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Detroit: If You Can't Afford Art, Do You Matter?

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, June 13th, 2013

Last week, Virginia Postrel, a columnist for Bloomberg.com wrote, "Great artworks shouldn't be held hostage by a relatively unpopular museum in a declining region. The cause of art would be better served if they were sold to institutions in growing cities where museum attendance is more substantial and the visual arts are more appreciated than they've ever been in Detroit."

Postrel went on to cite declining levels of support for art in the Detroit area, and further suggest that if the Detroit Institute of the Arts' masterpieces were sold to the Getty in LA, more people would appreciate them.

That's a position only a non-art-lover could love. Taken to its logical extension, Postrel's plan would concentrate art in a few wealthy, highly-populated enclaves, and leave the rest of the country art-less, jobless and homeless. It would ratify the view that art should only be purview of the elite, and give a whole new spin to the concept of Haves and Have-Nots—as in, "We have the art, and they don't!"

While art can be a commodity, which is why some works of art sell at auction for astronomical sums, the purpose of a museum is to stand as a bulwark against the commodification of art. Most museums are non-profits and all take seriously their charge to act in the public trust. Museums acquire art not for its financial value—museums are not speculators—but for its aesthetic and cultural importance.

Nor is art a popularity contest, with its consequence measured at the box office. It would be ridiculous to get rid of art just because there aren't lines of fans waiting to get in, just as it would be unthinkable for a library to throw away a rare volume just because no one has checked it out in the past year. Museums, like libraries, hold our collective culture. Their presence alone represents value and meaning.

What would be the economic consequence of a massive sell-off of Detroit's art? The further decline of a city on the edge. Which leads to my modest proposal, quite the opposite of Postrel's.

Most museums exhibit only a fraction of their collections. The rest, as much as 90%, is stored in archives and warehouses, far away from the public eye. What if America's most successful museums sent the best of their non-exhibited collections to struggling museums in distressed cities—like Detroit? Previously unseen works would be seen, and struggling museums would see an uptick in attendance.

Even more importantly, the presence of more art would help revitalize the community. Art—in museums and galleries, on public walls and private studios—makes neighborhoods more welcoming and cities more vital. Art brings foot traffic and businesses; restaurants open and café tables spring up on the sidewalks. Soon people begin to regard these urban areas as more attractive; industrial buildings get converted to living spaces and new families move in. The cycle of civic renewal begins again and, with it, a stronger economy.

Virginia, you'd be better off acting like Santa Claus instead of the Grinch. We should pour more culture into cities that need revival, and watch the creative process work its magic.

Image: Cotopaxi by Fredric Edwin Church (1862) in the collection of the Detroit Institute for the Arts. Photo © 2013, Detroit Institute of Arts

This entry was posted on Thursday, June 13th, 2013 at 12:17 am and is filed under Discourse, Visual Art
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