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“To Move or Not to Move...”

That is the question, say passionate art lovers battling over the home of a beloved collection

By Eric Wills

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A mural by Henri Matisse, *La Danse*, crafted by the artist specifically for the Barnes, decorates three lunettes above the main gallery. *Credit: Raymond Patrick*

Ask Evelyn Yaari to describe the [Barnes Foundation](#) to someone who has never visited, and she'll say that's no easy task. "It's not like a museum. You walk through those gates onto the property, and you just know it's going to be something really different, really special."

Indeed, the Barnes, sited amid a 12-acre arboretum in Merion, Pa., houses the largest private collection of Post-Impressionist and early Modern art in the world, including 69 Cézannes, 181 Renoirs, and 46 Picassos—all hanging in a late Beaux-Arts-style building designed by the architect Paul Cret.

But Yaari worries about the future of this foundation, begun in 1922 by physician Albert Barnes to promote arts education. That's because the Barnes' directors plan to move the collection to a new site in Philadelphia, eight miles away, with construction scheduled to begin this fall.

"The institution was failing," says Derek Gillman, the Barnes' president. The organization's dire financial straits, he says, spurred the decision to leave, which has been supported by \$150 million in philanthropic donations. Others argue that relocating downtown would make the collection more accessible, while adding luster to the city's so-called Museum Row.

But to remove Albert Barnes' collection from the building designed specifically to house it, Yaari says, destroys the context that makes the place unique: "It puts at risk an enormously important cultural site, a place that people come to almost as a pilgrimage."

Yaari belongs to the Friends of the Barnes Foundation, a grassroots group formed in 2004 to fight the move. The friends mounted a legal challenge that a county court judge dismissed last year on grounds that the members didn't have standing to bring the case.

Yaari and the friends group, however, will continue the fight. She says that any issue with accessibility could be solved with shuttle service from Philadelphia, and that simply increasing the number of paying visitors could help solve the institution's financial woes.