Betraying a legacy: the case of the Barnes Foundation

by Roger Kimball

On an exhibition of French paintings at the National Gallery, Washington.

After the Donor’s death no picture belonging to the collection shall ever be loaned, sold or otherwise disposed of except that if any picture passes into a state of actual decay so that it is no longer of any value it may be removed for that reason only from the collection.

—from the By-Laws of the Barnes Foundation, December 1922

One of the most striking things in America is the Barnes collection, which is exhibited in a spirit very beneficial for the formation of American artists. There the old master paintings are put beside the modern ones ... and this bringing together helps students understand a lot of things that academics don’t teach.

—Henri Matisse, 1930

The headline of a press release from the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., puts it with disarming frankness: “World Tour of Great French Paintings from the Barnes Foundation.” To be sure, the paintings are great. Among the eighty-odd canvases from the legendary Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania, now on view at the National Gallery are masterpieces by Renoir, Cézanne, Seurat, Matisse, and Picasso, as well as important works by Gauguin, Henri Rousseau, Vincent Van Gogh, Chaim Soutine, Amedeo Modigliani, and others. Renoir’s Leaving the Conservatoire (1877), Cézanne’s The Card Players (1890-92), Seurat’s Models (1886-88), Matisse’s Le Bonheur de vivre (1905-6), Seated Riffian (1912-13), and Merion Dance Mural (1932-33): these and other works—including the first public showing of a stunning early version of Matisse’s dance mural that was only recently discovered in Nice—make the exhibition one of the most spectacular samplings of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French painting anywhere.

Of course, it all sounds marvelous. Never mind that the installation at the National Gallery is rather sterile: is it not terrific that this is only the first of several stops on a worldwide, money-making tour that, as of this writing, includes museums in Paris, Tokyo, and Philadelphia?[1] Think of the crowds:
they will almost certainly number in the hundreds of thousands. All those art lovers, hitherto unable to make it to the Barnes Foundation—with its limited hours and out-of-the-way location in a comely suburb of Philadelphia—will at last be able to buy a ticket and shuffle past these masterworks *en masse*. Richard H. Glanton, president of the Barnes Foundation, now estimates that the tour will bring about $7 million to the Foundation’s coffers. Is this not a splendid example of shrewd financial management combined with “cultural democracy” in action? The National Gallery wants you to think so. With some notable exceptions, the press wants you to think so, too. Likewise the current administration of the Barnes Foundation.

But no. The spectacle of the Barnes Foundation in the last couple of years has been anything but encouraging. The public-relations apparatchiks would have us believe that, after decades of “elitism,” the Foundation is finally opening its doors and dispensing its treasures to “the people.” In fact, the recent behavior of the Foundation’s trustees, in collusion with several other institutions and individuals, raises a host of troubling questions: questions about the proper place of art and aesthetic values in a democratic society, first of all, but also questions about the future of private philanthropy in this country. This is hardly the only occasion on which such questions have come to a head. Indeed, the struggle between the prerogatives of artistic excellence and the claims of popular appeal have featured prominently in the recent history of American arts institutions. But the case of the Barnes Foundation adds several new elements to this long-playing drama: a maverick, largely self-taught connoisseur with a genius for business, art, and making enemies; a long and tangled legal battle in which undeclared rivalries have masqueraded as matters of high principle; and, last but not least, large dollops of populist demagoguery.

The protagonist of this saga is Dr. Albert C. Barnes. Born in Philadelphia in 1872, Barnes was brought up in a working-class family, the son of a butcher. He was a talented athlete, boxing and playing baseball semi-professionally to help pay for his schooling. He was also a diligent student, earning a B.S. in 1889 and, from the University of Pennsylvania, an M.D. in 1892 at the age of twenty. After his internship, he traveled to Berlin and Heidelberg to study pharmacology and philosophy. In 1902, he married and, with the German chemist Hermann Hille, started the company Barnes and Hille, which manufactured a proprietary antibiotic compound called Argyrol. Especially useful in fighting infant eye infections, Argyrol was to make Barnes’s fortune. In 1907, he bought out Hille’s interest in Barnes and Hille, and the following year established the A.C. Barnes Company, which manufactured and marketed Argyrol worldwide.

In addition to his skills as a businessman, Barnes had prodigious intellectual gifts. The philosopher John Dewey, a close friend with whom he corresponded and collaborated for over thirty years, once remarked that for “sheer brain power” he had not met Barnes’s equal. His fortune assured, Barnes increasingly turned his attention to the world of art and ideas. His intellectual tastes, like his artistic tastes, proved to be daring, individual, and supremely self-confident. From boyhood, he was
fascinated by American black culture—camp meetings, revivals, and the like—and he later acknowledged the indelible impression that black culture had made on his life and outlook. He also became deeply interested in psychology, including the startling new methods propounded by Freud and William James. Pragmatism especially, with its emphasis on the experiential basis of human values, attracted him.

Barnes began collecting art in the early Teens. At first, his high-school friend, the artist William Glackens, helped him buy works. Barnes sent Glackens to Paris in 1912, where, together with the artist Alfred Maurer, he purchased works by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Picasso, Renoir, Pissarro, and others for Barnes. Barnes later went and made his own purchases from dealers and auction houses. He eventually assembled one of the most dazzling collections of modern French painting anywhere in the world. By the time of his death, in 1951, he had acquired 180 works by Renoir, sixty-nine by Cézanne, sixty by Matisse, forty-four by Picasso, fourteen by Modigliani, twenty-one by Soutine, eighteen by Henri Rousseau, seven by Van Gogh, six by Seurat, as well as a handful of Gauguins, Toulouse-Lautrecs, Braques, Monets, Manets, and others. But Barnes’s taste was hardly confined to French art. He was also an avid collector of Old Master paintings, American Impressionists, Greek and Egyptian antiquities, intricate wrought ironwork, Native American art, and African tribal sculpture. Altogether, the Barnes collection totals nearly twenty-five hundred works of art.

Interested though Barnes was in art, his first passion was education. Deeply influenced by Dewey’s theories on education and democracy, he looked to art and aesthetic experience as a primary, if as yet imperfectly tried, means of educating the human spirit in modern democratic society. As he put in the Indenture of Trust that created the Barnes Foundation, he was particularly keen that “plain people, that is, men and women who make their livelihood by daily toil in shops, factories, schools, stores, and similar places,” have free access to the sustenance that art offers. As the scholar Richard J. Wattenmaker points out in his excellent essay for the catalogue accompanying this exhibition, Barnes began by instituting a six-hour work day at his factory. He installed dozens of artworks at the A.C. Barnes Company and established discussion groups for both white and black workers to ponder the paintings as well as books by Dewey, Bertrand Russell, William James, George Santayana, and others. He started a circulating library and even allowed interested outsiders not associated with the company to attend lectures and discussion groups.

In fact—and this is worth bearing in mind—it was out of these informal factory seminars that the Barnes Foundation with its formal roster of classes and research evolved. Convinced that he was on to something, in 1922 Barnes decided to create and endow a foundation “to be maintained perpetually for education in the appreciation of the fine arts.” This cannot be overemphasized: the Barnes Foundation was not created as an art museum; Barnes created it “as an educational experiment under the principles of modern psychology as applied to education.”
One of the great strengths of Barnes’s taste was its breadth. Of course, it is easy to disagree with some of his judgments about particular works or particular artists: but that can be said of any important critic. What matters in a critic are not so much particular likes and dislikes (though the quality of Barnes’s collection shows that he did pretty well on this score, too) but the principles of judgment he employs. At the center of Barnes’s philosophy was the effort to understand the distinctively aesthetic features of works of art no matter what their period or provenance. He sought, as he wrote in The Art in Painting (first edition, 1925), the “intelligent appreciation of paintings from all periods of time.”

In this, Barnes resembles critics like Roger Fry, who also attempted to delineate “experimentally” (as Fry put it in his book Transformations) the experiences we have “in the face of different works of art of the most diverse kinds.” Barnes wished to emphasize the aesthetic qualities of art—the emotional coefficients of line, form, color, texture, and so on. This led him to arrange his collection unchronologically in tableaux designed to highlight the aesthetic, rather than the narrative or thematic, affinities among the works. Many visitors to the Foundation have found this—and the absence of wall labels identifying the works—off-putting. But such were Barnes’s strategies to coax students (and visitors) into looking. Simple chronological organization and wall labels—to say nothing of that contemporary bane, the “audio tour”—serve to distract the viewer from, well, viewing. They encourage him to substitute reading or listening for the harder work of attentive scrutiny. Not that the name of the artist and title of a picture are unimportant; but one should be able to assume that anyone really interested in what he is looking at will go to the trouble to ascertain such historical information. As Barnes noted in The Art in Painting,

To see as the artist sees is an accomplishment to which there is no short cut, which cannot be acquired by any magic formula or trick; it requires not only the best energies of which we are capable, but a methodical direction of those energies, based upon scientific understanding of the meaning of art and its relation to human nature. “The meaning of art and its relation to human nature”: One should keep this desideratum in mind when the oft-made charge of “formalism” is hurled at Barnes. The truth is, if by “formalism” one means an abstract inventory of artistic technique, then Barnes was the opposite of a formalist. As Mr. Wattenmaker notes in his catalogue essay, “What Barnes sought to convey in front of the painting itself, rather than from a reproduction, was a means of sorting out the varieties of human experience embodied in a painting.” The term “formalism” is nowadays unthinkingly used as a negative epithet. But it is worth remembering that what separates good works of art from the bad or mediocre is always in some sense form and never “content.” What makes a depiction of the Virgin Mary or a bowl of irises a great work of art is not the Virgin or the flowers but the handling of those subjects by the artist.
All this is by way of background to the current controversy over the future of the Barnes Foundation—a controversy in which the touring exhibition of French masterpieces plays an integral role. At the center of the controversy is the contention that the Barnes Foundation, while it poses as an educational institution, is “really” an art museum that, in exchange for its tax-exempt status, should be more accommodating to the public. This battle is not new. It began shortly after Barnes’s death in 1951 when The Philadelphia Inquirer—then owned by one of Barnes’s chief antagonists, Walter Annenberg—initiated litigation and an editorial campaign against the Foundation in an effort to transform it into a public art museum. As Gilbert M. Cantor notes in his meticulous and informative book, The Barnes Foundation: Reality vs. Myth, the Inquirer’s campaign against the Barnes Foundation “was not a passing fancy but a ten-year program of harassment which has not ended even today.” Mr. Cantor was writing in 1963; all that needs to be emended is the phrase “ten-year.” As owner of The Philadelphia Inquirer, Walter Annenberg had a large hand in directing the attack against the Barnes Foundation. In this context, it is illuminating to compare Mr. Annenberg’s activities as a collector with Barnes’s. From the Teens—when it was still unpopular—through the Forties, Barnes collected French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art; Mr. Annenberg began assembling his collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art in the late Fifties when every museum in the country was clamoring for the stuff. Barnes used his self-made fortune to found an educational institution based on aesthetic principles that he had painstakingly thought through for himself; in the 1970s, Mr. Annenberg offered the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York some $20 million to establish an educational program that would bear his name, even if it could hardly be said to represent his ideas. Barnes stipulated that the artworks he bequeathed to the Barnes Foundation not be sold, moved, or lent; Mr. Annenberg, when he recently promised to leave his collection of paintings to the Met, stipulated that the works not be sold, moved, or lent. Extraordinary coincidences, to say the least.

One of the most disagreeable features of the effort to destroy the Barnes Foundation has been a campaign of character assassination directed at its founder. This, too, has a long history. Barnes made many enemies. He was aggressive, impatient, and could be overbearing to the point of brutality. He harbored a particular dislike for the academic art-establishment, which he regarded as effete, snobbish, and essentially uninterested in the vital aesthetic core of art. (This indeed was one reason that, near the end of his life, he arranged to cede eventual control of the Barnes Foundation to Lincoln University, a predominantly black college in Pennsylvania. Mr. Glanton, incidentally, served as counsel to Lincoln before being appointed president of the Barnes Foundation.)

Today it is routinely assumed that Barnes was eccentric to the point of irresponsibility. One journalist, writing recently in a major newspaper, described him as “loony.” Paul Richard, chief art writer for The Washington Post, went even further. In an extraordinarily ignorant article called “An Imprisoned Collection Breathes at Last,” Mr. Richard castigated Barnes’s view of art as “doggerel-like.” Admitting that the Foundation’s collection is “among the strongest” American collections of
paintings, he nevertheless insisted that it was also the “silliest, and strangest.” “Few American museums have ever been as selfish, as scornfully unwelcoming, as is the Barnes Foundation,” Mr. Richard wrote, snidely adding that it “isn’t really a museum, but a gallery-cum-school for promulgating Barnes-think.” In fact, Mr. Richard has it exactly wrong. The Barnes Foundation is not a gallery-cum-school; it is a school whose resources include art galleries. Is the public given carte-blanche to wander around classrooms at Yale? Of course not. And as for “Barnes-think,” well, Mr. Richard gives us a good sense of the quality of his own thinking about art when he goes on to complain that Renoir’s women “all look much alike.” Perhaps he should have taken a course at the Barnes Foundation.

Journalists such as Mr. Richard have unfortunately lent themselves to the attempt to destroy the Barnes Foundation by voiding its charter and forcing it to become a public art museum. As Gilbert Cantor noted in his book, should this effort succeed, it would be “tantamount to confiscation of an art collection.” The ironies are manifold. When he established the Foundation, Barnes wrote that “the purpose of the gift is democratic and educational in the true meaning of those words.” Now, under a barrage of populist and anti-elitist slogans, the “true meaning” of democracy and education are rejected for the sake of a grotesque counterfeit.

Before the court granted permission for the world-tour of paintings from the Foundation, Mr. Glanton had proposed selling off various works to finance renovation of the Foundation buildings. So far, that provision of Barnes’s trust document has survived the assault. Yet anyone considering the charitable disposition of his own property must be given pause by the cavalier treatment accorded Barnes’s Indenture of Trust. The Indenture specifies that “at no time shall there be any society functions commonly designated receptions, tea parties, dinners, banquets, dances, musicales, or similar affairs” held at the Barnes Foundation. But last fall Mr. Glanton gave an elaborate reception and lunch party there at which not only the press but also various society figures, including Mrs. Walter Annenberg, were present. The Indenture specifies that the administration building attached to the gallery “be used as classrooms”—and so it was until Mr. Glanton moved the Foundation’s offices into the building, converting Mrs. Barnes’s former sitting room into his private office. The Indenture specifically prohibits the “copying of any of the works of art in the Barnes Foundation by any person whatsoever.” Barnes was particularly opposed to color reproductions of works of art because they give a distorted impression of the original. And yet the exhibition catalogue, published by Alfred A. Knopf, contains hundreds of illustrations, “154 in full color,” as a press release boasts. Another fascinating coincidence: Samuel I. Newhouse happens to own Knopf and the Newhouse Foundation happened to make a $2 million grant to Lincoln University just before Knopf was granted permission to publish the catalogue. And of course the Indenture prohibits lending any works from the collection: that provision, too, has obviously been egregiously violated.

Albert Barnes gave his fortune to perpetuate the idea that democracy was not inimical to culture. Mr.
Glanton and many others are determined to prove him wrong, even if it means making a travesty of his ideas and trampling on the principle of private property. It is disheartening to behold.

Notes

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1. “Great French Paintings from the Barnes Foundation: Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Early Modern” is up at the National Gallery until August 15. The exhibition then travels to the Musée d’Orsay, Paris (September 6, 1993, to January 2, 1994), and the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo (January 21 to April 3, 1994). Dates for its viewing at the Philadelphia Museum of Art are officially “to be determined,” presumably because additional venues may yet be added to the exhibition’s itinerary. A catalogue of the show, with essays by several hands, has been published by Alfred A. Knopf in association with Lincoln University (318 pages, $65); a paperbound edition ($25) is available only from the National Gallery. Go back to the text.


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