

Main Line

The Art + Culture + Lifestyle Magazine

The Battle Rages On

April 1, 2010

By Lauren F. Friedman

With construction underway and a move to Philadelphia imminent, the relocation of The Barnes Foundation from its Main Line home of 85 years is angering opponents now more than ever. Is the decades-old battle truly “the biggest act of cultural vandalism since World War II” as a new documentary describes or the beginning of a new era?

At first blush, Latch’s Lane looks like any other Main Line side street. Thick, twisted branches of hundred-year-old trees shade the road, which climbs upward from Merion Botanical Park and ends at Old Lancaster Avenue a few blocks later. The houses are roomy, the driveways are winding, and the speed limit is a leisurely 25 miles per hour.

But something here is different: On lawn after neatly-manicured lawn, square black placards spell out the same message in bold white letters: THE BARNES BELONGS IN MERION. Does it?

For 85 years, Latch’s Lane has been home to The Barnes Foundation, widely recognized as one of the world’s best collections of Impressionist and post-Impressionist art. The imposing limestone mansion that counts 180 Renoirs, 69 Cezannes, and 44 Picassos among its treasures is nestled in a 12-acre arboretum and hidden from the road by tall, wrought-iron gates. Inside the Paul Cret-designed house, art that has been collectively valued at billions of dollars crowds the walls alongside hinges and tools of all shapes and sizes. Wooden stools are pushed into corners, and painted dressers sit under gilded frames. The overall effect is one of organized chaos and complete sensory overload.

It is unlike anywhere else in the world.

“You walk in the gate, and you go up the long driveway and across this beautiful lawn,” says Nancy Herman, who lives across the street. “You get a feeling of awe before you even get inside the building.”

Evelyn Yaari, a Bala Cynwyd resident, calls it “extraordinary. By the time I get to the last gallery room, I feel absolutely drunk.”

Herman and Yaari, both members of an organization called Friends of the Barnes, can easily rattle off reasons that the institution is remarkable as is. But in two years time, if all goes according to plan, the collection will move from its Latch’s Lane mansion to a brand new building on Philadelphia’s Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

For the Barnes leadership, this move is an exciting and necessary step forward. “The Barnes was always a place that had ambition and potential, but for various reasons, didn’t capitalize on that,” says Blake Bradford, the Foundation’s director of education. “Now we’ll be in a much better position to do so.”

The Friends of the Barnes and other opponents, however, see it quite differently. “It’s a tragedy,” says Herman. “The whole experience will be lost. More people will see it, but not one person will see it as intended.”

If the Barnes were just a house full of art, it might not inspire such heated conflict. But on this one point, everyone agrees: It’s much more than that.

No one can really understand the Barnes without understanding Dr. Albert Barnes himself. The prickly millionaire’s fairytale ascent from working-class Kensington boy to pharmaceutical entrepreneur goes a long way in explaining the iconoclastic nature of the institution that bears his name. The Foundation was based on Barnes’s vision and driven by his passion. He molded it according to meticulous specifications, and – almost 60 years after his death – his fingerprints are still all over it.

In 1928, a profile in the *New Yorker* labeled Barnes “De Medici in Merion,” and described his almost obsessive relationship with his collection. “When he can’t sleep, he puts on his dressing gown, and . . . studies his pictures,” A.H. Shaw wrote. “[He] sometimes spends hours arranging one to suit his taste.”

While the artists whose paintings Barnes acquired from all over Europe are now celebrated worldwide, at the time, their work was edgy and contemporary – a risky investment. In 1923, the still-growing collection was displayed at a special show at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, causing “a storm of protest,” Shaw wrote. One prominent Philadelphia doctor penned a public letter declaring that, in his medical opinion, “most of Dr. Barnes’ paintings were the work of insane artists.”

By most accounts, Barnes was badly bruised by his collection’s disastrous debut, and with his foundation’s mission, he resolutely snubbed both the cultured upper crust and the traditional approaches of its scholars and critics. The Foundation, Barnes decreed, would not be open to snobs who might turn their noses down at his life’s work. Instead, it would be an educational institution for the common man, teaching art appreciation and analysis to the masses in an extension of Barnes’s then-radical ideas about education and equality. Already, in his factory, men and women, white and black, worked side by side and broke for daily academic seminars led by Barnes himself. With his invitation-only admission policy, Barnes relished the opportunity to bar celebrities and socialites while welcoming plumbers and butchers with open arms.

Lenny Feinberg, a Lower Merion resident, was a student at the Barnes and is the executive producer of *The Art of the Steal*, a new documentary critical of the impending move. “[Barnes] built those galleries and bought those paintings to become an educational institution,” says Feinberg. “It’s not a museum – everything is there for a reason.”

The conflict that has turned Latch’s Lane into a battlefield is not really about what the mission of the Barnes should be. “The mission is clear,” says Executive Director Derek Gillman.

Before taking the reins at the Foundation in 2006, when the move was already underway, Gillman worked at Christie's, the British Museum, and PAFA, where he served as director for seven years. "The Barnes is an educational institution," he says, echoing Feinberg. "I think that's obvious."

Less obvious is what exactly this means for an institution beloved by many who disagree with its current trajectory. "We cannot be Barnes or Dewey, because they're both long dead," says Gillman. (John Dewey, a close personal friend of Dr. Barnes, was a celebrated philosopher who served as the Foundation's first director of education.) "What we have to think about is: What were the concerns that occupied them? ... How do you engage people in the visual arts? How do you make it accessible? How do you use the visual arts to engage people in life in general?" Gillman, unsurprisingly, exhibits a rich understanding of the founding values of the Barnes. He becomes visibly exasperated when his intentions are called into question. "There are all these big questions that they were asking, and all those questions still hold," he says. "It's just that the answers will be different in the 21st century than they were in the 20th."

The disagreement then, is not: What is the mission of the Barnes? But rather: What is the best way to execute it?

On this point, the simmering conflict comes to a rancorous boil. "Everyone has a different agenda," says Don Argott, director of The Art of the Steal. "It's a very polarizing issue, no matter what side of the fence you're on."

The only thing everyone can agree on is that their answer is one hundred percent right, and anyone who disagrees is one hundred percent wrong.

The roots of this battle can be traced to the night of July 24, 1951, when Albert Barnes ran a stop sign in Paoli. As John Anderson details in his 2003 book, *Art Held Hostage*, Barnes was hit by a trailer truck, thrown from his Packard convertible, and killed almost instantly. He was 78 years old and in excellent health.

Barnes was survived by his wife, Laura, but they'd had no children. His foundation – including his property, collection, and a substantial endowment – would be governed by the trust indenture and painstakingly specific bylaws he had drawn up with the assistance of one of Philadelphia's most prominent lawyers. Twenty-eight years after the Barnes Foundation's establishment, Barnes himself was still amending the indenture. But after his sudden and unexpected death, the Foundation was – in theory – to be governed in perpetuity by his most recent draft.

Barnes laid out the mission in no uncertain terms: "For... the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts; and for this purpose to erect, found and maintain, in the Township of Lower Merion ... an art gallery and other necessary buildings for the exhibition of works of ancient and modern art." He wanted the collection to remain exactly as he'd left it, stipulating that after his death, nothing could be added, loaned, sold, or even moved to a different spot on the wall. Artwork that was not part of the collection was never to be displayed with it, and "plain people" would always enjoy free access to all facilities and educational programs. He called the gallery and the arboretum together "integral parts of the educational resources," specifying further that "the identity of the [Foundation] as an educational institution" was "to be preserved for all time."

The indenture document also included instructions for what to do in the event of an organizational crisis. If administering the trust became impossible, Barnes wrote, the Foundation's resources should be "applied to an object as nearly within the scope herein indicated" as possible, "in connection with an existing and organized institution." But given the vast sum of money Barnes had bequeathed to the Foundation – \$76 million in 2008 dollars – he could not have imagined the perfect storm that would unfold in the decades after his death.

First, rampant financial mismanagement, led by Barnes's own short-sighted requirement that the endowment only be invested in bonds, meant that the growth of the Foundation's funds was quickly outpaced by inflation. Second, millions of dollars were squandered on a series of protracted legal battles – especially during the 1990s, when a zoning dispute over a parking lot famously escalated into a federal civil-rights suit. By 1999, the Barnes's new director faced a chilling reality: Though the collection was now worth billions, its endowment had zeroed out completely.

The 2004 court decision written by Judge Stanley Ott in response to the Foundation's petition for permission to move legally granted their request – provided the hang of the pictures was kept intact at the new location. The court had "determined that The Foundation was on the brink of financial collapse," and that, in such dire circumstances, the provision requiring its maintenance "in Merion ... was not sacrosanct." Judge Ott added that the decision only held true because "we were convinced the move to Philadelphia represented the least drastic modification of the indenture" necessary. Perhaps foreseeing the opposition's outcry, he acknowledged that: "It is... clear that The Foundation has no interest in reaching out for the olive branch extended by the Township, and absent this first step... we will never know if a mutually-agreeable solution could have been fashioned."

Opponents of the move allege that the Barnes's financial situation did not necessitate a move. In *The Art of the Steal*, journalist John Anderson goes so far as to call the planned move "a vast conspiracy," involving everyone from Governor Rendell to the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Lenfest Foundation, and the Annenberg Foundation. The state has pledged \$25 million, and the three foundations have together pledged to raise over \$100 million, to save the Barnes – if and only if it moves to Philadelphia. Some remain unconvinced. "They're trying to get away with something," alleges Feinberg.

Barnes students and members of the Friends of the Barnes see the vast sums of money directed toward the move as an inexcusable waste of scarce public and philanthropic funds. "You've already got this asset, so let's be good stewards of it," says Yaari, of Friends of the Barnes. "Let's make it work in Merion, not squander hundreds of millions of dollars trying to make a replica four and half miles away." Various members of the opposition have tried to appeal Judge Ott's decision, but they have no legal standing to do so, and their appeals have been summarily dismissed. "There are loads of creative ideas," Yaari insists, undeterred by the opposition's lack of judicial success. "They just require the will of people who have the power to make the change."

But the people who have that power want to look forward, not back. As far as they're concerned, the judge has made his decision, and it's long past time to just move ahead with the plan. "[The opposition] has completely ignored the process that the court went through in making this determination," says Brett Miller, the Foundation's general counsel. "It focuses on this grand conspiracy but doesn't focus on the legitimate legal process that was followed to reach a reasonable decision."

Gillman, the Foundation's director, doesn't even want to talk about it anymore. When he first became director, he met with the Friends of the Barnes to hear their complaints, but now construction at the new site is underway. He sees the move as a done deal – if only he could shift the conversation forward. "I'm not particularly concerned at the moment with the opposition to the move," he says, shrugging. "I'm thinking about what the Barnes is, and what it needs to be for the future, and the contribution that it should make... The things people are attracted to now will be continued."

Bradford, the Barnes's director of education, grew up in the Philadelphia area and is excited to help reinvent the Foundation for a new generation. "The Barnes has always been a mythical, slightly cultish place," he says, "but it wasn't a place that was engaged in Philadelphia or that you felt like you could participate in." He wants that to change.

For Yaari, big dreams about what the Barnes could be – in spite of and perhaps even in conflict with the wishes of its founder – are exactly the problem. "You get so excited by what you perceive as the potential gain that you lose sight of what you're possibly destroying," she says. "That's really the tragedy of it."

Whether the end result is a tragedy or triumph, the acrimonious clashes over the fate of the institution on Latch's Lane have certainly been in the spirit of its controversial founder. Dr. Albert Barnes was fiercely intelligent, ahead of his time, and every ounce as combative as the litigious confrontations he left in his wake might suggest. "With those on whom he could not impose his opinions," A. H. Shaw wrote, "he was apt to quarrel."