

The defense of culture and the crisis in Detroit

By David Walsh
17 September 2013

The following is an edited version of a talk given June 13, 2013 by WSWWS Arts Editor David Walsh to a public meeting on the threatened sale of art at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The meeting was held in Detroit as part of the mayoral election campaign of D'Artagnan Collier. For more information on the campaign to defend the DIA, visit defendthedia.org.

The news in late May 2013 that Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and his henchmen were discussing whether the collection at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) was an asset that could be sold to cover the city's debt provoked a great deal of anger, even outrage and disgust. The *World Socialist Web Site* has posted a number of articles with interviews of museum-goers and city residents that register those feelings.

This is an understandable and healthy reaction. The thought that the wealthy creditors might get their hands on this artwork, which was bought for and belongs by rights to the population of Detroit and the area, is appalling.

I want to emphasize that we take this issue of the DIA with enormous seriousness. The threat by the emergency manager and the creditors is an assault on the democratic, cultural rights of the population. It is an aspect of the social counter-revolution under way in this country.

"Social counter-revolution" is not a phrase we are simply throwing around. As I will try to prove, popular access to culture was a product of social revolution, in this country (above all, the Civil War) and globally. That popular access is no longer acceptable in so far as it stands in the way of the accumulation of wealth by the very rich. If there is a conflict between the creditors being repaid or the people of Detroit being able to pass through the doors of the DIA, which way do you think the conflict will be resolved under the present conditions? This is the political question that needs to be addressed, which, in our view, has revolutionary implications.

It is appropriate to be angry, but it is even more important to have a perspective on and an understanding of the present crisis. Protests to the emergency manager, the Detroit City Council, the Michigan state legislature, the governor will accomplish less than nothing. A movement has to be built entirely independently of the Democratic Party, local politicians and the unions, based on a serious grasp of the issues involved.

The driving force in the present crisis is the effort of the super-rich to retain its wealth, to drain the population of Detroit, to reduce it to a state of pauperism. The bankers have driven the country to the edge of abyss, and they want the working class to pay for that.

To the emergency manager and his team, the bondholders and creditors, the artwork in the DIA is simply a pile of cash that happens to take the form of oil and canvas, stone, glass, ceramic, metal and other materials. They believe they have the right to get their hands on the artwork, because they believe they have the right to get their hands on everything.

The US is a democracy in name only. A financial-corporate aristocracy runs this country, including both major parties, the media, every major institution, and organizes every important decision in its favor. The exposures by Edward Snowden about massive global spying by the US government on every phone call, email and communication in general reveal how much of the framework for a police state has already been

built in this country.

The billionaires have a veto over every aspect of American life. Nothing can impinge on their wealth. We have government of the rich, by the rich, for the rich.

In this context, we've discussed the return of the aristocratic principle: that is, the idea that the people have no basic right to hospitals, schools, museums, that if they are to have such elementary social necessities it will be the result of the generosity of the super-rich. If Bill Gates or Warren Buffet or Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook decides to keep the DIA open, for example, or perhaps buys a city or even a small state, and keeps it going, we should all be grateful and tip our caps.

Of course, if Bill Gates decides to withdraw his money and close the museum, or put the artwork in his basement or his own private museum, well, we're simply out of luck. This runs counter to the progressive social thought of several centuries, which found expression in the US in the basic documents of the American Revolution and the Civil War eras.

Right at the start, I want to put forward one of the themes of this talk in the form of a question. Is the existence of the DIA, as a museum open and accessible to the working population of this city and region, with its artwork intact—is that compatible with the existence of crisis-ridden, increasingly authoritarian American capitalist society, run in the interests of a handful of enormously wealthy people? I would ask you to keep that question in your heads for a few minutes. I will return to it.

First, let's review a little of the history and character of the DIA, which everyone acknowledges is an extraordinary institution, with one of the finest collections in the country.

The DIA was founded as the Detroit Museum of Art in March 1885. Among the early patrons were James E. Scripps, the newspaper publisher (*Detroit News*) and philanthropist, and Hiram Walker, the grocer and distiller. The museum was first housed in a building at the corner of Jefferson and Hastings, which opened in September 1888.

The growth of the auto industry led to a commercial and population boom in Detroit. The expansion of the art museum was discussed as early as 1905. Following World War I, in 1919, an arts commission was appointed, which included Edsel Ford (son of the famous manufacturer) and famed architect Alfred Kahn. The institution was renamed the Detroit Institute of Arts. That same year, the museum was made a department of the city of Detroit.

Kahn selected French-born Paul Cret to design the new building, which was opened in October 1927. By this time, William Valentiner, the German-born historian and critic, who was to contribute so much to the museum, had been appointed director.

At the ground-breaking for the new building in 1922, Ralph H. Booth, another newspaper magnate, noted that Detroit had achieved "first place in industry and an enviable place in wealth," but that "our true ambition is not mechanical production only." The new museum, suggested Booth, would "give tangible evidence to the world that Detroit is a city of enlightenment and progress. Where we claim the best that civilization offers in order that our lives may be fuller, and richer, and contribute to the true betterment of future generations."

In the depth of the Depression, Valentiner commissioned the great

Mexican artist Diego Rivera to paint his Detroit Industry murals, which were first open to the public in March 1933. (See, “Eighty years of the Diego Rivera murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts”)

The decline in the DIA’s fortunes and the beginning of the assault on Detroit’s cultural life more generally began in the 1970s, coinciding with the decline in the automobile industry and the global position of the American capitalism. In 1975 the state of Michigan took over as the primary financial guarantor of the DIA. In 1992, the state government cut allocations to the museum by 40 percent, and six years later museum operations were subcontracted to the DIA Founders Society. A condition of more or less permanent crisis has existed for several decades.

A few facts about the DIA: it is the second largest municipally owned museum in the US. It is the sixth largest art museum in the country, with 100 galleries and 65,000 works (not all of them of course on display). The DIA’s collection of American paintings, third largest in the US, is especially fine. It was the first public museum in the country to collect Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse (1922).

Artist, critic and historian Walter Pach was a significant figure in the art world in the first half of the 20th century. One of the organizers of the famed Armory Show of modern art in New York in 1913, Pach knew American and European artists as varied as Robert Henri, Claude Monet, Marcel Duchamp and Diego Rivera.

In his *The Art Museum in America* (1948), Pach had this to say: “Detroit Institute of Arts: A museum of the highest importance, having been developed with knowledge of the great classics European, Oriental, American, and modern, the applied arts (notably textiles), and also the relationship of the collections to the public. ... The frescoes by Diego Rivera, painted on the walls of the museum, and showing the great industries of the city, have caused vast numbers of working people to come frequently to their galleries which have also had active support from Detroit’s men of wealth. Important showing of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Japanese, Hindu, Byzantine, Gothic, Renaissance, and modern art. Among the paintings, the Italian, Dutch, Flemish, French, and American sections are particularly important. The first great art museum in this country to include the Indians (especially the ancient Mexicans) on the same footing as the people of the Eastern Hemisphere.”

Pach’s comment about the appeal of Rivera’s frescoes to “vast numbers of working people” has special importance for us.

The establishment of the DIA in the 1880s was part of a national process. The opening of art and science museums was associated in the US in the 19th century with the ideals of the Enlightenment, with the development of public education and the general socially and cultural progressive agenda. An enlightened, cultured population was viewed as a bulwark against monarchy and royalism, which still dominated Europe, by America’s progressive thinkers.

The Civil War and radical Reconstruction were the high point of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in the US. The destruction of the slavocracy was seen as a blow against the aristocratic principle. The creation of the major museums was made possible by both the immense wealth that American business was accumulating and the democratic, self-confidence of the people, which had reached a new level with the victory over slavery.

A comment by Radical Republican Congressman Thaddeus Stevens from Pennsylvania in 1865 spoke to this egalitarian mood: “Our fathers repudiated the whole doctrine of the legal superiority of families or races, and proclaimed the equality of men before the law. Upon that they created a revolution and built the Republic. They were prevented by slavery from perfecting the superstructure whose foundation they had thus broadly laid. For the sake of the Union they consented to wait, but never relinquished the idea of its final completion. The time to which they looked forward with anxiety has come. It is our duty to complete their work.”

The generation, the population that emerged from the Civil War, which

had gone through tremendous hardships to defend the Union and defeat slavery, was hungry for knowledge, progress, culture. One sees it in the architecture, for example, in Chicago, or what’s left of downtown Detroit.

It has to be kept in mind that, as opposed to the situation confronting European art institutions, which had much of the work at hand, museums in the US largely had to go overseas in the late 1800s and early 1900s and expend considerable resources if they were to fill much of their space with the classic art works. Enlightened robber barons did much of this work, or their advisors. These businessmen were swine in relation to the working class, but they had some feeling for art and culture, or they hired people who had that feeling.

In his work on the history of museums in the US, Pach commented: “The Civil War had interrupted the interest in art which had been taking such firm root and spreading so widely among us ... But the conflict ended, railroads spread across the nation, manufacturing increased, new settlements dotted the West, shipping crammed the harbors of the East, and more money than ever was devoted to the arts. The centenary of American independence was approaching and, for years, preparations were made for the great Exposition at Philadelphia. Its art exhibit is one of the landmarks in our history. But the showing, important as it was, would not have had its effect if men’s thought had not been turned in that direction by events six years earlier, when the museums of New York and Boston were founded; Cincinnati, with a long record of previous effort, got under way with its permanent gallery at about the same time. Thus, 1870 is the most significant date in our record, the American Museum of Natural History, moreover, being founded the same year.”

In 1869 the authorities in New York agreed, as they publicly explained, to “the establishment of a Museum in the [Central] Park that shall become an aid in the Great Educational System of the City, concentrate and develop Scientific efforts in all departments of Natural History, and at the same time be an instructive and acceptable resort for the people of the city, and for the throng of strangers that visit it.”

This entire historical process is being unraveled today, which involves as well the destruction of the public education system.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts was founded in 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York the same year, the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1876, the Art Institute of Chicago in 1879 and the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1881.

We don’t idealize these institutions. They were also built to bolster the prestige and power of the ruling elite, and they are run by elements of the elite—they have never been truly *accessible* to the entire population, including the DIA, for that matter, because we live in class society. The working class is an oppressed class and cut off from culture under the profit system.

As Trotsky noted in *Literature and Revolution*, “The proletariat is forced to take power before it has appropriated the fundamental elements of bourgeois culture; it is forced to overthrow bourgeois society by revolutionary violence for the very reason that society does not allow it access to culture.”

Nonetheless, the presence and threat represented by the working class in an earlier period, along with the great wealth of American capitalism, made possible certain cultural gains, which are now in the process of being taken away in the period of the latter’s decline and putrefaction.

It is not possible to point to more than a handful of the extraordinary works in the DIA collection. One of the greatest works, undoubtedly, is *The Wedding Dance* by the Flemish master, Pieter Bruegel (c. 1525-1569). The painter, known as the “peasant Bruegel,” went among the ordinary people in the Netherlands and present-day Belgium in disguise to capture the reality of everyday life—this in the mid-1500s. He was also enormously innovative in the field of landscape painting, depicting everyday life without apparent religious or classical reference points.

Another outstanding work in the collection is Vincent van Gogh's *Self-portrait* (1887). I would be remiss if I did not take note of van Gogh's comments about art profiteers in an 1883 letter. The "art trade," he wrote, has become "all too much a sort of bankers' speculation and it still is—I do not say entirely—I simply say *much too much*

"I contend that many rich people who buy the expensive paintings for one reason or another don't do it for the artistic value that they see in them. ...

"True, there are real, sterling art lovers. But it's perhaps only 1/10th of the total of the business that's done, perhaps it's even a much smaller proportion—of which it can be said: this or that transaction was genuinely out of belief in art."

It should be noted, speaking of art speculation, that of the 48 most expensive paintings ever sold, seven are by van Gogh. They were sold for more than \$700 million combined, all within the last 25 years. His *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* was bought for \$82.5 million in 1990 (\$155.7 million in current dollars). What might van Gogh have said?

As already noted, Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* frescoes form the physical and intellectual centerpiece of the DIA. At the time of their painting in 1932-33, the murals came under furious attack by anti-communist and religious bigots. They were denounced as "blasphemous" and "atheistic" for their tribute to nature and industry and exclusion of God and religion, and "communistic" for their placement of industrial workers in the foreground. Rivera created a work of genuinely world-historical importance, the coming together of high art and high politics, in the birthplace of modern industry and on the eve of massive class explosions.

One can only pass quickly over the presence of 19th century American painters and the breathtaking collection of African art. The DIA is an encyclopedic museum, which includes samples of the works of ancient peoples and the art of the classical era.

The development of the art museum as an institution has a connection in this country to the second American Revolution, the Civil War, and it has profound connections to the great social revolutions in other countries.

In the Western world, art was originally displayed publicly in churches, for whom the artists carried out commissions. The first art museum proper, the Uffizi in Florence, was founded during the Renaissance, which involved the economic and social struggle against feudalism and the intellectual struggle against the dominance of the Church.

The Louvre in Paris, the largest and most visited art museum in the world (more than 9 million visitors annually), was the direct product of the French Revolution of 1789. As David Gordon, former director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, observes in his article, "The Art Museum," "egalitarianism" was an important factor in the development of art museums. Gordon writes, "While several art collections were opened to the public voluntarily by rulers ... it was the French Revolution that decisively put art into the public domain."

Under France's old regime, plans for a public art museum were discussed for decades. Kings and ministers dithered. This was precisely the aristocratic principle in practice: if the king was interested, the process went forward; if he lost interest or became absorbed by other matters, the process stagnated.

The government brought to power by the revolution of 1789 took decisive steps. One year after the arrest of Louis XVI (in August 1792), the museum was opened to the public.

The new minister of the interior wrote a letter to the painter Jacques-Louis David in October 1792: "France must extend its glory through the ages and to all peoples: the national museum will embrace knowledge in all its manifold beauty and will be the admiration of the universe. By embodying these grand ideas, worthy of a free people ... the museum ... will become among the most powerful illustrations of the French Republic."

French revolutionary leader Henri Grégoire argued that those treasures "which were previously visible to only a privileged few ... will henceforth afford pleasure to all: statues, paintings, and books are charged with the sweat of the people: the property of the people will be returned to them."

The Russian Revolution of October 1917, led by the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky, took this process to a higher level. The new revolutionary government initiated far more decisive and democratic-revolutionary steps, with the assistance of the left-wing and avant-garde artists in the early days of the revolution. This process was brought to a brutal halt by Stalin after 1930.

In her 1993 article, "The Creation of the Museum of Painterly Culture," Svetlana Dzhafarova took note of some of the measures taken by the first workers' state: "In the outlying districts of Moscow, fourteen proletarian museums were created, distinguished by the heterogeneous contents of their temporary exhibits. ...

"Such small district museums stood in contrast to 'supermuseums' with holdings numbering in the thousands, and were intended for workers from nearby factories, who would not need to expend any extra effort traveling about the city from their place of work in order to visit the realm of the beautiful and to be exposed, very often for the first time, to the storehouse of culture—which was henceforth the property of every proletarian.

"The idea of making artistic treasures accessible to the masses, together with the belief in their educative value, constituted the cornerstone of all museum creation."

Dzhafarova commented on the establishment of the first art museum in history run by artists: "Among the new museums that proliferated in Moscow in the first years of the Soviet state, the Museum of Painterly Culture [1919-1929] was clearly the most distinctive; it was without precedent anywhere in the world. The museum was exceptional, above all, because it had been created and was administered directly by artists themselves ... It was the artists who were in charge of acquisitions, registry and storage, and the assembling of a central collection in Moscow and of collections to be sent to the provinces, and the artists who organized representative exhibits, engaged in analytical and scholarly work, amassed a library, and arranged the most timely exhibitions, as well as tours and lectures on issues in contemporary art."

The institution was closed down by the Stalinist regime in 1929.

In short, the opening and accessibility of art (and science) museums has been associated with democratic and revolutionary social movements, or their consequences, with the effort to raise the cultural level of the population, with confidence and interest in human progress. It is not possible here to describe the impact of a visit to a major art exhibition or museum, an experience that obviously varies with the individual and the institution.

But these are some of the thoughts and feelings I'm aware of having after an encounter with a major artist or exhibition:

An inspiring sense of what human beings are capable of, at their best; a sense that, in fact, human beings are capable of overcoming any obstacle through their endless ingenuity, curiosity and sense of beauty; a renewed confidence therefore in humanity and its possibilities; a desire to do important work oneself, work that will have an impact on others; a dissatisfaction with the trivia and ugliness of so much of everyday life, including relations between people.

Art is one of the ways we know the world. It makes human beings more flexible, sensitive, compassionate and aware.

The enemies of art are the enemies of the people, the enemies of the working class.

Taking all this into account, I repeat the question I asked earlier: Is it possible to imagine a situation in which the anti-democratic, crisis-ridden, aristocratic ruling elite in the US, which cares only for its own wealth, which hates and fears the population, could permit the Detroit Institute of

Arts, with its vast artistic richness, to continue operating as a museum open and accessible to the public?

As far as the rulers of this country are concerned, the working class population is riff-raff. If workers have anything of their own of value, it is something that is *not* in the pockets of the rich, where it should be. Including the art of the DIA. The ability of ordinary people to visit the museum and experience the artwork is a provocation to the aristocratic principle. As we speak, the powers that be are thinking up ways to get their hands on the art.

We are not speaking here in defense of the status quo. The present situation is impossible, the DIA has to be properly funded, along with other cultural institutions, and its works made *genuinely* available to the population through art education at every level, pouring funds into art and music programs.

In our view, access to art and culture is a social right, which has to be fought for against the ruling class. In the program of the Socialist Equality Party, adopted in August 2010, we write, under the heading, “The right to culture”:

“Access to art and culture is a basic component of a healthy society. Yet, like everything else, it is under relentless attack. American culture—film, television, music—was once a pole of attraction because of its innovation and powerful democratic and humanistic spirit. The subordination of culture to the profit motive has led to an immense degeneration.

“Culture has suffered from funding cuts for the arts, a right-wing ideological assault on artistic expression, and the general brutalization of American society. Government subsidies to museums, orchestras, theaters and public television and radio have been gutted. Art and music education has been drastically curtailed or eliminated outright from most public schools. Library hours and services have been scaled back, and education funding cuts have included the closure of school libraries. The media, owned by giant corporations, function as mouthpieces of the government and the wealthy, polluting public airways and spreading lies. The damage to the intellectual and moral fabric of society resulting from such a mercenary and philistine approach is impossible to quantify.

“To enable all working people to have full access to art and culture requires massive public funding and the creation of new schools and centers for music, dance, drama and art, either at a nominal fee or for free. Decisions on subsidies and grants for the arts must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats and placed under the control of committees of artists, musicians and other cultural workers.”

The defense of art and culture, and the right of ordinary people to experience art and culture, is a political, revolutionary question today

This program can only be implemented through the building of a new, mass socialist movement and the coming to power of the working class, which will radically redistribute wealth, break the corporate stranglehold, take control of the great business and financial enterprises and put them under democratic control, and place culture at the disposal of the people. The trillions that go for war, the vast wealth in society, currently monopolized by the one percent at the top, will go toward the needs and interests of the vast majority. We encourage you to take part in our campaign against the emergency manager in Detroit, to mobilize the population against the bankers’ dictatorship, and to join the Socialist Equality Party.

For more information on the campaign to defend the DIA, visit defendthedia.org.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>