

March 3, 2007

*This is a note I received via e-mail from Robert Zaller, Professor of History, Drexel University in response to a question I asked about how to communicate the profound importance of preservation of the Barnes Foundation well beyond Merion and Philadelphia. His answer is well worth sharing. EY*

You are of course right that the preservation of the Barnes is not simply a local issue. None of us, I think, would have devoted the time and energy to it we have were that the case. Preservation as such always has a local basis; it is about maintaining something in a particular place. But the Barnes is not another covered bridge somewhere; it is an institution of world renown, and one of the world's great art repositories. It is also a unique entity, the confluence of one man's vision at a moment of our country's social, political, and cultural history, and his astonishing realization of it. The art, priceless as it is, is only a part of this. Moving the Barnes destroys history, which is why I have often likened it to moving Monticello to Washington--Monticello is not famous for works of art, but as the home of the man whose ideas shaped our country. Those ideas, certainly, exist independently of whether Monticello itself does, or where Jefferson's writing desk happens to be. But I think we all understand--so far--that the genius loci of a place where a great man has lived or great deeds have been done is part of the fabric of life that sustains us all. Barnes was not Jefferson, but he was a great man in his way, and the art he collected, a glory in itself, is inseparable from the vision he tried to embody in it and in the house and grounds that are an equally inseparable part of it. That vision was more than aesthetic; it was holistic, embracing a vision of democracy itself. The ultimately fascinating thing about Barnes is that, although in the narrower sense his theories worked to preclude our view of art as a social artifact, his collection as such was an enormous social statement, and his belief in the educative, even the redemptive power of art for "ordinary" men and women was an act of faith in the power of democracy itself. I believe that is what led John Dewey to his side. It is also what makes any attempt to remove the collection from its setting an act of desecration. I think, too, that Barnes' quarrel with the art establishment was based on the same grounds. It is not only that Philadelphia's philistine elite seems to have shared Hitler's belief in the "degeneracy" of modern art, but that they degraded art in a subtler and more insidious way, by reducing it to ornament and commodity. Whether or not Barnes intended to decommoify his art--that is, to negate its potential cash value by refusing to lend, sell, or even rehang anything in his core collection--his indenture of trust had that result. The Barnes collection is worth \$30 billion if

you calculate it at auction, but nothing at all in monetary terms if you abide by the terms of the trust. I think that at least part of what Barnes wanted to do was to make us look at the work of art itself, stripped of all extraneous associations and all calculations of interest; that is, he wanted us to step outside the cash nexus. That is really the worst thing about what the Barnes' would-be movers want to do, as well as the most transparently obvious. They want to recommodify the Barnes collection, so that when we look at a Cezanne or a Matisse we will see it in the gilded veils of its price tag--that is, that we will see money and not art, a cash cow hard at work. Of course, most art is intended for sale, and Barnes himself was a purchaser. In that sense, his project was utopian. But we all need utopias, or at least places of quiet contemplation where we can encounter great art for, dare I say it, its own sake. We are the better for such encounters; I cannot imagine my own life without them, and I cannot subtract the thousands of hours I have spent in such contemplation from my life without impoverishing it. Barnes wanted even more than that of his art, and if that is utopian it is so only in the sense that democracy itself is. This is what makes the Barnes such a special place: the penumbra of vision that haunts it. It is in a sense the best vision we as Americans can have of ourselves, a vision of the liberating, democratizing power of art itself. And it is the very antithesis of the culture of the moneychangers and the elitists who work every day in so many ways to destroy it.

Best,

Robert