

The Bulletin

“Barnes And O'Keeffe: The Lost Correspondence Revealed”

by Jim McCaffrey

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Merion Station - Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is well-known for being a great 20th-century American painter. Dr. Albert Barnes, we learn through his letters, had great respect for her but had trouble translating that respect to her paintings.

In correspondence found in the Barnes' archives, we learn he purchased two O'Keeffe paintings from her husband Alfred Stieglitz's New York gallery 291.

Eventually, Dr. Barnes just didn't think the paintings worked in his collection and sent them back to Mr. Stieglitz. Dr. Barnes literally decided he couldn't live with them.

This incident seems only to have added to the respect between Ms. O'Keeffe and Dr. Barnes. They remained friendly. She continued to visit the gallery on occasion. He paid a visit to her New Mexico home.

The foundation isn't sure what paintings Dr. Barnes purchased. He refers to them as "Still Life" and "Indian Girl" in his letters.

In a letter dated March 21, 1930, Dr. Barnes writes, "I was much amused at your recital of the 'surprise caused by our visit the other day.' But I doubt if you were as much surprised at anything as were my colleagues when I told them that I was going to buy the two pictures that I had just criticized adversely to them when you and Stieglitz were far enough away not to hear. Since our visit I have been busy telling them why I bought the pictures and why I think they are authentic expressions of yourself and, therefore, genuine art. Just what they are in the hierarchy of the artists they will live with, time alone will tell. Like every other new arrival in our gallery, they will survive or die on what they have in themselves.

"I think you will like the places I gave them on the walls. Neither one went well in the company I had planned for it before they came - the still life over the Picasso goats and the Indian girl alongside of a bright Rousseau. Much of the disorder was due to your silver frames, and another kind of serious disorder arose when I replaced the silver frames with gold ones like those on the companion pictures. So, I hung each in a place where the picture plus its silver frame pull together towards order - which is stacking the cards in your favor; that is, I let you maintain the identity that you yourself have established and did not insist on you meeting your hanging companions on the equal terms of gold frames for both of you.

"I am glad you've arrived in the new company. You'll have as fair a show as any artist ever had and the odds are in your favor. I hope to learn to like the pictures as much as I like you."

Some months later, Ms. O'Keeffe writes to Dr. Barnes to tell him she met his good friend, world-renowned educator John Dewey.

"I like him," she writes "like him enough to think I would like to know him better. He seems to me so much something that seems distinctly American. And that American quality is one of the things that gives me a lift off the earth - like a grand cold sunny day - or the country where the land is flat like the floor and there is nothing in any direction as far as you can see - and the sun comes up in the morning as though the world is going to burst.

"It is a simply daily event so no one sees it unless they are foolish like I am."

Ms. O'Keeffe tells Dr. Barnes, "I read some on your [book] Art in Painting this fall.

"Maybe trying to find out why you bought mine - as exactly as I could - Maybe trying to find out about you - and maybe - too - trying to place myself - for myself.

"I must say something else that I didn't intend to - I think I went out to meet Dewey ... because I wanted to know why he is interested in painting - also I wondered what sort your good friend would be."

Dr. Barnes writes again in December 1930. "I was much interested in the poetry and wonderings of your letter - it was like listening to you and enjoying the flavor and color of your picturesque and vivid self. I'm glad you liked Dewey - he's genuine, simple, honest. His interest in art is real and comes naturally from his curiosity to find out what are the springs in human nature that prompt its expression, whether in words, paint or the charm of human relationships."

He then explains his decision to purchase her work.

"I had looked at your work in various exhibitions for perhaps eight or ten years and never felt an impulse to possess it. A few years ago I met you and felt the charm and force of the art in your personality. It made me wonder if I had been blind in not seeing in your paintings the expressions of the qualities I felt were integral parts of your personality. Then I went to your show in New York last spring and was still unmoved by what I saw there. I thought that perhaps if I had some of the paintings where I could see them day after day, the result would be different. To make that experiment I bought two of the paintings and said to Stieglitz that it was an experiment. I told him that if after a fair trial, your pictures sang in tune with the paintings in the rest of our collection, they would have a permanent home. I told him also that if they did not fit in, I would put them in the cellar. To that remark Stieglitz replied, 'Don't put them in the discard - return them to me and I'll return your money.'

"I gave the two paintings as fair a trial as I ever gave to new comers in the collection. I tried them in every conceivable kind of company and I continued to do that for a period of six months. It did not turn out as I hoped and I took the pictures down early in September.

"I am deeply and sincerely sorry not only that I couldn't fit the pictures in the collection but that I should have to tell you about it. However, the fact that they are not hanging would come to your knowledge sooner or later and I think it had better come directly from me to you rather than in a roundabout way and, possibly, misrepresented.

"What it means when an experiment turns out this way is, of course, simply a record of a personal reaction - not a universal law that should bother the artist thus involved. It means merely that I did not see in your work what your words and demeanor convey to me; nor did the objective qualities of your work excite in me the feelings that the objective factors of other pictures, painted by persons whom I never met, stir in me. I have had the same experience with the work of other artists whom the world has recognized as important. It may perfectly well be that there are phases of art that I miss because of my own deficiencies.

"You like to come over here and you've never been without giving me a great pleasure and quite on a par with what the best of our pictures give me. I hope you will not let the experiment bar you from what I know great pictures mean to you and what your visits have meant to me."

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