

# Albert Barnes and His Foundation: Three Paradoxes<sup>1</sup>

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Let me begin by saying that the writing of my book was largely accidental. I was invited to join the Barnes board of trustees in 2005, after the Foundation had won its legal case to increase the size of its board and to move from Merion Township to Center City Philadelphia.

Before accepting the invitation, I felt that I should read all the relevant legal and financial documents to understand the reasons for the board expansion and the move, to be certain that I could support both. Having done so, I concluded that the actions were not only justified, but essential: the Barnes was clearly in dire financial condition, constrained by the Founder's Indenture of Trust, lacking support from its local community, and unable to secure adequate sources of funds for future operations. I was persuaded that the Foundation was faced with a stark choice: either to dissolve itself and distribute its art collection to other appropriate institutions (an option that Barnes had once entertained himself) or else to move to a location where it might generate financial as well as other forms of support from a broad base of committed friends, members, and donors.

How did such a well-endowed organization become nearly bankrupt only 50 years after the death of its very wealthy founder? How did it become closed to virtually everyone within a few years of its establishment? Why was it created explicitly as a nonprofit *educational* foundation rather than a museum? What were the background, the character, and the personality of Barnes himself? And what inspired him to build a remarkable collection, to write five ambitious books of art criticism and aesthetics, and to become convinced that his highly

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<sup>1</sup> Read 8 November 2012, as part of a symposium on the Barnes Foundation.

personal approach to the interpretation of art and education through art was the *only* valid approach?

These were some of the questions that drove me to become more and more deeply engaged in the Barnes story. As my curiosity grew, the number and length of my notes on the subject steadily increased, until I found myself well on the way to writing a book.

Let me give you some basic biographical facts. Albert C. Barnes was born in a working-class part of Philadelphia in 1872. He was bright, ambitious, in some ways idealistic, but also iconoclastic, aggressive, opinionated, and determined to make his own way in the world. As time passed, he became increasingly judgmental and suspicious of others, especially art historians, other academics, and members of the social establishment whom he dismissed as misguided and superficial.

Contentious and provocative by nature, he was always ready to do battle with institutions and with the many individuals whom he regarded as irremediably unenlightened. This pugilist spirit was an intrinsic (not always admirable) part of his personality, as he himself acknowledged in a 1920 letter to the wife of his friend John Dewey:

I came into the world maladjusted—and I'm still that. I saw my trouble when I was about twelve years old, and at about fourteen I began the study of psychology from a deep interest which probably had its origins in an unconscious need. Even at that age, I was an inveterate experimenter and nothing I ever came in contact with did I accept as standard or right or ultimate. I wanted to change the status of everything in my boyhood world. . . . I don't regret it because it taught me to fight and it was always for an ideal—of course, a disbalanced, youthful, stupid ideal in many cases.

Barnes the “fighter” became very wealthy relatively young in life. He earned a medical degree by the time he was 20 years old. Trained as a chemist, he went into partnership with a German colleague, and they invented the medication Argyrol, which became widely used to prevent infant blindness and cure a number of infections. He made millions of dollars, bought a house on Philadelphia's “Main Line,” and in 1912, at the age of 40, began to acquire works of art. In less than four decades he had built a remarkably diverse collection of approximately 900 works. But his greatest passion was for the so-called “modern” art of his own era. As you know, he concentrated heavily on Renoir, on the postimpressionists, especially Cézanne, as well as Matisse, and to some extent Picasso.

At the time, the work of these and other “modern” artists was widely regarded as shocking, absurd, even degenerate. But Barnes (like a few equally perceptive Americans, including the Stein family, John

Quinn, and the Havermeyers), quickly developed an enthusiastic interest in these painters and assembled extraordinary holdings of their work. By the time he died in 1951, he owned 181 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes, 59 Matisses, and 46 Picasso drawings and paintings, as well as several hundred other works by Monet, Manet, van Gogh, Daumier, Modigliani, Henri Rousseau, de Chirico, and many others. His remarkable achievement remains to this day by far the largest intact collection of art from that period.

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In the brief time we have available, I will focus on just three of the questions that prompted me to write the book. First, why did this tax-exempt Foundation—dedicated from its founding in 1922 to the appreciation of art and to the promulgation of democratic principles (as a public institution serving people of *all* backgrounds and social classes)—why did such an institution soon become a semi-fortress, open to scarcely anyone except a few fortunate interlopers and a small cadre of hand-picked students whom Barnes and his staff taught according to his eccentric theories and methodologies?

Initially, Barnes was inclined (as he wrote to Dewey) to open the gallery to the public three days a week, reserving three other days for students from various colleges and universities to study the collection. He later told his attorney that he would eventually “throw the place” open entirely to the public. That is to say, Barnes’s own ideas (as well as Dewey’s) concerning progressive democratic education provided the initial impetus for the creation of the new Foundation *not* as a museum, but specifically as a place dedicated to a much broader vision. The rapid change from openness to closure is attributable in large measure to the development of Barnes’s idiosyncratic theories; to his single-minded, determined personality; and to the attitudes of the few zealous people with whom he surrounded himself. He came to believe that art should not be viewed or evaluated in traditional art historical terms. He excluded all consideration of social or cultural factors, as well as connoisseurship and the analysis of stylistic categories.

Rather, he firmly believed that all art, from totally different cultures and time-periods, should be analyzed according to formalist characteristics—the use of line, of color, of the handling of space, or the overall composition of a work. This approach could, Barnes believed, reveal important parallels among otherwise very dissimilar objects, but it required “learning how to see” (as he put it) according to the new method that he introduced into the Foundation’s curriculum. He was convinced that only by mastering this approach could viewers discover the underlying, true meaning of a work of art.

But learning how to *see* according to Barnes's theory proved to be extraordinarily difficult for almost everyone. Several students from neighboring academic colleges enrolled in one of Barnes's earliest courses at the Foundation, but by the end of the term, they were judged to be ill-prepared and incompetent. Barnes failed them all, and resolved never again to admit students from those particular institutions.

Meanwhile, Barnes and his staff were spending literally hours observing (and making judgments about) visitors to the gallery—particularly academics and students of art history. Anyone who had studied traditional art history was especially suspect. Many others were also noted for their apparent lack of seriousness, or their inability to discuss paintings in what was considered—by Barnes and his staff—to be the appropriate way. Mary Mullen—a trustee and devotee of Barnes's ideas—wrote that the Foundation's teachers were “handicapped . . . [because] a majority of our students had dabbled in art in college courses . . . [and they were consequently limited by their] demonstrable *inability to see*. How almost universal is that defect.”

Mullen also expressed contempt for the “utter blindness” of a visiting curator from a nearby museum, and added, “Protean variations of this disorder are duplicated a dozen times in the records of [our] observations of the behavior of men and women in the presence of [our] paintings. . . .”

In view of this attitude toward students and other visitors, it is not surprising that the Foundation began to close its doors to more and more people. The educational program rapidly became doctrinaire. Only the few who demonstrated a clear sympathy for the Barnes method were admitted, and the institution—founded to serve broad democratic purposes—ultimately excluded virtually everyone.

A second question that inevitably interested me was the Foundation's financial instability. Barnes was a highly practical, successful businessman who established a well-endowed, carefully planned Foundation. How and why were the assets depleted to the point of insolvency within a few decades?

The answers lie, once again, in Barnes's character and personality and his determination to create his own empire with its own devotees and to exercise absolute control. These tendencies were vividly demonstrated in the 1922 “By-Laws” or “Indenture of Trust” that defined the way in which the Foundation and its art collection should be administered—even after Barnes's death.

This lengthy, detailed, unyielding document was the primary cause of the Foundation's eventual financial collapse, although there were other important contributing factors that I will mention later.

Three provisions of the indenture stand out. First, it restricted all investments to the equivalent of “savings bonds,” yielding between 2½

and 3½ percent per year—barely enough to keep up with modest annual inflation (let alone enabling the institution to add essential professional staff, attend to major maintenance, or meet unexpected financial emergencies). The sustained period of double-digit inflation during the late 1970s and early 1980s therefore had a serious impact on the Foundation's finances. Constant invasions of the endowment corpus to cover deficits during those and other years steadily depleted the small corpus of about \$10 million—first to about \$7.8 million, and by the late 1990s to nearly zero. Most important of all, the Foundation missed the half century (between 1950 and 2000) of generally robust stock-market returns that would have greatly increased the endowment and kept the institution on a sound financial footing.

A second provision of the indenture barred all social events (such as teas, dinners, and parties) from taking place in any Foundation buildings. Barnes viewed such occasions as frivolous, exclusive, and snobbish (quite apart from the fact that he wanted to keep the Foundation as private and self-enclosed as possible).

The impact of this provision also proved disastrous, sending the strong message that outsiders were unwelcome and precluding any effort to build a committed group of friends, members, and potential donors. As a result, there was essentially no “constituency” to nurture and support the Foundation, and no source of annual funds or endowment gifts to help keep it healthy, vital, or even alive.

Third, there were no sources of *earned* revenue. Tuition fees from students were negligible, and until 1960, when the court ordered the Foundation to open two days a week, there were no ticket sales—and those revenues were, in any case, also negligible.

So given the indenture's catastrophic endowment investment policy; its ban on all social events that might ultimately produce donations; and its lack of any other sources of income, it was inevitable that the Barnes would—sooner or later—find itself unable to operate any longer. Indeed, it was ironic that in his determination to keep the collection and the educational program essentially private and intact forever, Albert Barnes unwittingly sowed the seeds of the Foundation's destruction. It was equally ironic that only the near collapse of the institution prompted the courts to offer it a chance to revivify and literally rebuild itself.

The last of my three questions concerns the Foundation's relocation. Given the indenture's provision that no works in the gallery should ever be loaned or even moved, what was the justification for allowing the entire institution to be transferred from Merion to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia?

The theory that has gained the most publicity is a conspiratorial

one, claiming that the mayor, the governor, and the three largest Philadelphia foundations—Pew, Lenfest, and Annenberg—as well as many members of the city’s elite, banded together to capture the Barnes as a “trophy” that would bring added prestige, cultural magnetism, and greatly increased tourist revenue to the city.

The three foundations were accused of deliberately withholding the financial support that could allow the Barnes to survive in Merion, support that would have required approximately \$80 million in endowment. Without such very substantial help, the nearly bankrupt institution would have only two choices: either to dissolve itself, or else to re-locate to the center of the city.

The proposed move to Philadelphia (eventually approved by the court) also included a sensible provision for expanding the board of trustees from five to fifteen. In the minds of some, this change was also thought to be conspiratorial: by tripling the size of the board (it was alleged), “white” Philadelphia’s elite was in effect wresting “power” from Lincoln University (the historically black college to which Barnes had, in the last year of his life, granted the very limited role of nominating four of the five Foundation trustees). But contrary to widespread misunderstanding, this capacity to nominate did not actually confer any real power on Lincoln. The university never owned any part of the Foundation: not its land, its buildings, *or* its collection, and it had absolutely no authority over the Barnes programs. The proposed expansion of the board of trustees from five to fifteen members consequently had zero material effect on Lincoln’s relationship with the Foundation.

Conspiracy theories are always much easier to invent than to disprove, but let me say that this particular theory could hardly have been further from the truth. The mayor, the governor, and many others were certainly enthusiastic about moving the Barnes. The three Philadelphia foundations—together with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Getty Trust (all of whom were asked for major financial help)—were each willing to contribute funds for *carefully defined individual projects and programs* to preserve and document the collection and the archives, while also undertaking strategic planning. But for understandable reasons, none would offer even short-term support to meet annual *operating* expenses in Merion, because there was no evidence at all that the Barnes would be able to sustain that level of funding into the future. There was no identifiable base of donors who could or would help the institution with major gifts.

Not only did the Barnes indenture of trust effectively preclude all forms of fundraising, but the local environment in Merion also stood

in the way. The area was residentially zoned, with large expensive houses where privacy and quietude were treasured above all. Any effort by the Barnes to generate income by increasing the number of visitors per week, or by expanding programs, was met by the neighbors with extreme apprehension bordering—as the presiding judge wrote in his final opinion—“on hysteria.” The Barnes was in court approximately 30 years of its relatively brief existence in Merion; and although a number of the legal cases were initiated by the Barnes itself, many suits were brought by local residents, or the township government, or the vigilant zoning board. In short, the Barnes was located in a place that allowed it no real flexibility to take any of the steps that might have helped it to improve either its quality as an educational institution, or its financial situation.

The lengthy proceedings that culminated in Judge Stanley Ott’s carefully considered decision to allow the Barnes to move to Philadelphia resulted in his comprehensive and eloquent December 2004 opinion (and I quote briefly):

Maintaining the *status quo* will neither generate excitement among potential benefactors, nor attract the all-crucial [major] donors to the cause. [Leading foundations] . . . have deemed the current situation to be unsalvageable; and [the chair of the Barnes board of trustees] has testified that the Foundation’s Board has approached all other potential saviors and been rebuffed.

Regarding options for increasing the income produced by day-to-day operations at Merion, no solid solutions surfaced. The dream of augmented admissions (with the attendant increases in shop sales and parking fees) was shown, during these hearings, to be as elusive as ever. . . .

[The clear obstacles to support have been] the restrictions imposed by the township and the [Foundation’s] indenture.

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Before concluding let me say some additional words about Albert Barnes’s extraordinary achievement. He entered the world of art and aesthetic theory when he was already in his 40s, and the five books he wrote were, at the time, by no means irrelevant. Although they are rarely if ever consulted now, they remain significant accomplishments. His venture into collecting modern art was audacious, given the ridicule to which such art was often subjected at the time. His grasp of the art scene—consulting endlessly with artists, dealers, and art critics in his effort to understand and then articulate the meaning of the works—was prodigious. And the path was not an easy one. In July 1914, he wrote to Leo Stein:



I have been reading and thinking . . . about art during the past three years . . . . It has become almost an obsession . . . . I have lived with my own . . . paintings as constant companions and objects of study . . . . I find I am constantly changing: paintings which interested me and which I fairly loved a year or even six months ago now leave me cold . . . because I think the personal message of the painter was either insincere or his presentation so bungling that it is not to be considered a work of art.

Barnes was a passionate student, and every work mattered to him. Paul Guillaume, one of the leading dealers of the time, captured the intensity of Barnes's commitment and his inexhaustible energy in a 1923 article:

Dr. Barnes has just left Paris. He has spent three weeks here, each hour not devoted to social calls, soirées, or official receptions, but rather as this extraordinary democratic, ardent, inexhaustible, unbeatable, charming, impulsive, generous, unique man [prefers to do]. He has seen everything shown by dealers, artists, patrons of art; he has bought, refused to buy, admired, criticized; he has pleased, displeased, made friends and made enemies.

Whatever the general atmospheric charms of Paris may have been in 1923, Barnes was clearly oblivious to them. Art was incessantly on his mind, and his formidable energy was combined with an excellent eye. As the famously discriminating dealer Vollard commented:

Mr. Barnes comes to see you. He gets you to show him twenty or thirty pictures. Unhesitatingly, as they pass before him, he picks out this one or that one. Then he goes away.

In this expeditious fashion, which only a taste as sure as his made possible, Mr. Barnes brought together [his] incomparable collection.

We can now *see* the fruits of Barnes's labors, all intact, installed as they were on the day of his unexpected death. Whatever his faults, Barnes was driven—in an almost heroic fashion—to create something extraordinary. He gave us the opportunity to confront incomparable works of art directly, and to experience them in ways that transcend the vicissitudes of everyday existence. As Barnes himself wrote:

When an artist has shown us a vision of things which profoundly stirs our emotions, he calls all our interests into harmonious play, which strips from material things all the accidents, irrelevancies, discrepancies with which they are usually encumbered. He has rebuilt the world according to his heart's desire, and [our] sense of union [with his vision] ceases to be illusory and becomes a realization of substantial fact.