What is the *New York Times* up to at the Detroit Institute of Arts?

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New controversies have emerged at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), the gem of an art museum located in the heart of the decayed industrial city. The DIA's director, Salvador Salort-Pons, has been accused of conflict of interest, along with insensitivity to "diversity" issues.

Immense tensions generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the DIA to close for almost four months this year, and the general, unprecedented social crisis in the US no doubt play a role. In addition, lower-paid employees and staff members assuredly have genuine grievances. The DIA has been under financial siege, particularly in the wake of Detroit's filing for bankruptcy in July 2013, for years. Its situation remains essentially precarious.

What part is being played by selfish and unscrupulous actors in the present situation is less clear, but that their presence is being felt seems unquestionable. In any such situation, where even the possibility of focusing on race and gender exist, the "fine hand" of the *New York Times* is sure to be found.

On July 15, the *Times* published an article, "Complaint Faults Museum Director for Hanging His In-Law's El Greco," which exemplifies the newspaper's current modus operandi. *Artnet News* published an article July 17 along similar lines.

The *Times* piece ostensibly focuses on the decision by the Spanish-born Salort-Pons to pursue and arrange for the loan to the DIA of a major work, "St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata" (c.1590), by El Greco, the great Greek painter of the Spanish Renaissance.

The wealthy collector from whom the painting was borrowed is Alan May, the DIA director's father-in-law. The *Times* notes that "a whistle-blower complaint, filed with the Internal Revenue Service and the Michigan attorney general," asserts that "conflict-of-interest rules to prevent self-dealing have been skirted."

Salort-Pons insists that proper procedures were followed and that the DIA's board was well aware of the family connection. "It's a common practice for American museums to engage collectors and patrons asking them to loan paintings," he told the *Times* in an interview.

Eugene A. Gargaro, chairman of the DIA Board of Directors since 2003, told the *Times* in a separate interview that both May and Salort-Pons informed him of the planned loan. "If it's disclosed to me, then it's disclosed to the whole board," Gargaro told the newspaper.

The El Greco issue appears to be largely a red herring. The idea that Salort-Pons has been motivated by the desire to see his family gain financially from the extended loan seems far-fetched.

The *Times* piece reports that Salort-Pons acknowledges "that including the work of, say, a young contemporary artist on the institute's walls would likely boost that work's value. But he questioned whether that held for paintings by established names like El Greco." The painting in question is already valued at $5 million.

In 2010, Salort-Pons, then an assistant curator of European Paintings at the DIA, borrowed for the museum from May a 17th century painting, "An Allegory of Autumn," attributed to the circle of the famed French artist Nicolas Poussin. Graham Beal, director at the time, emailed the *Times*, "The loan(s) from Alan May was/were totally above board and benefited the DIA as much, if not more, than the lender."

Of course, it probably would not occur to Salort-Pons or Beal, much less the *Times*, to address the more vexing issue: the extent to which the art-loving public is increasingly held hostage to the designs and whims of multimillionaires like May, a retired real estate investor in Dallas, who obtain paintings for their private collections. The vast sums raked in on the stock market in the past several decades have given ultrawealthy individuals far more clout and "buying power" than all but the most heavily endowed museums and art galleries.

In any event, one clearly senses that the conflict-of-interest issue is not the *Times'* overriding concern. As an indication of that, the July 15 piece asserts early on that the DIA director's answers over the El Greco loan "have failed to satisfy the museum employees who filed the complaint at a time when other concerns, including ones about Mr. Salort-Pons's management style and about DIA's treatment of its Black employees, are roiling the institute."

Whether the institute as a whole is "roiled" or not, it is clear that some staff members are agitated, and the *Times* would apparently like them all to be. The article subsequently cites "broader complaints" by anonymous staff members in regard to "a less-than-collaborative management style, sidelining of senior staff members, and frustration that Mr. Salort-Pons is undermining the institute's emphasis on community outreach and education for which it prides itself. They also complain about a certain deafness on race at a time when questions about systemic racism are coursing through the country's cultural institutions."

Such questions are undoubtedly "coursing" through US cultural institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), with the *Times*, dedicated to the racialization of every aspect of life, doing its part to ensure that process continues and deepens. As we wrote in late June in regard to issues raised about comments made by a senior curator at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, there is not the slightest evidence "that 'white supremacy' and unbridled racism reign supreme" at any leading art institution in the US.

We argued in June, and we will make the point again, that the relatively small percentage of black staff members and officials at art museums is, above all, a class question, the result of *social oppression*. The largely working class African American population is excluded from the art world primarily by the fact that the working class *as a whole* is blocked from access to culture by the existing social system. (How many sons or daughters of rank-and-file Detroit autoworkers of any ethnic background sit on the DIA's current board, or have ever sat on it?) The decades-long devastation of public and arts education, covered up or encouraged by the *Times* and the rest of the political and media establishment, has substantially worsened matters.

In its article on Salort-Pons and the DIA, the *Times'* general approach is fairly transparent: to collect real grievances, along with less than urgent or

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even manufactured ones, and focus or "weaponize" them in the service of the newspaper's obsessive identity politics agenda. In that effort, the newspaper is aided by the confusion and susceptibility of various social layers. Another grouping, decidedly *not confused*, composed of already affluent and aspiring African American petty-bourgeois elements, wants to advance its own economic interests at the DIA and will use every opportunity to press ahead.

A body called DIA Staff Action has demanded the removal of Salort-Pons on the vague grounds of "the now well-reported hostile and chaotic work culture that has affected the quality and accessibility of the service offerings for DIA's constituents." On the other hand, a group claiming to represent service workers at the museum has pointed to its legitimate "shock" that workers are "still being paid as little as $10/hr." Furthermore, the latter group points out rightly that "the concept of a no-wage increase for working in the public during this pandemic does not seem like the institution values its workers as much as they publicly lead on."

The *Times* refers to the June resignation of the DIA's digital experience director, Andrea Montiel de Shuman, who complained "in an online essay of 'a contradictory, hostile, at times vicious and chaotic work environment' that censors the work of people of color and neglects Black communities." The article further notes the departure of two assistant curators, "both Black women, who were hired for the contemporary art department in 2016 as part of an effort to expand diversity." One of those curators, Taylor Renee Aldridge, without elaborating further, told the *Times* in an email that her situation "is emblematic of many abuses and systemic violences that permeate from the top down in museums, and especially the DIA."

Unfortunately, Montiel de Shuman's essay is typical of the current conditions in artistic circles. One of her prime complaints is that the DIA, as part of an exhibition, hung Paul Gauguin's 1892 *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, which portrays the artist's 13-year-old Tahitian wife, Tehura, without a label addressing the fact "that the artist sexually abused her, gave her syphilis, and colonized her home." The former DIA official amplified her complaint by referring to her own sexual abuse as a girl.

We have written previously about the Gauguin "controversy" and do not propose to repeat ourselves here. We pointed out that even if one were to determine "that Gauguin acted irresponsibly or reprehensibly in Tahiti, to what extent, if any, do the more unseemly facts qualitatively or even identifiably mar his work?"

DIA officials apparently responded to Montiel de Shuman by suggesting that, first, "this was largely a personal issue," and, second, that "the DIA was not going to be a censoring institution," which seem to be pretty sensible arguments.

Montiel de Shuman counters that, on the contrary, museums censor "all the time… for money, to protect reputations, out of ignorance... And that makes us complicit." She no doubt has a point of some sort but seems to have missed the larger one, that this is hardly an argument for *further* censorship!

The DIA is a major arts institution, one blessed with an exquisite collection assembled in part by the Berlin-trained William [Wilhelm] Valentiner, who served as its director from 1924 to 1945. In that position, Valentiner, among other things, commissioned Diego Rivera's astonishing *Detroit Industry Murals* (1932-33), one of the 20th century's greatest artistic achievements.

However, the DIA is a major arts institution in a country undergoing an immense and unprecedented social, economic and health crisis--in fact, a country experiencing a systemic breakdown. Moreover, the DIA is especially vulnerable, its development and eventual historic crisis linked to the rise and decline of the US auto industry. The DIA has already faced three decades in particular of budget cuts, downsizing and existential financial threats.

The 2013 bankruptcy of Detroit and the demands of its creditors threatened the DIA with closure or having its collection sold off to satisfy Wall Street. The Socialist Equality Party organized opposition, insisting that the art work belonged to the population, not the bankers, and held an important rally outside the museum on October 4, 2013.

In the face of widespread popular anger and fearful of the political repercussions of simply shutting the museum's doors, top government and legal system officials organized the "rescue" of the DIA by raising hundreds of millions of dollars from nine private foundations and other means. The DIA is more than ever at the mercy of these "philanthropic"-corporate bodies, which is unquestionably an added and significant pressure on museum officials and the artistic choices they make.

The answer to the DIA's undeniable crisis does not lie—as the *Times* and other establishment mouthpieces would have it—in the racial or gender shakeup or "re-engineering" of the museum's officialdom, and the reapportioning of positions and incomes according to identity quotas. There is not the slightest evidence that "diversity" of this artificial and politically driven character, which does not make an institution any more *socially* diverse in the slightest, will improve matters.

Nor is maintaining the status quo, which involves the museum's eking out an existence in the shadow of a massive social crisis in a country and a city at the beck and call of powerful financial interests, a tenable solution.

In the end, any progressive, artistically and socially productive future for the DIA depends on the conscious intervention of the working population, which responded to the threats to the museum's existence in 2013 and whose cultural education is bound up with its flourishing.

The museum's future requires ending the corporate-plutocratic stranglehold over every important aspect of life in the US, the ultimate source of *all* its difficulties. The socialist transformation of American society would mean a vast redistribution of wealth from the top to the bottom. The ill-gotten gains of the corporate-financial oligarchy have to be seized and used to meet social and cultural needs.

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