

# Current Comments

## The Legacy of Albert C. Barnes. Part 2. The Barnes Foundation

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Recently, we published an essay about the stormy life and impressive accomplishments of the physician Albert Coombs Barnes (1872-1951).<sup>1</sup> In that account, I related how Barnes invented an antiseptic silver protein solution called "Argyrol." It was used primarily to combat infections of the mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, and throat prior to the advent of antibiotics.<sup>2</sup> Argyrol made Barnes a millionaire by the time he was 35.<sup>2-5</sup>

Barnes's studies at the various educational institutions he attended had included not only medicine and chemistry, but also such subjects as philosophy, psychology, and art.<sup>3,6</sup> It was his consuming interest in the latter which led him first to paint pictures of his own, and later, after conceding his lack of talent, to collect the paintings of others. Barnes's purchases, however, were based neither on financial interests nor on the fashionable artistic tastes of his day. Instead, the bulk of his collection was acquired through years of diligent study, based on a scientific system he claimed to have evolved himself. His method made use of what he termed "objective" criteria in the perception and evaluation of certain aesthetic elements in an art object.<sup>7</sup>

Barnes created and endowed the Barnes Foundation on December 4, 1922, with the expressed purpose of imparting his presumably scientific, objective system of perceiving art to the common man. He also wanted to relate the

somewhat esoteric experience of art appreciation to everyday life.<sup>3,8,9</sup> Eventually containing more than a thousand paintings as well as hundreds of works of sculpture,<sup>9</sup> the collection Barnes donated to his Foundation was intended to serve as the raw material—the "text"—from which students would learn his aesthetic theories.<sup>3,8</sup> But despite his noble intentions and rigorously reasoned theories, Barnes and his Foundation were embroiled in bitter controversy from the day of the Foundation's official opening on March 16, 1923, until almost ten years following Barnes's death on July 24, 1951. In this essay, I want to tell you about Barnes's theories on art, his fabulous collection, and the convoluted history of the Foundation to which he bequeathed it.

Barnes began collecting paintings in 1912. From then he began to form his ideas on art appreciation and aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Devouring every book on art that he could find, he made regular trips to the cultural nerve centers of Europe—Rome, London, and, most especially, Paris. He exhibited an almost unerring talent for distinguishing important work, and purchased paintings by many giants of Western art long before they had become well known or even accepted in the US.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Barnes paid ludicrously small sums for numerous major works.<sup>7</sup>

Barnes also managed, however, to pick up even acknowledged masterpieces at bargain prices. Since he had

shrewdly sold his Argyrol business for six million dollars prior to the stock market crash of 1929, he remained quite wealthy during the worldwide depression of the 1930s. Few of the formerly wealthy families and businesses that were forced to sell their treasured art were in a position to quibble over whatever price Barnes cared to offer.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Barnes had a wide reputation for unabashed ruthlessness in the pursuit of a painting he wanted. Curiously, though, he was reluctant throughout his life to discuss purchase prices. To a question about whether or not it was true that he had paid the highest price ever for a painting by a particular artist, and whether or not he still had the painting in his possession, Barnes responded: "The equivalent of asking me to confirm such rumors would be asking a lady if the rumor were true that she had bought the most expensive pair of panties ever sold by Lit's [a Philadelphia department store] and if she is still wearing them."<sup>4</sup>

Barnes's theories on art appreciation and education derive partly from the thoughts of American educator and philosopher John Dewey. Dewey was convinced that philosophy was of value only when it dealt with the affairs of everyday life and could be used as a guide in intelligently conducting those affairs. Similarly, Barnes believed that art should not be divorced from everyday life and the "real" world. According to Barnes, art is not merely a hobby to which one may turn in one's spare time, nor a luxury to be indulged in in the name of "culture," nor a relic to be approached in a spirit of worship. Instead, art is a vital part of every person's workaday world, affecting each of us in countless ways, large and small, whether we know it or not.<sup>11</sup>

The *raison d'être* of the Foundation's educational program is to remove art from its customarily detached, esoteric niche and link it with life itself.<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite his crusading desire to bring art

to the common people, Barnes was convinced that it is presumptuous of the uninitiated to venture any opinions on art, and that it is useless for the untrained to view art.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, he believed that it is vital to a true understanding and appreciation of painting for a student to have direct contact with the paintings themselves. Barnes's educational philosophy is perhaps best summed up by the following statement from a World War II-vintage pamphlet: "Art appreciation can no more be absorbed by aimless wandering in galleries than can surgery be learned by casual visits to a hospital."<sup>3</sup>

For Barnes, no system for analyzing an *objet d'art* was adequate, other than his own. According to his theory of aesthetics as set forth in his book, *The Art in Painting*, appreciating art is difficult primarily because of the unconscious habits and preconceptions absorbed from a society "which is but little interested in art."<sup>12</sup> The function of a painting, in spite of what most of us may have been led to believe, is not to photographically reproduce the subject matter nor to tell a story. Instead, a painting should "reveal to us the qualities in objects and situations which are significant, which have the power to move us esthetically. The artist must open our eyes to what, unaided, we could not see.... A landscape...should catch the spirit of the scene; a portrait...what is essential or characteristic of the sitter."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the artist's goal is to help the viewer see as he himself sees. But the only resources that a painter may legitimately employ to that end are the elements of color, light, line, and mass—the "language" of art. The success of the artist's efforts may be judged by his command of this language—that is, by the interplay of these four elements, and how well they achieve the effect the artist intended. A true artist, according to Barnes, does not stoop to depend upon his viewer's resources, or upon familiar

devices or symbols to do his work for him. If he wants to inspire in a viewer a sense of tragedy, for instance, he does not paint a picture of some tragic scene. Instead, he may use somber colors, constricted spaces, and thin, wavering lines—or harsh colors, chaotic spaces, and bold, shrieking lines—depending upon how he himself experiences the emotions of grief and tragedy. Thus he seeks to instill in the viewer some idea of how *one other* human being (the artist) experiences an emotion felt, at one time or another, by all. The viewer gains an insight into human experience that could not otherwise have been absorbed. And if representational and natural shapes, colors, and spatial relationships cannot be made to serve the artist's purposes, then not only is it permissible for him to distort them until they do, it is incumbent upon him to do so.

Barnes's criteria for analyzing a painting formed the cornerstone of several other works besides *The Art in Painting*. These include *Art and Education*,<sup>13</sup> *The French Primitives and Their Forms*,<sup>14</sup> *The Art of Henri Matisse*,<sup>15</sup> *The Art of Renoir*,<sup>16</sup> and *The Art of Cézanne*.<sup>17</sup> The art world's opinion of these efforts seems to have been almost equally divided between admiration<sup>18-22</sup> and scorn.<sup>23-26</sup> In a 1939 review of *The Art of Cézanne*, for instance, *Art Digest* recommended that the book be "read and re-read,"<sup>21</sup> and the *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* called the book a "penetrating study of the structure of Cézanne's art."<sup>22</sup> Yet a 1939 review that appeared in *Parnassus* roundly criticized Barnes for "pretensions to a scientific method," "dogged and dull determination in the pursuit of [that] defective method," and a "superficial," often inaccurate, account of historical fact.<sup>23</sup> A review in the *Magazine of Art* agreed, calling *The Art of Cézanne* "dull, long-winded and...repetitious," and noted that "the only scientific standards successfully applied to paintings are those

achieved by the recently developed X-ray and chemical color tests."<sup>25</sup>

Today, both art and art criticism are recognized as highly subjective fields that are not amenable to rigid ideas and rigorous methods. According to art historian Horst W. Janson, New York University, "Barnes's method is no more scientific than any other method. It is not necessarily a bad thing to judge art by formal values alone, as Barnes did; it is simply one-sided."<sup>27</sup> Janson also notes that Barnes's ideas did not really originate with Barnes—he simply took the ideas of earlier scholars and critics, put them into his own words, and seemed to believe that he had invented something new. Thus, although formal analysis of the language of art plays a large part in contemporary art criticism, Barnes is not credited with having fathered the method. Indeed, his books and theories are largely ignored today. What he is admired for, essentially, is his pioneering taste. Janson acknowledged that the Barnes Foundation possesses a staggering collection of important works that were gathered at a time when the artists who painted them were decidedly unpopular.<sup>27</sup>

While the fire has long since gone out of the controversy surrounding Barnes's ideas on art, the enmity between Barnes and the art community at one time burned fiercely. On Barnes's part, the feud was precipitated by the reception a portion of his beloved collection received from the art establishment and the general public in 1923, during an exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup> Barnes was fresh from a well-received exhibition of 75 of his latest acquisitions, staged by art dealer Paul Guillaume in Paris. Consequently, he accepted the invitation of the Academy when it proposed to sponsor a similar exhibition in the US, using its facilities. Unfortunately, the bold and daring art of the Impressionists, Postimpressionists, and Fauvists shocked American critics, who

ridiculed the paintings and artists alike. Barnes was enraged and hurt by this avalanche of rejection. In retaliation, he barred both the critics and the general public from his Foundation for the rest of his life.<sup>3</sup> However, he was still determined to go through with his plans for establishing the Foundation as a tuition-free educational facility for anyone who wished to learn his theories on art appreciation.

As was discussed in the first part of this essay,<sup>1</sup> Barnes took pleasure in refusing requests to view his collection after modern art gained acceptance. Indeed, it was his fiery, unpredictable temper and his pungently worded rejections of such requests for which he was best known to his contemporaries—and the more well known and influential the petitioner, the more spectacular and humiliating Barnes's refusal was likely to be.<sup>28</sup> His most virulent animosity, however, was reserved for members of the established art community—particularly the art faculties of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania, and the trustees and administrators of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. For instance, coinciding with the opening of the Foundation's school in 1923, Barnes established a chair of modern art at the University of Pennsylvania, his *alma mater*, giving Penn students access to his gallery. Immediately, a senior professor at the Academy of Fine Arts publicly asserted that "Bolshevist" ideas were invading the university, and denounced the newly established chair as the worst possible catastrophe he could imagine. Barnes reacted by excluding all members of the Academy's faculty from his gallery for the rest of his life, pronouncing them to be "habitually in a state of profound intoxication."<sup>10</sup>

The university, meanwhile, had reservations of its own about the new chair, and Barnes began to detect signs of what he considered academic "inertia

and hostility." As the program with Penn continued, Barnes became more and more dissatisfied. Eventually, in 1926, he voiced his complaints in a letter to university officials. He told them that he planned to donate his art collection to Penn, and provide the university with an income sufficient to support the Foundation in perpetuity. Before he would act on such plans, however, the university would have to make sweeping changes in its undergraduate art program. Penn never even acknowledged his letter. Barnes ended his alliance with the university in a storm of abuse that a member of his staff later described as "picturesque profanity."<sup>10</sup>

Barnes began a public feud with the Philadelphia Museum of Art when that institution announced, in 1937, that it had purchased one of the variations of Cézanne's "The Bathers" for \$110,000—and that a "second version" of the painting was hanging in the gallery of the Barnes Foundation. In-furiated, Barnes charged that the Museum's painting was a poor effort that Cézanne had never completed, and that it lacked the "deep, juicy, sparkling, lustrous colors" of his own earlier version. Moreover, he informed the press, he had refused the opportunity to buy the Museum's version of "The Bathers" for less than half the price the Museum had paid. And early the following year, he launched yet another attack—this time directed at then-Federal Art Administrator Mary Curran and her assistant, Fiske Kimball. In their "autocratic" control of art exhibitions in Philadelphia, Barnes said, the two presented a truer picture of fascism than did Hitler or Mussolini.<sup>29</sup>

Thus Barnes earned the undying enmity of most of the art community of his day, which he returned with equal fervor. A chronicle of the Foundation during Barnes's lifetime would consist mainly of the particulars of how Barnes continued to make enemies, how peo-

ple continued to be outraged by his poison pen, how the press continued to give blow-by-blow coverage of every controversy, and how the Foundation itself remained closed, on the grounds that admitting the general public would severely interfere with its educational mission. Some months following Barnes's death in a traffic accident at the age of 79, however, the first attempt to pry open the doors of the Foundation began.

On February 16, 1952, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* filed suit in Montgomery County (in which the Barnes Foundation is located) to require the Foundation to adopt "reasonable" regulations concerning the admission of both art students and the general public to the gallery.<sup>30</sup> This was the first of five separate court actions that would eventually be started against the Foundation.<sup>31</sup> The suit was brought by the *Inquirer* in the name of Harold J. Wiegand, an editorial writer for the paper and a resident of Montgomery County.<sup>30</sup> The suit contended that the Foundation, as a nonprofit, tax-exempt, educational institution, owed its existence to public largess, and should therefore be open to the public.<sup>32</sup>

The Foundation's trustees, defendants in the suit, maintained that the court did not have the right to change the by-laws of the Foundation; that Wiegand had no right to bring suit, since he was not a member of the Barnes Foundation Corporation; and that the administration of the Foundation was legally within the jurisdiction of its board of trustees. "Any question concerning the wisdom or propriety" of Barnes's policies concerning who would or would not be admitted to view the collection was "irrelevant...and not subject to the supervision of the court," the trustees stated.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, argued Foundation student Carol Carpenter Dewey in an article published in Philadelphia's *Sunday Bulletin*, it was not

correct to refer to the Barnes Foundation as a tax-free *gallery* at all.<sup>34</sup> The Foundation was far more than a gallery or a collection of paintings. It was an educational institution, and like all such nonprofit facilities, it deserved its tax-free status. The suit was eventually dismissed in a December 1952 ruling by Judge Harold G. Knight, who said, "Neither the plaintiff nor the court may set themselves up as judges of the proper method of conducting a course in the fine arts."<sup>35</sup> The judge further stated that the Foundation's by-laws "seem to make it clear that the primary aim of the Foundation is educational, and any public use of the galleries is purely secondary."<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting to note that while the Barnes Foundation has historically regarded itself as an educational facility rather than a gallery, art experts have historically been quick to praise its gallery and almost equally quick to condemn its educational program. A 1961 article appearing in *Nation* pointed out that despite its many years of operation and Barnes's generosity with grants and traveling fellowships, the Barnes Foundation had never turned out "a single painter of any value—a record that could have been predicted for a school of art education based entirely on the ritual admiration of masterpieces."<sup>8</sup> And in a 1952 letter to the editors of *ARTnews*, Janson attacked the Foundation's educational status as a claim that could be supported only on the Foundation's own say-so.<sup>36</sup> No art experts had ever been permitted within its walls, and no art department or school had ever recognized the Foundation's program. And although 30 years have gone by since Janson wrote that letter, his opinions have remained firm. "The Barnes Foundation is not a valid training institution for art historians," he said recently.<sup>27</sup> By the most widely accepted measure of any college-level program—published articles in scholarly journals

authored by faculty members—Janson found the Barnes staff woefully lacking. However, the ability to produce great or scholarly articles may not be a valid set of criteria in judging whether or not an educational program is "educational" for a large percentage of those who attend. The Foundation does not attempt to grant degrees.

Judge Knight's ruling in favor of the Barnes trustees was upheld by the state's Supreme Court in June 1953.<sup>30</sup> The majority of the justices agreed that only the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had the right to bring suit against the Barnes Foundation on behalf of the public. However, the *Inquirer's* editorial campaign to unlock the Barnes collection continued. Eventually, the state's Justice Department decided to look into the matter. Once again, however, the lower court ruled in favor of the trustees, and once again, the ruling was appealed to the state's Supreme Court. In March 1960, the high court ordered the Montgomery County court to review its previous decision. Two days before the new trial was to start, however, the trustees reached an out-of-court settlement with the state.<sup>30</sup> On March 18, 1961, almost 38 years to the day after it had officially begun operations, and almost ten years following the death of its founder, the Barnes Foundation opened its doors to the public. The conditions under which the public was first admitted are still observed.

Predictably, the Foundation's doors opened amid additional controversy. As the public shuffled through the rooms of the Barnes gallery, awed by an avalanche of masterpieces, art experts began to disagree about the quality—and in some cases, even the authenticity—of the paintings. A critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that perhaps Barnes had kept the art world from viewing his collection not out of bitterness or injured pride, but because he had feared impartial,

educated appraisal of his paintings. The critic estimated that only one quarter of the paintings in Barnes's collection were of "prime quality." In fact, "shockingly many" were so poor or insignificant that they wouldn't have been given wall space in the permanent collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art or New York's Museum of Modern Art.<sup>37</sup>

More serious charges were leveled by Sydney Freedberg, then-chairman of Harvard's department of fine arts, who found 26 paintings he considered to be "complete [modern] fabrications, copies, or misattributions."<sup>38</sup> Frederick Hartt, then-chairman of the University of Pennsylvania's art department, agreed, citing numerous works as misattributions or even forgeries.<sup>39</sup> The Foundation, however, has never allowed any of the paintings in question to be examined by experts using modern laboratory techniques. The accuracy of statements concerning any painting's authenticity, therefore, has never been determined. Moreover, there is little the Foundation could do about such allegations even if they were proved true. By the terms of the trust Barnes set up prior to his death to provide for the Foundation, the collection must remain intact. Not a single object may be sold or removed for any reason, save temporarily for the purposes of a lecture.<sup>39</sup>

In spite of these and other critical remarks, however, the Barnes collection remains indisputably one of the most impressive gatherings of French modern paintings in the world. Although Barnes and his theories had—and still have—their detractors, it should be noted that it was Barnes, not the American art establishment at the turn of the century, who recognized the potential and genius of the burgeoning modern art movement. Marking the event of Barnes's death, even his lifelong adversary, *ARTnews* magazine, grudgingly paid him tribute in an editorial: "Barnes, through his own superb

imagination concerning the art of his day, and through stimulating the imaginations of his pupils and others, can take a great deal of credit for the germination of modern art in the [US]."<sup>40</sup>

The Barnes Foundation collection is estimated to contain some 200 Renoirs, 75 Matisse's, 60 to 100 Cézanne's, and 35 Picassos.<sup>41</sup> Although no complete catalog of the works in the Barnes Foundation has ever been made public, a partial list of the major modern paintings exhibited in the gallery would include the following: "Washerwoman" and "Le Linge," by Manet (1832-1883); "After the Bath" and "Four Dancers on Stage," by Degas (1834-1917); "The Bathers," "Skull and Fruit," "Man with Skull," "Card Players and Girl," and "Madame Cézanne," by Cézanne (1839-1906); "Girl in Garden" and "Houseboat," by Monet (1840-1926); "La Famille Henriot," "The Artist's Family," "Portrait of Mademoiselle Jeanne Durand-Ruel," and "Mussel Fishers at Berneval," by Renoir (1841-1919); "Landscape: Haere Pape," by Gauguin (1848-1903); "The Postman" and "Flowerpiece and Fruit," by van Gogh (1853-1890); "Music Lesson," "Joie de Vivre," and "The Dance," by Matisse (1869-1954); "Harlequins," "Violin and Bottle," and "An Ascetic," by Picasso (1881-1973); "Carnival," by Pascin (1885-1930); "The Models," by Seurat (1859-1891); "Jungle," by Rousseau (1844-1910); "Nude," "Girl in Sunday Clothes," and "Beatrice," by Modigliani (1884-1920); "Miller's Daughter," by Daumier (1808-1879); "Landscape," by Maurice Prendergast (1859-1924); "Church with Red Roof and White Walls," by Utrillo (1883-1955); and "Racetrack," by Glackens (1870-1938). Other artists represented in the collection include Soutine, Pippin, Braque, Klee, the Pinto brothers, and Toulouse-Lautrec.<sup>42-50</sup>

The Barnes collection does not consist entirely of modern art, however.

Many old masters are also represented, and a number of major works grace the Foundation's walls, including: "Man and Child," by Titian (1477?-1576); "Two Prophets" and "Venetian Senator," by Tintoretto (1518-1594); "Baptism of Christ," by Veronese (1528-1588); "Annunciation" and "Mocked Christ," by El Greco (1541-1614); "David Playing the Harp," by Rubens (1577-1640); "Doctor Galos," by Goya (1746-1828); and "Triumph of Saint Michael," by Delacroix (1798-1863).<sup>42</sup> Other artists included in the collection include Bosch, Dürer, and David.

The Barnes Foundation is also a showcase of sculpture, Early American antiques, and Pennsylvania Dutch artifacts. Works by Jacques Lipchitz highlight the collection of contemporary Western sculpture, which is contrasted with numerous examples of African and pre-Columbian Mexican sculpture. Ancient Egyptian stone reliefs, medieval Russian, French, and German wood-carvings, Korean ivory carvings, and ancient Roman metalwork are also scattered throughout the gallery. Hung side-by-side with the paintings on the gallery walls are such Pennsylvania Dutch artifacts as shoe horns, hinges, toasting forks, wrought iron tools, and burnished steel ornaments. Below the paintings on the gallery floors stand numerous examples of Early American furniture, including chests, chairs, tables, and candlesticks.

The odd juxtaposition of sculpture, paintings, and antique furniture and metalwork serves a purpose. Each object on display in the gallery was arranged personally by Barnes according to his own theories, based on the continuity of tradition and style he felt they exhibited. A Renoir, for example, may appear in close proximity to a Tintoretto, an El Greco, and a Cézanne. These in turn may be bracketed by Pennsylvania Dutch artifacts and ancient stone

reliefs or medieval woodcarvings, while the whole group may be set above an antique toy chest—all to illustrate their similarity of rhythm, form, and style. The purpose of the arrangement is thus to aid the Barnes Foundation students in grasping the analysis of the forms in art objects, and to provide proof that each supposedly new, original movement in art is actually the heir of some past tradition.<sup>50</sup>

The Barnes collection is housed in a French Renaissance-style mansion that cost Barnes half a million dollars to erect following the end of World War I. Constructed of imported, cream-colored French limestone blocks, it is surrounded by acres of magnificently landscaped grounds, which double as an outdoor laboratory and lecture facility for the Barnes Foundation's arboretum. The arboretum, founded in 1940 by Laura Leggett Barnes, offers practical, scientific, and aesthetic courses in botany, horticulture, and landscape architecture. Besides the arboretum, gallery, and auxiliary buildings located in Merion, at the intersection of Latches Lane and Lapsley Road (just a few blocks west of 54th Street and City Avenue in Philadelphia), the Foundation's educational facilities also include a pre-revolutionary farmhouse in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Furnished with authentic pieces of the period, it supplements the program at the Foundation by presenting more ex-

amples of the influences various artistic traditions have on everyday objects.

A maximum of 200 visitors are admitted to the Barnes Foundation gallery on Fridays and Saturdays, 9:30 am until 4:30 pm, from September through June. A maximum of 100 visitors are admitted on Sunday, 1:00 until 4:30 pm, during the same months. Half of the visitor allotment on each day is on a first-come, first-served basis, while the other half is by reservation only. Admission to the gallery, which is closed during July and August, is \$2.00. The Barnes Foundation's mailing address is: Box 128, Merion Station, Pennsylvania 19066. The telephone number is (215) 667-0290.

It is obvious that the trustees of the Barnes Foundation have never really accepted the spirit of the court decision. Never have I known a less-publicized "public" institution. While there is occasionally a delay in my gaining admission to the collection, on most visits I find the quota far from filled. But as some of the participants in a recent international conference held at IST<sup>®</sup> learned, a visit to the Barnes Foundation is gratifying indeed. As I've often remarked, "wall-to-wall Renoir" is a unique—if not blinding—experience.

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