

understand everyday responses to social problems in the nineteenth-century city.

Matt Neale

Independent scholar

Jeffrey Abt, *Valuing Detroit's Art Museum: A History of Fiscal Abandonment and Rescue*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xvii + 273pp. Illus. Bibl. Index. £109.99 hbk. £87.50 ebook.
doi:[10.1017/S0963926818000512](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926818000512)

What happens when city hall runs out of money? Which services are essential, and what can be cut? Can assets be sold? The scenario is not unfamiliar to a popular audience: the premise of *Parks and Recreation* (2009–15) is that a (fictional) city has fiscal discipline imposed by the state, as the unlikely heroine Lesley Knope (Amy Poehler) attempts to prove that the parks department is essential and therefore should be exempted from drastic budget cuts. Millions watched. Kim Phillips-Fein's discussion of the (real) example of 1970s New York, as representing the end of an American experiment in more comprehensive local government, was shortlisted for a Pulitzer.¹

In *Valuing Detroit's Art Museum*, Jeffrey Abt takes a major public institution, and follows the debates about who should pay for what, from its establishment in late nineteenth-century Detroit, through the economic boom of the motor industry, the civil rights era, the economic decline and collapse which followed the waning of the industry and the acute crisis in the early years of the twenty-first century. Whilst Abt has written about this institution before, this work not only updates the story to 2013, but in the most urgent part of the book, focuses in particular on how the museums and its collections were valued by different groups.² Longer-run context makes it clear that these tensions are not new.

In many ways, the story of Detroit Museum of Art (DMA) is one of good intentions never quite being backed up by financial support. As Abt shows, from the point of establishment, the museum as an institution was in an almost constant state of restructuring: it started with hopes for 'liberal men' to write large cheques (p. 3), motivated by concerns around taste, civic pride and education. Incorporated in 1885, the museum was the product of a deliberate move to build cultural capital for the city. Quite early on, negotiations resembled a *pas de deux* between the city and the museum's Society; this soon became more complex with distinctive voices and agendas from the museum's curatorial staff, and Michigan state, about what the museum should be, who it should serve and how it should do this. Ambitious plans to expand the physical premises and deepen collections frequently sat alongside budgetary constraints and demands for retrenchment.

The reality was, and is, that creating a museum of international standing, particularly in terms of fine art collections, is expensive. Abt navigates a history

¹ Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York, NY, 2017).

² *Museum on the Verge: A Socioeconomic History of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1882–2000* (Detroit, IL, 2001).

of ambitious fundraising targets from private donors, and campaigns to secure state and city funds, both from general budgets and from taxation (millage). A thorough analysis of the political economy in which this took place sheds light on how culture is valued: in return for each of these sources of funds, trade-offs were – and are – made: private donors are more keen to support certain types of project – new purchases of artworks hold a stronger appeal than meeting daily running costs and overheads. Employing curators for the museum to function as a research institution fell down almost everybody's list of priorities. City funding tended to be in return for having more days without admission charges; State money required more outreach work, warranting a taxation mandate over a wider geographical area. In 1960, nearly 80,000 benefited from extension programmes and onsite activities (p. 84).

When the periodic demands for retrenchment came, adjustment of service levels such as reducing opening times only took the museum so far. For 130 years, the main thrust of the debates was arranged around three fundamental issues which were never fully resolved. First, geography and administrative boundaries came to the fore in one of the fundamental questions of local administration, around discrepancies between areas which benefit from urban government and those which bear the financial burden. One possibility was 'regionalism' where state funding for metropolitan public services was justified by the regional benefits they brought (p. 100). The issue of this relationship is relevant to urban historians generally.

Secondly, financial good practice of endowing for long-term security was challenged by political pressure to meet immediate needs from reserves. This tension sits at the heart of political life. Thirdly, a development of the prudence–pragmatism tension, was the temptation from outside to sell valuable collections to raise cash. In the UK, it is taboo and in many cases illegal for a public museum to sell artworks or objects in order to raise funds, but in the US the situation is more complicated. Assets might be sold to meet the city's obligations to its creditors, but this would depend on the terms under which they had been acquired – did the city own them? The scale of the task involved in appraising collections – valuing and ascertaining if they could be sold to satisfy the city's creditors – required external consultants. In an undoubted strength of the work, Abt not only deals with central issues for the life of the DMA as a cultural institution, but adds to our understanding of the nature of what public assets can be, and where the demarcation between essential and optional public services can be drawn.

The surprising omission from this work is of a single table or chart: a handful could show the operating budget, the proportion borne by city, state and the museum's Society; a tabulation of visitor numbers, square footage of the museum, for example, would afford great clarity over the consequences of the events taking place after 2000, and place them in historical perspective. These would use data series that Abt appended to his previous volume. This is the only reservation, and the book will be extremely helpful for any urban historians interested in debates about which public services are seen as optional, or in the bounding of the public and private. Studies like this, however, are essential to understanding urban government.

Malcolm Noble

University of Hertfordshire