

## Eakins, Barnes, and a Great City

by Evelyn Yaari and Sandra Gross Bressler, Ph.D.

The energetic campaign by arts and culture forces in Philadelphia has successfully redeemed Thomas Eakins' *The Gross Clinic*, preventing it from being moved to Bentonville, Arkansas, keeping it in its home a masterpiece with unique ties to the city. This scenario mirrors the potential transfer of another cultural asset: the planned move of the art collection of the Barnes Foundation from its home in Merion. But there is an important difference. In a self-serving interpretation of the meaning of cultural patrimony, the same forces that successfully flexed their considerable muscles in the cause of civic pride for Philadelphia have worked long and hard to wrest control and possession of the Barnes legacy. The players include The Annenberg Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Lenfest Foundation, Governor Rendell, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and others. Unlike the proud exercise that "saved" *The Gross Clinic*, the campaign to dismantle the Barnes is built on a foundation of distortion, disinformation, and unseemly political maneuvering.

In contrast to the Eakins painting, which will continue to exist intact wherever it lives, the world-renowned Barnes Foundation will be eviscerated if the art collection is moved. Much more than an art collection, the Barnes Foundation is a site-specific work of art unto itself, a unified whole which includes art and ethnographic collections, gallery building, arboretum, and educational programs. These inter-related parts reinforce and support one another, creating an aesthetic experience hailed around the world as unique. Moving the Barnes art collection would be the cultural equivalent of a "successful" surgery that leaves the patient dead. It would be like slicing Dr. Gross's image from the Eakins canvas and shipping it to Arkansas, while leaving the remainder of the painting in Philadelphia.

Powerful financial resources threatened *The Gross Clinic* and were required to redeem it. The Barnes Foundation also requires financial support, but the funds truly needed for it to thrive in Merion are utterly dwarfed by the private and public\* resources being employed to haul it to Philadelphia. In the Barnes case, the financial formula is bizarrely out of kilter, giving the lie to the oft-mentioned rationale of MONEY as the justification for the move to a site only five miles

away. It will cost at minimum **ten times more** to move the Barnes art collection than to leave it where it belongs. Beyond the initial pledges of support of \$150,000,000 for the move, **it has been recently uncovered that over \$100,000,000 of state taxpayer funds was allocated for the Philadelphia project, two years prior to the Court decision permitting the move.\***

Beyond the finances, there is the question of a honoring a person's bequest. Eakins' painting was purchased by Jefferson University alumni and for generations it has been assumed that the work would remain in Philadelphia. In contrast, Albert Barnes created his foundation in Merion with the stated intention that the entire foundation—collection, gallery and grounds—remain there *in perpetuity*. The words *in perpetuity* normally ring of hallowed legacy, but they ring hollow with the planned treatment of Albert Barnes' generous gift to future generations. The plan to extract the artwork from Merion dishonors Barnes' legacy in a particularly painful manner, for Barnes vehemently and famously eschewed the Philadelphia art establishment.

Let's not be hypocritical. The close call of *The Gross Clinic* episode has raised important issues that also apply to the Barnes Foundation; among them cultural meaning, donor intent, the public interest, and the influence of money on our cultural life. The fact is, financial and political resources can trump cultural capital if not vigorously tempered by full and open public debate. It is time for an honest acknowledgement of the true cultural patrimony that is the Barnes and an open examination and assessment of the plan to dismantle it.

Great cities celebrate and protect their cultural heritage. Rather than move the Barnes art collection to Philadelphia, let a shuttle bus move visitors from Philadelphia to the Barnes. On the return trip, they would see an exquisite panorama of a truly great city, a generous city that acts wisely and honorably with the region's artistic legacies.

\*Pennsylvania Senate Bill 1213 containing an appropriation for \$100 million for "design and construction of a Museum facility to house the Barnes Art collection." passed in 2002. This was two years before the Orphan's Court gave permission for the art collection to move to Philadelphia. The existence of that state appropriation was not known to the Court at the time of its ruling.

The authors are members of Friends of the Barnes Foundation. For further information, contact Friends of the Barnes Foundation at [barnesfriends@comcast.net](mailto:barnesfriends@comcast.net) or [www.barnesfriends.org](http://www.barnesfriends.org)