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After 50 Years, the Barnes Way, Still



Michael Nagle for The New York Times
Harry Sefarbi, 90, artist and teacher, in his Philadelphia home.

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Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Harry Sefarbi at the Barnes Foundation, where paintings are installed according to its founder's exotic methodology.

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“After 50 Years, the Barnes Way, Still”

by Randy Kennedy

Harry Sefarbi turned 90 last month, but he appears not to have paid much attention.

“Listen, before you faint, I want you to come over here and take a look at one more Modigliani,” he said recently to a reporter whose art-appreciation muscles were beginning to weaken well into the third hour of a guided tour of the [Barnes Foundation](#) here, where Mr. Sefarbi, a painter, has taught for 54 years.

He often wears a patch over his left eye now, to remedy a double-vision problem. But you get the sense that Mr. Sefarbi has spent so many hours of his life looking at and thinking about the paintings that climb the walls of the Barnes — 181 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes, 59 Matisses — that he could describe each of them while blindfolded, like a Zen archer.

He leads the way to a Renoir landscape, whose luminescence he compares to peacock feathers. He describes how Cézanne’s oft-painted wife seems to be “screwed up into her hat” in one dark, torqued portrait. He admits that he is still deep into arguments, now more than half a century old, with many of the works, like a small Cézanne still life of a bottle, undulating cloth and fruit. “I stare at it every time I’m here,” he says, “and it stares back.”

Mr. Sefarbi is one of the last living links to the eccentric origins of the Barnes. In the late 1940s he attended classes presided over by the foundation’s charismatic founder, Albert C. Barnes, a patent-medicine millionaire, whom he remembers sitting in the main hall with a cigar, petting a lap dog as he surveyed his masterpieces. Barnes’s exotic “method” drove his installation of the works, with paintings piled almost atop one another amid a jumble of decorative metalwork, African sculpture and folk art, everything in heated, intimate conversation.

The doctrine Barnes expounded, one that has inspired cultish devotion, held that paintings tell you nearly everything you need to know in themselves, in their colors,

shapes and lines, and that with “fierce attentiveness,” as one art critic said, you can begin to understand artists’ visual language in a new way, a kind of aesthetic high rationalism shading into the mystical.

Now, as the foundation, in financial trouble, moves ever closer to leaving its odd home and transplanting its collection to a new building planned for downtown Philadelphia — a decision viewed as essential by some and apostasy by others — Mr. Sefarbi is often seen as more than just a veteran teacher of Barnes’s method. He has become a voluble, cane-carrying symbol of all the ethereal qualities that critics of the move fear may be lost in the foundation’s translation to a sleeker, more contemporary space.

His classes, taught every year in the vaulted main hall, are as much about a worldview as they are about paintings. And this view — exalting the virtues of concentration, dedication and deep insight into art accruing only over time — is largely antithetical to much of today’s quick-moving museum world, in which institutions are under pressure to expand, increase attendance, compete with popular entertainment and serve as anchors for urban development.

Mr. Sefarbi is not exactly a firebrand and does not relish being seen as an emblem for a cause. When he testified against the move in a court case in 2003 — arguing that it would be a “complete betrayal” of the institution and of Barnes, who stipulated before his death that no painting could be sold, loaned or even moved from its chosen place — he did so only after being subpoenaed. “I don’t talk about the political stuff,” he said.

But it takes little more than a half-hour in his company to learn how he feels: that the move will most likely mean the end of the foundation’s primary role as a teaching institution, as its founder intended, and its reincarnation as a high-profile museum, despite assurances from Barnes officials that teaching will remain central. “It will be like those courses at most museums,” Mr. Sefarbi said, with more disappointment than anger. “They’re just entertainment, more or less.”

Derek A. Gillman, who took over as the foundation’s executive director and president in the fall, said he deeply respected Mr. Sefarbi and was glad, in a way, that Mr. Sefarbi was worried. “Harry is right to express concern because there is a need for people to make sure that this is done right,” he said. But he added that 56 years after Barnes’s death, the institution needs to grow, even if that means beginning to unmoor itself from its founder’s educational dogma.

“There are plenty of people who are deeply allied to the Barnes method who will continue to teach it, but there will also be other approaches if this place is going to be a living institution,” Mr. Gillman said. He added that teaching would not simply be window dressing for a museum. “As we look forward to the new building,” he said, “everybody is committed to using the galleries as classrooms, as they are now.”



Tim Shaffer for The New York Times

A planned move to Philadelphia from Merion, Pa., has stirred some protest.



Tim Shaffer for The New York Times

The exterior of the Barnes Foundation, where Harry Sefarbi teaches and the galleries are used as classrooms.

Whether teachers like Mr. Sefarbi or his 80-year-old colleague, Barton Church, who began there in 1952, a year before Mr. Sefarbi did, will have a meaningful place in those classrooms is a question. (Both men have paintings on display in the Barnes that were bought by Barnes himself; Mr. Sefarbi’s, an impressionistic kitchen scene with a blazing red ketchup bottle at its center, hangs above a door on the second floor along with the Renoirs, Picassos and Soutines. “I felt like I had been touched by God,” Mr. Sefarbi said of the sale, in 1950, for \$100.)

At Mr. Sefarbi's rambling Victorian house west of downtown Philadelphia one recent morning, piano music could be heard coming from the open ground-floor windows. It stopped when the doorbell rang, and Mr. Sefarbi explained that he had been trying — "the operative word is trying" — to teach himself some Bach on the Steinway piano that dominates his living room. The rest of the room is filled with books and his paintings, one of which, a gauzy portrait of a large woman flanked by two small men in red neckties, Mr. Sefarbi sat beneath as he talked about how he first fell in love with painting and found the Barnes. Mr. Sefarbi is a native Philadelphian who grew up in Chester, "which is just a trolley ride from here" — he paused — "was a trolley ride from here."

He wanted to paint as early as high school but ended up as a grocery clerk to help his family. He served in the Army in World War II and, when he returned, began taking classes at the venerable Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. But every Tuesday he and other students would trek out to the Barnes to see the weirdly double- and triple-stacked modern masterpieces and catch glimpses of the mercurial man who had arranged them this way, grouped not by chronology or country but by their "plastic forms," the shapes and colors echoing and ricocheting across the walls, accentuated unexpectedly by an andiron or an American Indian rug.

"For me it was so intoxicating, I eventually stopped going to classes at the academy," he said. He began painting feverishly in a rented room on Race Street in Philadelphia. "I wanted to paint Byzantine art, basically," he said, smiling. "I wanted to paint Madonnas. But a Jew can't really paint Madonnas, so I started painting other things."

Even as an awe-struck acolyte of Barnes, he said, he was always wary of him and kept his distance. "Eventually he had a falling-out with everyone he ever knew," he said. But when Mr. Sefarbi decided to travel through Europe on his G.I. Bill money, he sat down first with Barnes, who encouraged him to return, possibly to teach. He did, hired by Violette de Mazia, Barnes's longtime assistant, who oversaw the foundation's educational mission for decades after the founder's death in a car crash in 1951.

Mr. Sefarbi's teaching, more than five decades down the road, might not hew to the Barnes gospel quite as faithfully as it used to. He throws in a little history and context now alongside the founder's everything's-in-the-frame mantra of "color, light, line and space." But Mr. Sefarbi said he is still "always on the trail of some idea, trying to make it interesting for myself."

“I don’t think two classes I’ve taught have ever been alike,” he said.

Complementing Barnes’s philosophy of art appreciation growing out of artists’ intentions, Mr. Sefarbi’s teaching has grown out of his own work as a painter, which he attends to daily in a cluttered, splattered studio that takes up the third floor of the house he shares with his wife of 52 years, Ruth.

“The light’s good today,” he announced that morning after making his way slowly but steadily up the stairs and surveying the four or five paintings, several of them family scenes, that he had in progress, sitting among stacks of other works and brush-filled Cento tomato cans.

When he is finished with a painting, he descends to his basement woodworking shop, where he makes the frame for it. Asked when he painted one particularly striking canvas over his fireplace, a segmented view of a park with elements of a predella along the bottom, he shrugged: “Who knows? It’s so hard to keep track anymore.”

Perhaps as much as his teaching, it is Mr. Sefarbi’s life — still burning with Walter Pater’s “hard, gemlike flame” for the beauty in the world — that has inspired his hundreds of students. David Poll, a Philadelphia cardiologist who met him and bought a painting from him a decade ago, took Mr. Sefarbi’s first-year course at the Barnes and then returned to take his second-year course twice (and twice more with Mr. Church). He tried to get into the second-year course a fifth time recently but was barred by foundation rules against serial course taking.

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“Each year proved as rewarding as the previous one because you built on it,” he said of Mr. Sefarbi’s teaching. “You began to see different things each year.” He recalled running into Mr. Sefarbi regularly at the Barnes, staring deeply into paintings while preparing for his courses.

“I mean, these are paintings he has lived with for 50 years, but he still goes every Friday to refresh them in his mind and figure out how he’s going to approach them in that class,” Dr. Poll said, adding: “I’m a cardiologist. How did I become so passionate about

this? It's because it kind of changes your life and makes you look at many things, not just art, in a different way."

Walking through the Barnes's imposing front doors one recent afternoon, Mr. Sefarbi was greeted by a longtime security guard. "Hey, Professor Sefarbi, how you doing, kid?" he said, grinning. "Can I have your autograph?"

Mr. Sefarbi relied on his cane and sought out the occasional bench, but it was often not easy to keep track of him as he forged from room to room and painting to painting, Rousseau to Renoir, [van Gogh](#) to Gauguin. He remembered clearly, he said, the years when he still had the freedom during classes to haul one of the masterpieces from its perch and carry it into another room, to juxtapose it with a painting he was talking about.

"Now that can't happen," he said. "It's all worth too much. Dr. Barnes and Miss de Mazia basically treated this place as if it were their living room, but the people who work here now are just caretakers."

His took his visitor by the arm and pointed to a small, brightly colored Renoir high on the wall, "Two Children Seated Among Flowers," from 1900. He used it to jump into a long, impassioned disquisition on the difference between what he called stated color and expressive color, which he tried to explain by singing a lyric from a song his mother taught him long ago:

"Your lips are saying no, but you're eyes say yes, yes, yes," he sang softly, adding: "That's the difference. Stated color is telling you something, but expressive color is just showing you."

He apologized. "I'm pounding your ear, I know," he said. "I'll stop talking now."
"But first," he added, "just come over here and look at this one last thing."