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“The Revenge of the Rich”

By Lars Jensen

(translation by Maureen Winterhagen)

The Barnes Foundation, the world’s most valuable private collection of art, is being moved to downtown Philadelphia. This will destroy the founder’s overall design concept.

The Benjamin Franklin Parkway is Philadelphia’s version of a prestigious boulevard. Stretching from the city centre to the highway, the ten-lane avenue passes by the Central Library and the Rodin Museum. At its far end is the Philadelphia Museum of Art, towering over the city like the palace of some impoverished king.

On a vacant block yawns a huge hole, the construction fence with its posters of Rodin, Picasso, Cézanne and Matisse announces what is going up here: the Art Collection of the Barnes Foundation will be moving here from Merion in 2011. “Philadelphia’s becoming a world-class art metropolis”, raves Mayor John Street and spells out the number of new workplaces that art tourism will net the ailing city: “5000 or more”. The Governor of Pennsylvania, Ed Rendell, says: “There was never a question that we’d pull the collection into town. It’s only here that millions of people can see it”.

The world’s most valuable art collection is moving from a weather-beaten old mansion at the edge of town to a new building downtown with bus parking, a restaurant and a museum shop. What sounds so harmless is in reality an act of vandalism which will completely destroy an overall design concept. The courts have decided: 181 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes, 59 Matisses, 46 Picassos, 18 Rousseaus and 500 other paintings by Monet and Cranach, Rembrandt and van Gogh, as well as 2000 works of art from all epochs and continents are to be moved to the Parkway.

The film “The Art of the Steal” describes how three powerful Philadelphian clans, together with clueless provincial politicians, have connived to gain control of the collection. But it’s too late for public outcry to have any effect. The first three rooms in Merion were cleared out some weeks ago. Even the interest group, the Friends of the Barnes, consisting of artists, gallery-owners and civil rights activists, has resigned. Christopher Knight, art reviewer from the “Los Angeles Times” describes what this loss means: “America without the Barnes Foundation is like Egypt without the pyramids”.

What exactly makes the Barnes Foundation such a precious heritage? Why have the three billionaire families, the Pews, the Lenfests and the Annenbergs been scheming for decades to get the collection into the neighborhood of the PMoA – which they own? The history of the move is the story of the Establishment’s posthumous revenge on a provocative figure, of financial interests and how they dominate a city, of the victory of commerce over art and culture.

From the Parkway it is 5 miles to Merion to an elegant street with residential homes from the late 19th Century. A gravel path leads to an old park and behind exotic trees stands the Beaux Arts mansion of the Barnes Foundation. A heavy door opens onto the first room and we gasp. The rooms are eight or nine meters high and Barnes covered the entire surface of every wall with art – according to his own ingenious composition. Modigliani's beside El Greco's, between them items of daily use like wrought-iron locks or Stone Age weapons. Van Gogh's are hung beside Titians and African jewelry. The message here is clear and powerful: art is life and life is art. Henri Matisse called the Barnes Foundation "the only place where one can enjoy and understand art in America" and donated his monumental mural "The Dance II".

Art and Life

Albert C. Barnes established this building in 1922 not as a private museum but as a school. Together with the philosopher, John Dewey, the architect Paul Cret and his wife, Laura, Barnes developed a revolutionary pedagogical concept. Students should be able to use the library and the garden to develop a holistic understanding of the human existence. The property was rarely open to the public until the 90's. But if a teacher needed "The Models" by Seurat or a Van Eyck, he could take them into the classroom.

In the Twenties, Barnes was considered a troublemaker by the *haute volée* of Philadelphia. He had made his fortune with an antiseptic for hospitals. In 1912 he met Gertrude Stein who introduced him to Picasso, Modigliani and de Chirico. Decades before the big museums started collecting the Impressionists, he had picked up hundreds – often for prices under \$100. When he first showed his collection in Philadelphia in 1921, the reviews were scathing. "Decadent" was the word one reviewer used. He was so shocked that he withdrew from the city and declared: "Philadelphia is an intellectual slum and its museum is a hotbed of prostitution."

The "Philadelphia Inquirer" was particularly hardnosed in its campaign against Barnes. Its owner, Moe Annenberg, an ultra-rightwing activist, denounced Barnes as "a friend to niggers and communists" because in his pharmaceutical company he gave his black workers the same rights as the whites. Barnes was the first to write essays about African-American painting and was the most important sponsor of the (historically) black Lincoln University.

Philadelphia's art patrons, the Pews, the Lenfests and the Annenbergs, despised Barnes. With their own art collections housed in the PMoA, their envy of Barnes increased in due proportion to the rise in value and significance of his collection over theirs.

When Barnes' lawyer and friend John Johnson died, they annexed his collection of Old Masters, claiming that Johnson's mansion, where a museum had been planned, was not fireproof. To this day Johnson's paintings represent the core of the PMoA. Barnes was pretty sure his collection was doomed to the same fate. In 1951 he died in a car accident at the age of 78. His will stated: "The collection may not be lent or sold or taken to another venue." His last will and testament was a diatribe against the commercialisation of art which he saw coming. Asked what he thought the collection might be worth, New York art dealer Richard Feigen replied: "...pedestrian Picassos and Cézannes rake in hundreds of millions of dollars at auction. The Barnes are all works of monumental importance, not owned by the Louvre or the Met (sic). Whether the collection is worth twenty or thirty

billion dollars or more is of no consequence.“ In one last affront to the establishment, Barnes made provisions for the Foundation to be signed over to Lincoln University. His assistant, Violette de Mazia, conducted the school as Barnes had wanted and, until her death in 1988, the Foundation was run along the lines he stipulated. Shortly thereafter Walter Annenberg, Moe's son, started the campaign which is going to end with the opening of “Barnes on the Parkway”. Annenberg was Nixon's Ambassador in London and Reagan's fundraiser. In return he was allowed to draft a law that Reagan pushed through: whoever endows a museum with an art collection can tax deduct the current value and not the buying-price. In Philadelphia Annenberg controlled both daily newspapers and, through his multi-billion dollar Foundation, his influence on the affairs of the city was immense. His newspapers denounced the Barnes Foundation, claiming that the directors were inept, the building decrepit, the works of art no longer safe. A new president was to save the Foundation: Richard Glanton. His first suggestion was to sell paintings to finance the renovation of the building. This caused a huge outcry, even in Philadelphia. His second idea was to send the Collection on a three-year tour of the world. Glanton shook hands with Lady Di and Edmund Stoiber, ever the gentleman with a pink hanky in his breast pocket.

Power and Intrigue

Somehow the proceeds dwindled away with no renovations being undertaken in Merion. At the same time Lincoln University was sliding into financial difficulties. The State of Pennsylvania bought from the University the right to expand the Supervisory Board from 10 to 15. The new members were hand-picked sympathizers of the Annenberg, Pew and Lenfest Foundations. Besides the prestige of controlling the Barnes Collection, these Foundations had another more significant motive: Participation in a museum project was proof of their non-profit status, meaning huge tax savings. For instance The Pew Foundation was able to save an annual \$200 million in taxes like this. In 2002 the Barnes Foundation – now lead by the people Barnes considered his enemies – announced that the Collection would be moving to Philadelphia. To date the city and the state have allocated \$170 Million for the project. For this sum they could have renovated Merion three times over. It doesn't really come as a surprise that the US media industries have not organized any resistance: hardly any of the institutions could do without donations from the three Foundations.

The “Barnes on the Parkway” is going to look like a cross between a multiplex cinema and an upside-down milk carton. The architects Williams/Tsien have attempted to reproduce the original galleries inside. Nicolai Ouroussoff, architectural reviewer for the *NY Times*, called the design the “best reason to leave the collection where it is”. The argument that more people will be able to see the masterpieces at the new site is flimsy: The Barnes Foundation in Merion offered 120,000 tickets annually and has never been sold out.

Walter Annenberg died in 2002. He bequeathed his collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He stipulated that his paintings were never to be sold, lent or donated.

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