



Press Room

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Mass Cultural Council Statement on the Berkshire Museum

The Mass Cultural Council is proud to be a longtime supporter of the Berkshire Museum through investments in its operations, facilities, public education and accessibility initiatives. The Museum has been an important partner in our mission to support excellence, access, education, and diversity in the arts, humanities, and sciences across Massachusetts.

To finance future operations, endowment and redesign, the Berkshire Museum has contracted with Sotheby's auction house to sell 40 works of art from its permanent collection. After careful consideration and analysis, the Mass Cultural Council strongly opposes this plan as a violation of the Museum's public trust. We urge the Museum's Board of Trustees to reverse its decision to sell these artworks and explore alternatives to stabilize its finances and generate community support for its new vision. These alternatives exist, and we are prepared to help the Museum and its Board explore them and realize another path forward.

As a state agency, the Mass Cultural Council invests in our museums as public institutions by virtue of their designation as 501(c) (3) nonprofit organizations, which exempts them from property and corporate taxes and allows them to accept contributions and donations that are tax-deductible to donors, including works of art and culture. That tax-exempt status establishes nonprofit museums' eligibility for our funding, grants from the Mass Cultural Facilities Fund, and many other public funders and private foundations.

In return our nonprofit museums have a special responsibility to act as stewards for our Commonwealth's unique cultural heritage for the benefit of our citizens today and for future generations. For these reasons and many others, museum deaccessioning of artworks and cultural assets should be done only in the context of a carefully developed collections plan, sound institutional planning and, where appropriate, public input. Further, there are longstanding, widely accepted museum standards that require that funds generated from deaccessioning must be used for the care and preservation of artwork, or to purchase new art. Museum collections should never be treated as disposable financial assets.

The Berkshire Museum disregarded these important guidelines in its deaccessioning process. As a result major national accrediting organizations for both art and history museums have condemned its plan, and the Museum was forced to sever its affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution and the benefits that came with it.

The Museum has stated that it must raise \$60 million to stabilize its finances, strengthen its endowment, and fulfill its new vision—an interdisciplinary, interactive approach connecting the arts, sciences, and local history. We recognize the extraordinary challenges of operating a nonprofit museum with an extensive, diverse collection in a highly competitive philanthropic environment. And we appreciate the willingness of the Berkshire Museum and its volunteer Board to address these challenges to ensure the institution's long-term viability. The Museum has run annual operating deficits for a decade, an unhealthy and unsustainable practice. Yet two independent analyses, along with our own review of the Museum's audited financial statements, show clearly that the Museum could put itself in a healthy operating position without deaccessioning art. We fear, moreover, that its broader plans rely on uncertain market and cost projections, and that widespread public opposition to the

deaccession will erode the very base of support upon which the Museum must depend to realize its ambitions.

The children and families of Pittsfield deserve the chance to experience the work of Norman Rockwell, Albert Bierstadt, and Sir Joshua Reynolds in their own community. Once these Massachusetts treasures hit the auction block they will be gone forever, most likely landing in private collections abroad, if recent sales of this magnitude are any guide. The fact is that few museums can afford to purchase art of this significance, and must rely on the generosity of collectors who donate art to museums with confidence that it will be cared for and made available to the public. Thus the Berkshire decision threatens to undermine trust in museums and other cultural institutions at a time when such trust is one of our sector's greatest assets.

While we respect the hard work and consideration of the Board of Trustees of the Berkshire Museum, we urge them to take all necessary measures to curtail the sale of its artwork. We hope to work together to support the goal of putting the Museum on solid financial footing while allowing residents across Pittsfield, Berkshire County, and the Commonwealth, to experience this culturally significant artwork.

About the Mass Cultural Council

The Mass Cultural Council is a state agency supporting the arts, sciences, and humanities, to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts and its communities. It pursues its mission through a combination of grants, services, and advocacy for nonprofit cultural organizations, schools, communities, and artists. The agency's total budget for this fiscal year is \$15.7 million, which includes a state appropriation and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and other sources. Mass Cultural Council also runs the [Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund](#) in partnership with MassDevelopment.

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