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The Barnes Foundation, RIP

On the recent decision to move most of the Barnes Foundation's art collection to Philadelphia.

It is last-act time for the Barnes Foundation, the art school that the pharmaceutical magnate Albert C. Barnes founded in the 1920s in Merion, Pennsylvania, a plush suburb of Philadelphia. Last month, Judge Stanley Ott approved a request by the trustees of the Barnes Foundation to move most of the school's \$6-billion collection of art to downtown Philadelphia where it could be more effective fodder for tourists. In an editorial on the decision, *The New York Times* called Judge Ott's decision "an act of judicial common sense." In our view, it was an act of judicial usurpation, the final—or at any rate the latest—indignity for an institution that has struggled mightily since Barnes's death in 1951 to preserve its independence, curatorial as well as financial. The fact that the indignity might well have become inevitable—largely, we think, because the Barnes Foundation has been grossly mismanaged for more than a decade—only adds insult to the injury.

As long-time readers of *The New Criterion* know, we have several times had occasion to reflect on the tangled history of the Barnes Foundation (see, for example, Roger Kimball's "Betraying a Legacy: The Case of the Barnes Foundation" in our June 1993 issue). The story forms a cautionary tale, with two sets of morals: one cultural, the other practical or prudential.

The cultural moral has to do with the perils of individuality. The governing imperative? Conform. We live at a moment when art is more and more exploited as a commercial resource: a lever to boost "urban renewal" and enhance city coffers and social-cultural pretensions. What is wanted is art that appeals to and can be disseminated to as many people as possible. Hence, homogeneity is the order of the day. Every urban center must have its "arts complex," and every arts complex must be basically the same (apart, of course, from such incidentals as the contents of the collection). Restaurants, gift shops, tours for schoolchildren, parties and receptions and fund-raising events. "Access" is the code-word but "box-office receipts" names the real goal. Anything that opposes this force is dismissed as "elitist," "idiosyncratic," "out-of-touch," or just plain reactionary. Roberta Smith, a writer on art for *The New York Times*, epitomized the reigning sensibility in an article celebrating Judge Ott's decision. "Many have compared the Barnes relocation to dismantling the Frick Collection and moving it up the street to the Met," she wrote. "But who wouldn't enjoy seeing some of the Frick's great paintings—Bellini's St. Francis,

Vermeer's laughing girl—free of the trappings of Henry Clay Frick's robber-baron lifestyle?"

“R obber-baron lifestyle”? Let's see, would that be the magnificent building designed by Carrère & Hastings and John Russell Pope? Perhaps it is the sumptuous integration of art and domestic splendor that the Frick's curators have managed to preserve? Or maybe it is the thrilling intimacy that has made the Frick a favorite retreat for art lovers the world over? In any event, to answer Ms. Smith's question, we wouldn't. And neither would Albert Barnes. Barnes had over the years formulated a complex vision of art that stressed aesthetics on the one hand, and pedagogical or political possibility on the other. It was a vision that required concentration, leisure, and first-hand experience of works of art. Barnes believed that the power of art depended primarily on its *aesthetic* qualities—such things as line, color, form, and texture. Hence he arranged his collection to highlight formal, not chronological, geographical, or cultural continuities. He limited attendance both to protect his students and to enhance the experience of visitors. He eschewed wall labels and those little exercises in social history that most exhibitions today feature: the introductory sermonettes that tell viewers what to think about the artist or artists in question. Barnes wasn't interested in telling people what to think. He wanted to induce them to feel, to experience, *for themselves*.

In this context, it is worth noting that although Barnes was deeply interested in art, his first passion was education. Barnes looked to art and aesthetic experience as a means of educating the human spirit in modern democratic society. In the Indenture of Trust that created his foundation, Barnes noted that 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.

T he Barnes Foundation is often referred to as a “museum.” It is not—not yet, anyway. It is a school. True, it happens to own some 2,500 works of art, most of it of the highest quality. But the fact remains that Albert Barnes used his money and his property to start an educational institution, not an art museum. Indeed, he loathed the art establishment of his time and deliberately set out to create an institution that would adhere to other principles and pursue different ends. Among other things, he stipulated that the collection not be moved, that pictures not be lent, that the foundation not be used for “society functions commonly designated receptions, tea parties, dinners, banquets, dances, musicales, or similar affairs,” etc. In order to secure the character of his foundation, Barnes went to great lengths to formulate a bullet-proof indenture.

It turned out, however, that it was not lawyer-proof. The Barnes Foundation is an unusual institution at a time when only the usual will do. At least since the mid-1950s, there have been attempts to transform it into an art museum, to move it to Philadelphia, to merge it with the Philadelphia Museum of Art: anything but let it exist for the purpose that Albert Barnes intended. Some of the pressure came from Merion residents who didn't like the traffic the Barnes attracted. Some of it came from rival art collectors. Some of it was internal, the result of mismanagement, especially under the disastrous watch of Richard H. Glanton in the 1990s.

The reward for the Barnes's capitulation is \$150 million that the Pew Charitable Trusts and other foundations have pledged to raise in order to rescue the nearly bankrupt institution—on the condition that the Barnes Foundation move to Philadelphia and transform itself into an art museum. In other words, the Barnes Foundation will be “saved” if its current masters agree to violate the dearest wishes of its founder. Which brings us to the second, prudential, part of this admonitory tale. As Leslie Lenkowsky noted in a thoughtful piece in *The Wall Street Journal*, Judge Ott's decision “sends a cautionary signal not just to those who are collectors, but also to anyone who is considering making a carefully thought-out bequest.” One likely result is more legal meddling whenever the purposes of a donation are politically or socially or culturally unpopular. Another likely result, as Mr. Lenkowsky delicately put it, is “greater caution on the part of donors about making unusual or potentially controversial bequests.” In other words, *caveat donator*.

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