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## Art World Omertà

Why is a museum association sitting on the sidelines of a major debate?

by Eric Gibson

Barring any unforeseen developments, the final hearings on the fate of the Barnes Foundation are set to begin today. Judge Stanley Ott of the Orphans' Court of Montgomery County, Pa., has to rule on whether to let the Barnes move to center-city Philadelphia or remain in suburban Merion.

The Barnes is struggling to recover from a decade or more of mismanagement that has pushed it to the brink financially. Advocates of the move, proposed in 2002 by the Pew Charitable Trust, the Lenfest Foundation and the Annenberg Foundation, which would all oversee its execution, argue that this would both ensure the beleaguered institution's survival and funnel additional tourist dollars into the local economy.



Dr. Albert C. Barnes was an aesthetic philosopher as well as a collector. The early modern masterpieces by Matisse, Cezanne, Picasso and the like that form the core of the collection are salted with Old Master paintings, ancient art and other pre-modern works. The entire collection is installed in dense, nonchronological arrangements intended to underscore similarities and differences across artists, periods and regions, and so increase the visitor's understanding of art.

The Barnes isn't just a museum (technically, it isn't even that but an educational institution, since it offers a curriculum propagating Barnes's aesthetic philosophy). It isn't just an art collection, although it ranks as one of the greatest of its kind in America. It's a portrait of a man and his era, and as such is a monument to a unique moment in the history of American taste. And it is that because of the way Barnes himself set it up. It's hard to see how the Barnes's ineffable quality wouldn't be irrevocably altered, perhaps even destroyed, in any move.

The matter is before a court because the move requires breaking the trust with which Barnes, who died in 1951 at age 69, established the foundation: It stipulates that no part of it may be lent, sold or rearranged in any way. Which brings us to the deeper issue raised by the Barnes: donor intent. Museum directors and trustees are required to honor the letter and spirit of benefactors' wishes. Are there times when circumstances warrant overturning them? You might be able to justify moving the Barnes if doing so were the last resort. But the problem with this and just about every other rescue plan has been that the drastic step of breaking the trust has always been the *first* resort.

Understandably, given the unique nature of the Barnes, the depth of its crisis and the radical nature of the solution proposed for it, the move has generated a good deal of commentary. Except from the one corner of the art world that, given the issues at stake, you would have most expected to hear from: the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD). It has been utterly silent on the subject.

AAMD, comprising 175 directors of the major art museums in the country, large and small, is a professional oversight and advocacy organization. Its mission includes "establishing and maintaining the highest standards of professional practice" and "being a leader in shaping public discourse about the arts community and the role of art in society."

From time to time AAMD has taken a public position on an issue, most notably in the late 1990s when it convened a task force on art stolen by the Nazis; it subsequently put in place policies designed to identify and return any works looted from Holocaust victims that had inadvertently entered their collections, and to prevent any more coming in down the road. While the Barnes situation isn't on that order of magnitude, it is the next most important museum issue of our time. Yet AAMD has remained silent.

You might think this is because the Barnes itself is not a member and thus outside its purview. Yet AAMD did issue a statement last January expressing concern over a proposal to raise needed cash by selling parts of the collection in storage. This showed that the Barnes was at least on its radar screen. Why not, then, address the entire issue rather than one tiny part of it?

AAMD's silence is particularly puzzling because the issue of honoring a donor's wishes goes right to the heart of its members' professional responsibilities. Some are directors of "house museums" like the Barnes. Other members have rooms where objects are displayed as the donor had them in his or her home. And every single member of AAMD has, at one time or another, entered into an agreement with a donor whose terms they wouldn't dream of trying to overturn. Why then the silence on this issue when it comes to the Barnes Foundation?



One reason may be because it cuts rather close to home. One of AAMD's members is Anne d'Harnoncourt, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. As it happens, that institution is closely intertwined with the plan to move the Barnes: Not only are the Pew and Annenberg foundations among that museum's biggest benefactors, but H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, head of the Lenfest Foundation, is also chairman of its board. Moreover, if the Barnes moves to Ben Franklin Parkway as called for in the plan, then the museum can presumably expect to benefit from spillover visitation. The art world is a famously collegial place. Perhaps AAMD's other members are worried about rocking the boat.

But AAMD is mistaken if it thinks there's a safe haven in silence. By sitting on the sidelines in the Barnes debate, AAMD is gravely damaging its moral authority. You can't cherry-pick the issues you want to get involved in if you're an ethical watchdog.

AAMD may think moving the Barnes is a good idea. Or it may not. The problem is, we don't know. The French have a saying: "*Qui dit rien consent*"--he who says nothing agrees. Absent a clear pronouncement on the matter, the AAMD's silence is sending the message--present and future benefactors take note--that donor agreements can be torn up at will.

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