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Vanity Fair's "Art Issue"

A D.C. public school student protests
Photo by commonromanEast Building of the National
Gallery of Art in Washington DC.
Photo by iainr

A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR THE ART WORLD

by Ben Davis

People like to throw around the word "priceless" when it comes to art. But we should know better. Art is not priceless. We know exactly how much art is worth. It's worth however much people are willing to pay for it, and right now, this is a lot of money.

The blow-out two-week cycle of auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's may have been tied down by last-minute issues of Nazi loot (only non-Nazi loot allowed, thanks!), but the total initial estimates for the sales were in the neighborhood of \$500 and \$700 million, respectively. *Vanity Fair* featured a cover story this month, "Inside the Billion Dollar Art Market."

The burgeoning interest of the mega-wealthy in art is, of course, chump change next to more vital interests of national well-being, like the thriving trade in prison construction, or the multi-trillion dollar defense industry.

For reasons of my own, however, I happened to be online looking up the education budget for different cities and couldn't help but take note of the fact that the Sotheby's/Christie's estimates are roughly equivalent to the proposed 2007 school budget for the city of Washington, D.C.

That got me thinking -- all that money spent in two weeks, for a few hundred art works, equal to what we set aside for public schools in our nation's capital for a whole year. Jonathan Kozol notes that the number of education dollars that go to urban, mainly minority populations is on average half of what is spent on more affluent suburban populations. The power of art could reverse this trend, in just two short weeks!

Our national and city governments may be drowning in debt, but right there in D.C., there's a resource that can't be passed up -- the National Gallery. Aside from the Met, the National Gallery has one of the most compendious collections of fine art in the nation. Rembrandt! Van Gogh! Vermeer! It's a potential revenue goldmine!

Keep in mind that the \$1 billion estimate is based on auction house prices. They are actually quite conservative for the potential cash yielded from private transactions of quality material -- think of Ron Lauder's \$135 million for Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, Steve Wynn's \$139 million deal

Leonardo da Vinci
Ginevra de' Benci
 ca. 1474/1478
 National Gallery of Art



Artist Edwin Ahlstrom's easel in the National Gallery of Art, as he copies Gilbert Stuart's *Portrait of John Randolph* (1805)



Egyptian Art I (1890-91), spandrel painting in the staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, commissioned from Gustav Klimt, Ernst Klimt and Franz Matsch



Pablo Picasso
Portrait of the Artist's Father
 1896

to sell Picasso's *Le Rêve* (before he put his elbow through it), the (okay, possibly fictional, but still credible) \$140 mil David Geffen got for that Pollock recently.

Surely some corporate titan who has a sliver of patriotism and a taste for the finer things could be convinced to give to the children for a shot at a bundle of paintings that included a rare property like the NGA's portrait of Ginevra de Benci (ca. 1479/78), the only Leonardo on this side of the Atlantic.

Some will respond, "But Art is best served where the public can see it." But think of this: A portion of the profits can go to funding a massive employment program for artists, creating replicas of the expropriated artworks to hang in their place! The proposed 2007 budget for the National Endowment for the Arts is \$124 million -- not bad, but still less than Lauder paid for *Adele Bloch-Bauer*. We could multiply this many times over with just a couple of works from the NGA's cellar (most museums only show a small fraction of their holdings at a given time, anyway).

After all, if there is one valuable thing that contemporary art has taught us, it's that the difference between the copy and the original is a social construct (this scheme would, in a sense, be the biggest postmodern art project ever -- bigger than Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wildest fantasy, Sturtevant on steroids!) It's not as if the plebes are really going to notice as it is, with school arts programs being cut left and right.

This helps answer the final, naïve objection: Isn't this just a quick fix? Aren't, after all, masterpieces a non-renewable resource? What do we do when we run out of haystacks and Helgas to pawn?

The answer is -- we need to make more masterpieces. What will get us there? Artists, like any other group of people, are a product of their circumstances. Klimt, that specimen of aristocratic decadence, was born poor. The School of Applied Arts, where he trained, was founded by Austria to make the country more industrially competitive. His first significant projects were public works for buildings along the Ringstrasse. Picasso was an early prodigy, but then again, his dad was an art teacher, supporting his family by bouncing around to teaching positions in La Coruña and Barcelona. Pollock, the force of nature, spent time on government assistance and cut his teeth on post office murals in Roosevelt's WPA.

With each round of escalating sales, we who care about art must ask ourselves -- what price our civic pride? It is only pride. Enough with the superstition that art is inherently edifying! Artworks do not teach themselves, they need decently paid educators to do this. Is holding onto a few paintings worth giving up on creating a new Klimt, or Picasso, or Pollock?



Page from Jackson Pollock's
second sketchbook, folio 13 (ca.
1937-38)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

I know, you say, there has to be another way. But we all know that these days we must work with the rich, and avoid any whiff of class warfare. It is so 20th century. Given how much is at stake, it would be criminal not to act now to sell our national treasures, if the market will take them.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.