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Museum's Role in Police Mural Outside Detroit Draws Criticism

The Detroit Institute of Arts sponsored the mural as part of its efforts to support art in the communities it serves, but critics say the "pro-police" art work sends the wrong message.

By Graham Bowley and Zachary Small
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The newly installed mural, "To Serve and Protect," on the exterior of a police station in Sterling Heights, Michigan.

They unveiled the mural outside the Sterling Heights police station with fanfare on June 1. The mayor of the city in the Detroit suburbs cut the red ribbon to mark the installation of the artwork, which had been three years in the making and depicts police officers bowing their heads and clasping hands in front of an American flag.

But in the week since then, the work, which was sponsored by the Detroit Institute of Arts, has become a touchstone for controversy as critics have denounced it as badly timed and overtly pro-police when they say the public discussion should be about police aggression. Some have called for it to be removed, and following the backlash, the artist herself said she no longer believes it is appropriate and that she feels used by the museum, which paid for the work as part of an initiative to work with surrounding counties whose tax dollars support its operations.

“I absolutely regret making the mural,” said the artist, Nicole Macdonald, in an interview. She said it should be taken down if it causes anguish for residents of the Detroit area. “The DIA’s number one priority should be serving the people in the city who are predominantly Black; instead, it represents those tenets of power that are historically racist.”

As museum leaders across the country are challenged on whether their institutions are systemically racist, the Detroit Institute of Arts has recently faced questions about whether it is doing enough to serve the needs of the predominantly Black city in which it’s located or to the people of color on its staff.

The museum has countered that it also needs to provide programming for three surrounding counties, which came to the museum’s rescue in 2012 when they agreed to pay extra taxes to support the institute. About two-thirds of the museum’s budget is now underwritten by money from the three counties.

The mural in Sterling Heights, titled “To Serve and Protect,” was created as part of the museum’s “Partners in Public Art” initiative, one of the programs it runs to meet a commitment to reinvesting a share of the tax funds back into the communities that pay them.

Dale Dwojakowski, chief of police of Sterling Heights, said he and his colleagues intended the work — which is in part a memorial to three fallen officers — to depict noble values such as service, family, unity and inclusion, and show that “police and community are one.”

“I can’t think of anything more fitting after what happened in this country last year,” he said. “The mural represents police officers doing their job protecting the community that loves their police department.”

But when the mural was publicized by the museum over the weekend, critics said it was ill-timed and argued that the museum should be focused on addressing issues of police violence, not honoring the police. Sherina Rodriguez Sharpe, a Detroit-based artist, said it represented “painting a mural over a history of colonization and violence.”

Xaviera Simmons, an artist who has donated artworks to the museum, called its role “a major offense.”

“We are talking about abolishing police and they are fortifying their relationship with police,” she said. Simmons said she would decline future donation requests from the institution until she saw it assess its own history of wealth, whiteness and disenfranchisement.

After the furor, the museum removed a social media post about the mural that had been originally designed to draw attention to the work, and also a subsequent post that it had used to explain that it had taken the original post down “out of concern for individuals who were being personally targeted in the comments.”

The museum said the ideas for public art like the mural come from the communities, not the museum, and that its role was limited to finding an artist and helping funnel input from its community partners, in this case the city of Sterling Heights and the police. It said it put $6,400 toward the cost of the mural, and other installation costs were paid by Sterling Heights.

In a statement addressing the criticism, the institute acknowledged that the diverse makeup of Detroit and its surrounding districts meant different areas would have different points of view on the art they want, and that the national conversation around racism and police violence had changed since the work was painted.

“A broad and diverse region supports the DIA with millage funds, providing more than two-thirds of our operating budget,” it said. “As a consequence, individual communities will have priorities that differ greatly from others.”

It added, “Since 2018, the year this mural was painted, much has transpired in our country and we understand and respect that many members of our community are hurt and angered. To support healing, we will continue investing in partnerships with community-based nonprofits in the tri-county region led by and serving the BIPOC community.”

Michael C. Taylor, the mayor of Sterling Heights, a city of 130,000, defended the mural as symbolizing good policing.

“The reason we are emphasizing public art, using resources and taxpayer dollars, is because we want to change the conversation,” he said. “This mural is about the police department showing service to the community.”

Chief Dwojakowski said the depiction by the artist of some officers of color was meant to show inclusion. Critics said they did not think the mural portrayed a diversified police force.

Below the central image of the police officers, the art work features tiles created by police officers and their families. Brittany Greeson for The New York Times

Beneath the 20-foot by 30-foot mural are painted tiles created by Sterling Heights police officers and their families, under the artist's supervision, in workshops at the museum. (Most tiles expressed symbols of peace and love, but one depicts a skull with the "Thin Blue Line" symbol that is used to show support for law enforcement, but some say has come to signal opposition to the racial justice movement.)

At the installation on June 1, Macdonald spoke alongside an official from the museum and said the work was about peace and introspection. In an interview, she said she regretted including the American flag, which she believes might have caused some to misconstrue her work as sanctioning police violence.

But the critics said the involvement of the museum, which had given its approval to the artwork, was troubling.

"Fulfilling the desires of the Sterling Heights local community," said Kevin Beasley, a celebrated artist who completed his undergraduate studies in Detroit, "doesn't mean you no longer have a responsibility to the broader context."