

Don't loot Detroit's art museum to pay the city's creditors

On Tuesday a federal judge ruled that Detroit was eligible to enter Chapter 9 bankruptcy – the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history. That same day, we got a price tag for how much the collection of the threatened Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), one of the country's oldest and best museums, is likely worth. DIA has been under threat for months since Kevyn Orr, the emergency manager appointed by Michigan governor Rick Snyder, insisted that everything in Detroit is "on the table". For months, salivating creditors have circled the museum while the institution has tried to keep them at bay. Now, for better and for worse, we have a price tag.

In a five-page letter to Orr, the auction house Christie's appraised the works of the DIA collection that the city bought at \$452m to \$886m. It's significantly lower than the \$2bn figure batted around this summer. More than that, it disguises the fact that a few masterpieces now on public view, among them Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Wedding Dance* and Matisse's *The Window*, account for as much as 75% of that estimate ; selling forgotten pictures in the basement is not going to have an impact.

The pitifully simplistic justification for looting the DIA goes like this: Detroit owes money. Detroit owns pricey paintings. [...]Therefore, Detroit should sell up to pay its creditors.

Contained within that malign logic, though, is a morass of assumptions, mistakes, and flat-out lies. Most of the paintings in the collection are tied up in legal agreements that make de-accessioning impossible. A fire sale of dozens of major art works would also likely cause a depressed market; even in these go-go times for the art market, there are limits. Then there are the costs. Even a small sale, in fact, would have immense ramifications. Putting just a handful of artworks on the block would lead to a mass exodus of philanthropic donors, who would be justifiably unwilling to throw money towards an institution that can't guarantee the preservation of art in perpetuity. It would also wipe out around \$22m in tax revenue DIA has enjoyed since three Michigan counties voted last year to support the museum through a property levy.

This is not to mention the regulations governing American museums, which expressly forbid the sale of artworks for any reason other than to acquire other artworks. Or the UNESCO treaties such a sale would violate. Or the opinion issued this summer by the Michigan attorney general, which explicitly stated that such a sale would contravene the law. This is not even to mention the insanity of treating artworks in the public trust as mere assets.

Even putting all that aside : on the barest economic level, raiding the museum will have no meaningful impact on the city's bottom line. Detroit has \$18bn in debt. More than 100,000 creditors have swamped the city. The Chapter 9 process begun this week means that the city can renegotiate all of its contracts – a process that need not lead to pension cuts for public workers if done right – and it's those renegotiations, rather than a frantic search for the most appealing baubles in city limits, that will get Detroit back on its feet. [...]

I am not such a romantic that I ascribe to art the mystical status of some of the DIA's defenders. If there really were a one-to-one correspondence between selling off paintings and feeding families, I could become a museum looter myself. But the whole point of a bankruptcy is to solve deep and structural problems in the economic organization of a major

city – not to strip-mine everything from the Bellinis at the museum to the baboons at the Detroit Zoo for however much one-time cash you can squeeze out of them. [...] Detroit has serious problems, but the Detroit Institute of Arts is not one of them. It's running very well, actually ; the museum is run at no cost to the city, and to disembowel one of its few great institutions for the sake of dysfunctional ones defies not only decency but logic. [...]

And just as Detroit is not a corporation, the Detroit Institute of Arts is not a family or a small business fallen on hard times – it's a public trust. Now is the time to remake Detroit, not to strip-mine it.

By Jason Farago, theguardian.com, Sunday, 8 December 2013

I. VERSION (sur 20 points)

Traduire le titre, et à partir de "I am not such a romantic..." (ligne 35), jusqu'à "...not only decency but logic" (ligne 43)

II. QUESTIONS (sur 40 points)

1. Question de compréhension du texte

Explain what the following sentences mean: "The pitifully simplistic justification for looting the DIA goes like this : Detroit owes money, Detroit owns pricey paintings. Therefore Detroit should sell up to pay its creditors." (lignes 13-14) (100 mots + ou - 10% * ; sur 10 points)

2. Question de compréhension du texte

Explain what the following sentence means: "Even putting all that aside: on the barest economic level, raiding the museum will have no meaningful impact on the city's bottom line." (lignes 29-30) (100 mots + ou - 10% * ; sur 10 points)

3. Question d'expression personnelle

Is culture a luxury in periods of economic difficulty? (300 mots + ou - 10% * ; sur 20 points)

*Le non-respect de ces normes sera sanctionné. Indiquer le nombre de mots utilisés.

III. THEME (sur 20 points)

Encaissé entre l'océan et l'Irlande du Nord, souffrant d'un manque criant d'infrastructures - pas d'autoroute, ni même de ligne de chemin de fer pour le relier au reste de l'Irlande -, le comté rural de Donegal a souffert, plus que les autres, de l'éclatement de la bulle immobilière, en 2008. Lui aussi s'était laissé contaminer par la frénésie de construction pendant les années de boom économique. Quand le rêve s'est écroulé, des milliers d'éleveurs, qui s'étaient reconvertis dans le secteur du bâtiment, se sont retrouvés au chômage. Aujourd'hui, une personne sur quatre est sans emploi dans le Donegal, et un jeune de moins de 30 ans sur deux. Alors que des villes comme Dublin, Cork et Galway renouent avec la croissance parce qu'elles constituent des pôles de développement attractifs pour les multinationales, Letterkenny et ses environs n'intéressent pas grand monde. Bien sûr, il y a un hôpital réputé et un Institut de technologie de qualité, mais pas de quoi séduire les investisseurs étrangers.

D'après Florence Beaugé, Le Monde, 13 octobre 2013