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DIA Asks: What is a Museum Worth, Anyway?

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, August 15th, 2013

Diego Rivera's mural "Detroit Industry" at the DIA. Photo: Andrew Galbraith

"Be determined and advance," counsels a classic Samurai text. Good advice for any arts institution, especially the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Even before Detroit filed for bankruptcy on July 18, 2013, pundits and creditors had their eyes on the DIA's $1 billion-plus collection, which includes works by Van Gogh, Bernini, Picasso, Beckmann and Matisse. Christie's auction house has been brought in to appraise the collection.

But when I spoke with Graham Beal, the DIA's Director, he called the entire issue of selling the DIA's collection "a media circus—the art cannot and will not be sold."

I hope he's right, and I think he probably is, in practical terms. The Michigan Attorney General has issued a strongly-worded opinion that selling the art would violate the legal principal of public trust.

Bolstered by the AG's opinion, Beal promises a legal fight. "If the creditors *did* move in that direction, it would be tied up in courts for years, and that's the last thing creditors want," Beal said.

Threatening protracted legal action in the media is a valid counter-offensive move. Such threats, coupled with favorable governmental opinions, have kept other collections from being sold—notably the collection at Brandies University in 2009.

So why is Detroit's Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr proceeding with the Christie's appraisal?

It may be a purely administrative move, something he has to do as part of a complete accounting of the city's assets.

Or it may be more strategic.

To understand why, we have to look back more than a decade. When Beal took over the DIA, in 1999, the museum was a roller coaster of complications, as the city diminished its financial support year by year. Then, following a move that had kept the Detroit Zoo afloat, Beal hit upon an idea: Convince voters to tax themselves to keep the museum thriving.

Beal enlisted considerable support, indulged in raw politics, and the DIA won. In 2012, voters in a tri-county area passed a special tax entirely directed to the DIA; it now provides $20 million a year. Citizens in the three counties get free admission and a museum that has become highly successful.

You read that right: *In Detroit, citizens have taxed themselves to keep their art museum open.* No other American city has done that, and it gives lie to the prevailing view, expressed by a Bloomberg.com columnist, "that the visual arts [in other cities] are more appreciated than they've ever been in Detroit."

Now comes the city's bankruptcy, and further evidence that no good deed goes unpunished. By threatening the DIA's collection, the City's strategy may be to get at that special tax revenue.

"They wanted to put pressure on us so *we* would find sources to pass on to the city," Beal told me. "They've said, 'Maybe you can leverage the collection without actually selling it…Maybe you can

make a commitment to the city of $20 million a year for 20 years, and if you can't raise that money then maybe *you* can sell a couple of works of art.'"

To put it another way: The city seems to be asking the DIA to pass through its special tax money directly to city coffers. Quite a strong-arm tactic. It would certainly violate the terms of the 2012 vote. "The biggest single issue was convincing skeptical county taxpayers that there was no way their money could ever end up in the coffers of the city of Detroit," Beal explained.

As for the threat to sell the collection, Beal is having none of it. "Works that are in public trust should stay there. I have worked at a number of museums, and at only one of them was the board of trustees so well-trained that the question of selling art never came up. It's a kneejerk response. It derives from a complete misconception of how museums work, what works of art actually mean, and how they live."

The DIA's fight goes on. We'll watch it in the coming months, because it is a cultural battle that's political, legal and ethical—fitting for a museum that will unveil an exhibition called *Samurai: Beyond the Sword* in the spring of next year.

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