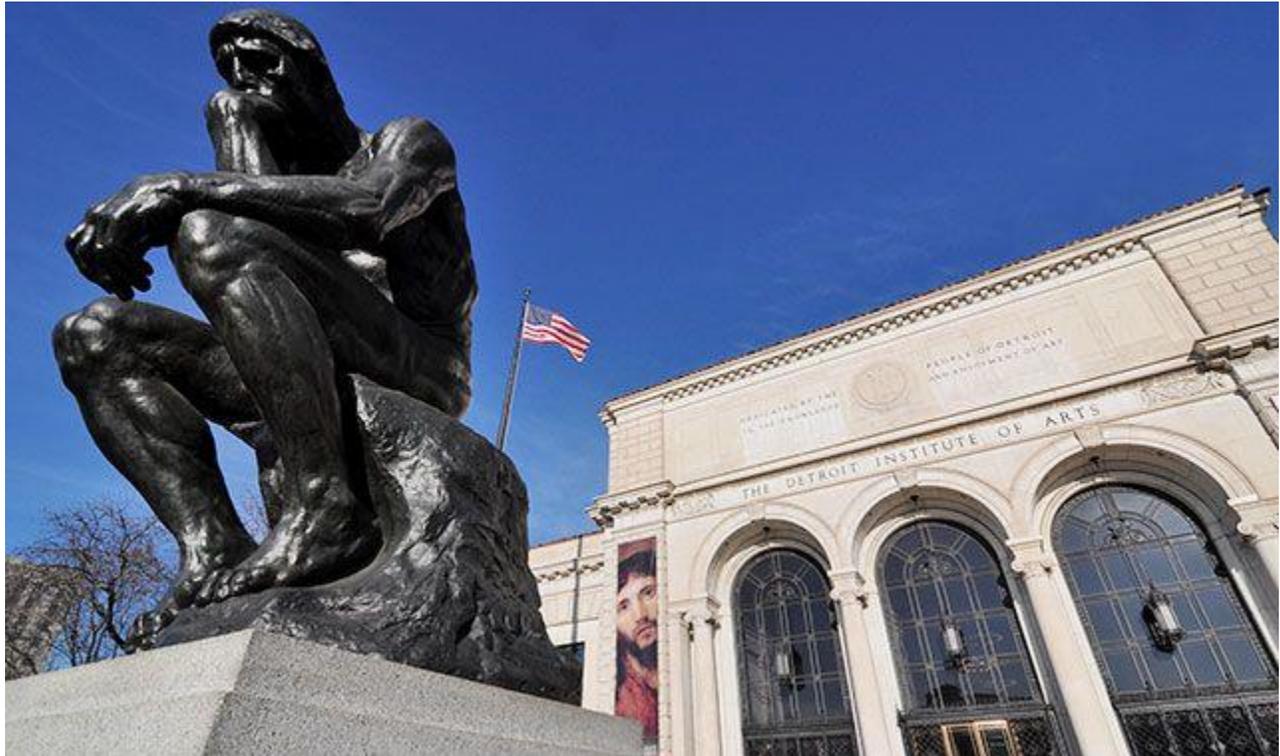


# What DIA's Plight Says About the Fate of Art in the Age of Inequality

by Ben Davis

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Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker" in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts  
(Courtesy of AndrewH324 via Flickr)



Detroit's Emergency Manager, Kevyn D. Orr / Photo: REUTERS/ Rebecca Cook

A few years ago, as the auctions first went parabolic and Vanity Fair crowed about “The Billion Dollar Art Market,” I wrote an article entitled “[A Modest Proposal for the Art World](#).” In it, I said that these kinds of numbers led to an inevitable conclusion: The U.S. must sell off its art immediately. Sure, people would yell and scream, but think of all the things we could buy with that money! Think of all the good art education we could buy for living kids with all that dead art!

This was meant as satire, to illustrate the freakish conclusions that such mind-numbing numbers must produce; rather than something to be celebrated, I saw (and see) the soaring market for trophies as a representation of how our [increasingly bifurcated](#)

[society](#) is being stretched apart. Yesterday's absurdity, however, is today's new normal in austerity America, as last Friday's announcement that a nearly bankrupt Detroit was toying with the idea of selling off the art at the Detroit Institute of Arts to please its creditors attests.

The idea has provoked widespread outrage, as it should. [Met Museum head Thomas Campbell](#) and [DIA's own boss Graham Beal](#) have decried the suggestion — but the [appraisers are already moving into position](#), and the city's Emergency Manager (EM) says that “[people should be prepared](#)” to think the unthinkable. In the event of a Chapter 9 filing, no one quite knows what would keep the sell-off from going through. It is apparently the city's creditors themselves who first floated the idea. As the EM's spokesman explained, “These are people savvy enough to know where all the money for the City of Detroit is.”

Will the fire sale go down? Perhaps, though [experts argue that such an eventuality currently remains “remote,”](#) partly because of the tremendous outrage it would cause among the city's middle classes (suburban voters [only recently passed a tax to sustain the museum](#)). Affluent and articulate people like art, and are willing to take it up as a cause. And yet, even if liquidation is forestalled, a very important lesson can be gleaned here that should not be lost amid all the high-flown rhetoric about the sacred value of culture.

The focus has been on Detroit's sheer, historic desperation; the situation is, we are told, the product of “[an existential drama of a kind that no city has ever faced.](#)” Yet that is only half of the story. Here's another unprecedented bit of art news from the last few weeks: [Christie's just did half a billion dollars of business on a single 70-lot sale](#), a staggering all-time record. When the DIA liquidation story broke last Friday, a cadre of New York art dealers [lined up to estimate that the museum's collection could bring in billions of dollars](#). It is unlikely that such a potentially disastrous move, which amounts to a clear advertisement of civic decline, would be on the table if such astronomical figures weren't being tossed around.

I, of course, find revolting the idea that Van Gogh's salt-of-the-earth “[Self-Portrait](#),” or Bruegel the Elder's lively ode to the common people, “[The Wedding Dance](#),” might be sold off to sate the moneylenders. But I also understand how, in a city that has been [forced to experiment with turning off street lights](#), righteous rhetoric about DIA's art holdings being a “public good” might ring a wee bit hollow. Hammering away at fine art's sanctity while the privatization of the city's water authority is [also “on the table”](#) seems bound to make pundits seem out of touch.

DIA may survive, as art lovers rally to its cause. But as long as the rich continue to absorb more and more of society's wealth to themselves, the [totals will keep rising at the art auctions](#). Pressure is going to continue to mount, and defending Detroit's museum is going to sound more and more like the well-off putting their concerns over regular folks. Politicians are [already harping on this angle](#) — and if you think they don't have an audience, look at the [feedback from the public to the Detroit Free Press's original report](#): “Here we go again with outsiders telling the city what's up for grabs and what is not,” wrote one angry reader. “Make some prints of what we sell, and save the city's pension fund and city services. Which is more important: saving the city? Or saving some art?” (If he were to propose hiring locals to make the copies as a job program, this would be exactly my “Modest Proposal.”)

At what price point do you give up on platitudes about the inviolability of art? At a hundred million dollars? Two hundred? One billion? The glue that holds society together is coming apart under the pressure of mounting inequality, and public institutions of art — which promote the mythical notion that the finer things belong, potentially, to us all — are bound to be pulled apart with it. That's why what is badly needed is for arts advocates to make a case for culture that doesn't frame it in isolation, but that links the fight for art to a broader movement to challenge the economic dogma that we live under, with all its baleful effects. There is no doubt that Detroit's situation is dire. But it is *obscene* that we live in a society where some people might pay hundreds of millions of dollars for single works of art while whole communities are mauled to death by the creditor class. The temperament of arts administrators is not such that they are inclined to make fire-breathing speeches about the One Percent. Critics call that “politicizing art.” But unless something happens to change the underlying trajectory of our economy, our culture, and our world, I fear that institutions like DIA will only have one real choice: die fast or die slow.