

# Christie's appraisal paves way for sale of Detroit Institute of Arts masterpieces

By Joseph Kishore  
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Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr released the final appraisal Thursday by Christie's auction house of many of the most significant masterpieces at the Detroit Institute of Arts. By making the appraisal public, Orr signaled he was prepared to carry through his threat to seize the art, which belongs to the people of Detroit, sell it off to wealthy investors, and use the cash to pay off the city's financial creditors.

There is but one word to describe the spectacle unfolding in Detroit before the stunned and horrified eyes of the world: plunder! Orr, the unelected front man for the banks, embodies the descent of the American ruling class into criminality.

The so-called "monetization" of great art works is part of the plan, coordinated with the Obama White House, implemented through the bankruptcy court of Judge Steven Rhodes, and enthusiastically backed by the entire media and political establishment, to use the bankruptcy process to slash the pensions and health benefits of city workers, sell off city assets, and privatize services.

The "unprecedented public accounting of the value of a public museum's holdings" (in the words of the *Detroit Free Press*) is seen as a model for similar actions in cities throughout the country and sets a precedent for privatizing museums, libraries and other cultural facilities around the world.

The 150-page report (published under the title "Fair Market Value for Financial Planning") includes appraisals of the 2,781 art pieces that were purchased directly by the city of Detroit, mostly in the 1920s and 1930s. The estimate for their cash value on the auction block is put at between \$454 million and \$867 million.

On this list are treasures of human culture from every corner of the globe and from every period of human civilization—from an Egyptian limestone relief carved in 2,400 BC (tagged by Christie's at \$150,000-300,000) and Buddhist sculptures from 5th Century China to modern works by European and American artists. They include many of the museum's most important pieces, without

which it would cease to be a world-class institution. Eleven pieces account for about 75 percent of the total appraisal.

\* "The Wedding Dance," painted in 1566 by Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, is a masterpiece of the Renaissance period. The painting was acquired by DIA Director William Valentiner in 1930. It is valued by Christie's at between \$100 million and \$200 million.

\* An 1887 self-portrait by Vincent Van Gogh, also acquired by Valentiner, was the first piece by the Dutch painter to enter a collection in the United States. It is marketed at \$80 million to \$150 million.

\* "The Visitation," by Rembrandt, painted in 1640, is priced at \$50 million to \$90 million.

\* "The Window," a 1916 painting by Henri Matisse, is valued at between \$40 million and \$80 million.

\* A drawing by Michelangelo of a design for the Sistine Chapel is valued at \$12 million to \$20 million.

The pricing of the art comes in the wake of a decision earlier this month by Judge Rhodes to allow the bankruptcy of Detroit to go forward. The report from Christie's has been released in advance of a plan that Orr is preparing to release in early January detailing his scheme to slash pensions and restructure the city in the interests of the rich.

The attack on the DIA is a central part of this plan. Orr has demanded that the institution contribute \$500 million, either through the direct sale of art or some form of privatization.

The city's creditors responded to the Christie's report by criticizing it for including only items purchased directly by the city and not the entire collection. The *Free Press* noted that the creditors, including major financial institutions and bond insurers, "complain that by instructing Christie's to evaluate only 5 percent of the collection, Orr was unfairly excluding what experts believe is billions of dollars of city-owned art."

Included among the creditors are the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and a number of trade union-backed organizations. Last month, these groups joined in a motion endorsing the bankruptcy process and the actions of Orr, while demanding a more aggressive attack on

the DIA. (See: “The unions and the Detroit bankruptcy”).

Bruce Babiarz, a spokesman for a the union-controlled police and firefighters pension system, said in response to Christie’s report: “We understood that everything was on the table based on Kevyn Orr’s assertions, and that means there should be a full evaluation of everything at the museum. Then it could be decided whether any part of the collection should be sold or monetized.”

The unions say they want the art to be sold in order to protect city workers’ pensions. They are lying. The union leaders know full well that any proceeds from the sale of DIA art will go to the banks and city bondholders, and the union-controlled pension funds, not to the workers themselves. They are concerned not about maintaining the benefits of retired workers, but protecting their own salaries, which are based on their control of multi-billion-dollar investment funds. The unions have already agreed to hundreds of millions of dollars in concessions and made clear they are willing to work with Orr in imposing more cuts on city workers.

The position of both the unions and the financial institutions is that the DIA and other cultural institutions are “non-essential” services and therefore fair game for Wall Street asset-strippers and thieves.

The museum for its part issued a statement reiterating that DIA management is “actively supporting” a privatization scheme drawn up by a mediator appointed by Rhodes to transfer control of the museum to a trust, funded by various foundations, in exchange for \$500 million. Such a move would end public ownership of the museum, paving the way for restrictions on public access and changes in the content of the museum’s exhibitions. (See: “The implications of privatizing the Detroit Institute of Arts”).

The *Free Press* cited comments from veteran arts journalist Lee Rosenbaum, who noted that the threat to the DIA’s collection could lead to a “slippery slope,” in which, in the words of the newspaper, “other cities, universities and even trustees at other museums might look to the sale of art in Detroit as a model for covering financial shortfalls.”

“What happens in Detroit may not stay in Detroit,” commented Rosenbaum.

The Obama administration has worked closely with Orr and the Detroit city administration throughout the bankruptcy process. Earlier this week, the White House announced that Gene Sperling, the director of Obama’s National Economic Council and the liaison between the administration and Detroit, will stay on for at least one month past a previously announced January 1 departure date. Last week, Sperling met with incoming Mayor Mike Duggan, who praised the administration’s efforts in “revitalizing” Detroit.

There is overwhelming popular opposition to the schemes of Orr and the attack on both art and pensions. Yet all the official institutions—the representatives of both big business parties, the unions, the courts, the mass media—accept the claim that there is “no money” and that the working class must pay through the destruction of its right to culture, a secure retirement and essential social services.

Such claims are made amidst record corporate profits and soaring social inequality. The entire valuation of the 2,781 art pieces examined by Christie’s is about one one-hundredth the value of dollars printed every month by the US Federal Reserve (\$85 billion) to transfer to Wall Street banks and inflate the stock market bubble. Ford just announced a record profit for 2013 of \$8.5 billion.

The bankruptcy of Detroit is a massive and criminal conspiracy against the working class of Detroit, the United States and the world. It is based on a mountain of lies—the chief lie being the claim that the workers themselves are to blame for the crisis because they demanded excessive pensions and benefits.

Who is really to blame? Who has profited from the dismantling of the auto plants in Detroit and nationally, the growth of unemployment and the impoverishment of the people? Who is making millions from the restructuring of the city and the theft of public assets? Who are Kevyn Orr and his lawyer and banker cronies? What is Obama’s role?

These are the questions that must be asked and answered, so that the workers of Detroit and the entire country have the information and knowledge they need to mount a massive fight back against the bankruptcy and its perpetrators.

The workers need the truth. That is why the Socialist Equality Party has organized a Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA and the Bankruptcy of Detroit. The Inquiry will expose the real social and political forces behind the Detroit bankruptcy and on this basis lay the foundations for an independent political movement of the working class.

*For more information and to register for the Inquiry, visit [detroitinquiry.org](http://detroitinquiry.org).*

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>