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## 'The Art of the Steal: The Untold Story of the Barnes Foundation'

by Christopher Knight

"The Art of the Steal: The Untold Story of the Barnes Foundation" is a riveting — and tragic — documentary film chronicling the gratuitous ruin of a school outside Philadelphia that houses an incomparable art collection. It's a classic story of destroying the village in order to save it.

Except this little saga comes with an unexpected twist: "Saving" the Barnes turns out to have been a sham, as the title's claim of artful theft implies. (Full disclosure: I was interviewed for the film and appear, uncompensated, in it.) That slowly evolving turn of events finally leaves a viewer slack-jawed and angry.

No doubt it's also central to the film's largely rapturous reception in recent weeks at film festivals in Toronto and New York. (It screens Wednesday night at the Mann 6 in Hollywood as part of AFI Fest; national release is slated for February.) You leave the theater energized but frustrated by the grim sense of needless waste, a dull ache roiling the pit of your stomach.

The Barnes Foundation is a school built more than 80 years ago by Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951), a cantankerous Philadelphia physician who became wealthy after developing a patent medicine. Modern art is the school's primary tool, while architect Paul Cret's specially designed building set in a 12-acre arboretum forms a unique container integral to the school's curriculum.

To build it Barnes assembled important examples of African sculpture, Navajo rugs, Pennsylvania Dutch furniture, decorative metalwork and more. These he displayed in distinctive arrangements with mostly Modern art.

The staggering art collection includes 69 paintings by Cézanne, 59 by Matisse, 46 by Picasso, 21 by Chaim Soutine, 18 by Henri Rousseau, 16 by Modigliani, 11 by Degas, seven by Van Gogh, six by Georges Seurat and four each by Manet and Monet. Some are among those iconic artists' greatest works.

The holdings in Renoir are uneven. But with 181 to choose from, there's more than enough Renoir to satisfy.

This holistic ensemble embodies an American philosophical tradition called democratic pragmatism, the defining intellectual movement between the Civil War and the Cold War. Begun by such philosophers as Charles S. Peirce and William James, then put into practice by the likes of Jane Addams, Alain Locke and John Dewey, who was Barnes' closest adviser, the progressive doctrine shaped virtually all our modern ideas of education, politics, civil rights law and religion.

The Barnes Foundation — pragmatism's singular artistic incarnation — is the most important cultural monument America produced in the first half of the 20th century.

“The Art of the Steal” lays out the foundation's complex but manageable administrative and financial problems that arose in the 1990s. The awful heart of the film, however, is the subsequent maneuvering to dislodge its valuable art collection, now estimated to be worth more than \$20 billion, and move it to a tourist destination five miles away in downtown Philadelphia. That plan, now underway, represents everything Barnes himself worked to avoid.

As the film unfolds, not one of the businessmen, politicians or power brokers engaged in “saving” this irreplaceable village has the slightest clue why the Barnes even matters. Focused instead on their own personal agendas, the pseudo-saviors emerge as a cast of venal characters — by turns unwitting in their ignorance and heinous in their calculation.

A layer of cowardice is added because most of them, with the noteworthy (if hapless) exception of Pennsylvania Gov. Edward G. Rendell, declined interview requests from director Don Argott and producer Sheena M. Joyce. Their silence loudly resonates.

Sadly, the loudest belongs to three local philanthropies. They used their vast wealth as a lever to pry the valuable art collection loose rather than keep the Barnes intact. The film shows how Pew Charitable Trusts President Rebecca Rimel even gave false testimony in a court hearing to achieve her goal.

Tacit opprobrium is heaped on two other potential players, mostly through their general absence from events. Missing in action were the press and most of the art profession.

Locally, the news pages of the Philadelphia Inquirer acted as official stenographer for establishment views, while its editorial page was chief cheerleader for the “steal.” Regionally, culture desks at the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal left developments largely unquestioned. Typical was a fawning 2007 Journal profile of Rimel, which allowed her to deny any direct role without asking about her court testimony.

Area artists and art museums were faced with the daunting, monolithic unanimity of their region's biggest cultural donors. Art critics individually complained, but nationally professional associations of museum directors, curators and college professors barely murmured. That left Barnes Foundation students and neighbors as slender reeds against a torrential wind.

“The Art of the Steal” relies on John Anderson's important 2003 book, “Art Held Hostage: The Battle Over the Barnes Collection,” as a sturdy guide. (Anderson is interviewed at length.) But the film emerges as a powerful indictment in its own right. It takes sides, as documentaries don't always do.

The film quotes Matisse, who described the Barnes as “the only sane place for art” that he saw during his 1930 U.S. sojourn. The filmmakers, forced to choose between a brilliant Modern artist and the closemouthed bureaucrats and provincial knuckleheads now engineering the ruin of the Barnes Foundation, know exactly whom to get behind.