

Moving the Barnes Foundation's Art Collection: Withering Criticism From Around the Country

In an era of big box museums, the Barnes is the ultimate jewel box. The financial problems of the Foundation are real, but the snatch-an-grab solution of relocating the collection to Philadelphia is no solution at all. It isn't salvation. It isn't even euthanasia. It's death by disembowelment."

- Richard Lacayo, *TIME's Looking Around* (blog)

(This is) what I feel obligated to say apropos of current proposals that aim to resolve the foundation's chronic financial and administrative woes by moving the collection to a new home downtown: Altering so much as a molecule of one of the greatest art installations I have ever seen would be an aesthetic crime.... The Barnes is a work of art in itself, more than the sum of its fabulous parts.... If there were other places like the Barnes, dispensing with it would not be tragic. But one minus one is zero.

- Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for *The New Yorker*

It can move but it won't be the Barnes anymore. Ripped from its context, it will be just another 'attraction' on Philadelphia's cultural midway. Thus passes the glory of the world. The Barnes will surrender its ineffable genius loci and the atmosphere of seclusion and contemplation that characterizes the art and horticultural school created by Albert C. Barnes. It will no longer be a refuge from art-world commercialization, but an intrinsic part of it.

- Edward J. Sozanski, art critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

As with Penn Station four decades ago, so with the Barnes Foundation today. Fifteen or 20 years down the road, people will look back on what was lost and scratch their heads: What could Philadelphia have been thinking?... In a deal that would warm the cockles of even the most heartless corporate raiders, an art collection worth billions of dollars has been snagged for just pennies on the dollar.... The Barnes Foundation is... important because of the enchanted stature of the Merion complex as a unique cultural monument. Once that's demolished, it cannot be willed back into being in a simulacrum on the Parkway.

- Christopher Knight, art critic for *The Los Angeles Times*

When power speaks, institutions are likely to crumble and lose. In this case, tourism trumped Albert Barnes' trust and the accumulated interests of Philadelphia's wealth and might and political power broke Albert Barnes' intention.

- Julian Bond, former NAACP Chairman,
responding to Judge Ott's decision permitting the move

The Barnes affair is one of the great scandals in American art museums, and it sets a disastrous precedent. If a will isn't sacrosanct under the law, what is? The Fricks, Barneses and Carnegies of the future are going to think very carefully before donating their masterpieces to our institutions and to our future generations. And that is a more dangerous situation than the public understands it to be.

-Thomas Freudenheim, The Smithsonian Institution, in *The National Law Journal*

It's not too late to decide to celebrate Barnes instead of making an end run around him in the name of the public good. If Philadelphia's culture brokers can see past the move-it-or-lose-it fallacy, they might realize that they had an opportunity to preserve an unforgettable aesthetic experience...

- Peter Linett, Curator, in *The Wall Street Journal*

What is happening here is an act of cultural vandalism... In bringing their suit, the trustees showed no interest in exploring alternative means of getting visitors to the suburban site, such as a shuttle system of the kind successfully used by the Getty in Los Angeles... Enter now the philanthropies. Like the project to build a new home for the collection on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, the trustees' suit was underwritten by a consortium of philanthropic institutions led by the Pew Charitable Trust. Given that Barnes's collection has been estimated to be worth about \$25 billion, the \$150 million amassed for the move can be regarded as one of the great garage sales of all time.

Barnes's little reliquary of a museum—designed by Paul Cret, sculpted by Jacques Lipchitz, and painted by Henri Matisse—was designed for the objects it contains. It was, one might say, an installation piece, on a grand scale. Dismantled into its constituent parts and removed from its context, it will offer something far diminished—an instance of more people getting to see less.

No one would think the world better off if the paintings of Lascaux were taken from their lonely caves and installed in the Louvre, or if the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were dropped and brought closer to the eye. Or perhaps the Pew Trust would....

.- Michael J. Lewis, *Commentary Magazine*

(T)here's no way an enlarged Barnes in downtown Philadelphia could come close to matching the serene setting of the original... (with its) bucolic surroundings, complete with arboretum and horticulture school, where Dr. Barnes ensconced his collection and art-education program.

Compounding the insult to the integrity of Dr. Barnes's creation is a bizarre scheme to replicate it. The proposed Philadelphia Barnes would harbor a suite of galleries configured just as they are in Merion. Matisse's famous mural, "La Danse," may well be reproduced, according to Barnes officials, rather than moved from the Merion space for which it was commissioned

There's certainly room for improvement in the Barnes's management, which has been exposed, through publicly released audits and court documents, as chronically chaotic. Better financial management would improve the foundation's chances with philanthropists, who have, according to the Barnes's own legal brief, "expressed an unwillingness to contribute to the foundation as long as a potential for conflicts and mismanagements remains in place...."

Barnes officials should also persuade the 32 individuals, foundations and corporations that have pledged \$100 million toward the proposed Philadelphia project to instead contribute the much smaller amount that would be needed to keep the Barnes in place.

- Lee Rosenbaum, *The New York Times*