for sale and has never been offered for sale," the reaction to the news is indicative of both popular sensitivity about the preservation of the DIA's collection and ongoing nervousness about the museum's unresolved financial state.

The story about van Gogh's "Still Life with Carnations" being up for sale originally appeared in the *Art Newspaper*, the London-based publication, in March. The article in question asserted that the DIA was "about to reboot its deaccessioning programme [the sale of art by museums for the purposes of purchasing other art] after placing it on hold for two years during the city's bankruptcy proceedings." Beal was quoted as saying that "Deaccessioning is not controversial—US museums do it all the time—unless the intention is to use the funds for anything other than buying art."

The *Detroit News* carried a story May 15, "Van Gogh for sale? DIA tiptoes into art auction market," which suggested that the DIA was thinking about "a prospective, voluntary sale of some Detroit Institute of Arts works," including the van Gogh work. Beal told the *News* he had decided not to sell the van Gogh, and to leave the matter of resuming art sales to his successor, who takes over July 1. He suggested that the story had emerged because "I had been talking to Sotheby's and I think word leaked out." He did not deny that the picture might be for sale, at the right price.

The *Detroit Free Press* then followed up with an article containing Beal's denial that the painting had ever been for sale. That could be formally true, as the discussions with Sotheby's may have been of a preliminary and general character.

In any case, the murky business was further muddied by the demagogic intervention of various pundits noting that during the bankruptcy process and the consequent threat to sell all or part of the DIA collection, Beal had insisted that not a single piece of the collection could be sold without doing it irreparable harm.

Of course, art museums do regularly and ethically sell works, but only for the purpose of upgrading their collections. The American Alliance of Museums' "Code of Ethics for Museums" insists that "disposal of collections through sale, trade or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum's mission. Proceeds from the sale of nonliving collections are to be used consistent with the established standards of the museum's discipline, but in no event shall they be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections."

More and more, in fact, art and historical museums are selling precious works simply to stay afloat. The current economic conditions have created impossible circumstances for cultural institutions of every kind. Vast wealth is flowing almost exclusively into private and corporate hands, helping to ensure that "there is no money" for government funding of art and culture available to the general public.

Increasingly, the continued functioning of museums, orchestras and arts programs at every level is contingent on the whims of billionaires and their foundations. Their gift-giving can come to an end at any moment, depending on their immediate financial position. Moreover, the dominance of these corporate interests is a guarantee that nothing oppositional or truly original will emerge.

This is the case with the DIA. It may well be that there was nothing untoward in Beal's testing out the art market waters. The van Gogh is not considered one of the artist's major works, and was even considered a fake at one point (and the work's donator gave it to the museum with the proviso that it should be sold to improve the collection). Nonetheless, the possible sale of such a work takes on a far larger significance in the present context.

The Detroit restructuring plan approved November 7, 2014, by Judge Steven Rhodes slashed pensions and health benefits for current and retired city workers, and at the same time handed over hundreds of millions of dollars to Wall Street banks, hedge funds and bond insurers. The approval concluded a lengthy process that included “the state government’s use of an antidemocratic law to install an unelected emergency manager, essentially a financial dictator, to throw the city into bankruptcy and slash pensions in violation of state constitutional protections.” (WSWS, November 8, 2014)

As part of the so-called “Grand Bargain,” the ownership of the DIA collection and building was handed over to a private non-profit, the Detroit Institute of Arts, Inc., which had already been operating the museum on a day-to-day basis. The change of ownership took place on December 10, 2014. The museum then reverted to its condition prior to 1919, at which time the city took it over.

With the entire political establishment and its accomplices in the unions fearful of popular reaction to pension cuts and the other attacks on workers, the “Grand Bargain” provided for $816 million over 20 years to somewhat lessen the blow. The DIA itself was called on to raise $100 million (which its officials say has been done), corporate foundations kicked in $366 million and the state of Michigan contributed $195 million up front, the equivalent of $350 million over two decades.

The approval of the restructuring plan last November was the occasion for much noisy commentary to the effect that the “DIA has been saved!” In fact, nothing about the museum’s future or financial situation has been resolved. True, the DIA’s fate has been taken out of the hands of the small-time crooks in Detroit’s local political apparatus…and placed more fully in the hands of far more dangerous criminals, the representatives of the auto makers, banks, utility companies and other major corporations.

The DIA owes its continued existence entirely to the corporate elite. A partial list of who or what are in effect the new owners of the museums includes the Ford Foundation, Kresge Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, William Davidson Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Hudson-Webber Foundation, McGregor Fund, Ford Motor Co., General Motors Co./General Motors Foundation and the Chrysler Group.

Contributing to the DIA’s $100 million portion of the “Grand Bargain” settlement were the Penske Corp., DTE Energy, Dan Gilbert’s Quicken Loans and Rock Ventures, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, Meijer, Toyota, Comerica Bank, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

All in all, a who’s who of the corporate interests responsible for the social misery that blights the Detroit metropolitan area and makes life impossible for wide layers of the population.

Do these people give away *anything* for free, even taking into account that political considerations—i.e., fear of popular unrest—encouraged them to be “openhanded”?

The DIA board of directors elected seven new members in January 2015, including Stephen Biegun, a corporate officer and vice president of international governmental affairs for Ford Motor Company and a trustee of the Ford Motor Company Fund; Robert Jacobs, president and owner of Buddy’s Pizza; Victoria McInnis, chief tax officer for General Motors; Dennis Scholl, former vice president of arts for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (specifically nominated by the various foundations to be their observer on the DIA board); and Mark Zeffiro, chief financial officer and executive vice president of TriMas Corporation.

Detroit’s art museum will still need to raise hundreds of millions of dollars to keep its doors open. The *Free Press* comments, “With its grand bargain funding obligation met, the DIA can now turn its full attention to raising roughly $275 million in new endowment funds over the next eight years. Those dollars are critical to ensuring the museum’s long-term financial stability after the tri-county tax support for the DIA expires in 2022.”

Phillips Oppenheim, which specializes in finding executives for non-profit organizations, asserts in a statement, “The challenge facing the DIA today is to establish an unrestricted operating endowment of approximately $400 million by 2023 that will provide adequate annual operating funds and obviate the need to return to the voters for a renewal of the millage.”

At the next crisis—and there will be a next crisis as surely as the sun rises and sets each day—who is to say that the museum board members, exempt from any public control or oversight, will not begin to sell the DIA’s masterpieces? What would hold them back? Perhaps the devastation of the museum would not take place all at one go, but Detroit residents run the risk of waking up one day and discovering a different institution on Woodward Avenue. Without the emergence of a socialist-minded working class movement, the future of the DIA is entirely at the mercy of the corporate-financial aristocracy.