

Barnes Forum Statement

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Lord Elgin took the Elgin Marbles from Greece. The Nazis looted art from all over Europe. Now the Pew Charitable Trusts and their co-conspirators are trying to destroy the Barnes Foundation, one of the great collections of post-Impressionist and early modern art in the world. It is the greatest act of cultural vandalism since World War II, and it is happening to us, right now and in our community. It is our duty to stop it. It is the duty of our political representatives to assist us.

No issue of comparable importance has ever faced Montgomery County. The Barnes Foundation is the crown jewel of our community, its most precious patrimony. It is our greatest pride and distinction, the landmark that draws visitors from all over the world and by which we are known to the world. It was given to us in perpetuity to enjoy and to protect. Future generations will judge how we discharge that responsibility, no less than they will the carpetbaggers who have come to steal it from us.

The courts have given permission for this theft. The governor has blessed it, and wants to tax us too to pay for the looting of our own treasure. The mayor of Philadelphia stands by to applaud. And the rest of the world, including the conscience of the art community, stands by appalled.

Governor Rendell, shame on you. Mayor Street, shame on you. Judge Ott, shame on you. But shame on the thieves themselves above all. Shame on Rebecca Rimel. Shame on the Pew Charitable Trusts, so-called. Shame on the Annenberg Foundation,

whose founder spent fifty years trying to break the Barnes Indenture but deeded his own collection of art to another city. Shame on the Lenfest Foundation and on Gerry Lenfest, who schemes with the rest to bring the Barnes collection under the effective if not the actual control of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which he himself heads. Shame to those in the arts community who know better but, cowed by the Pew and its millions, dare not speak. But thanks and honor to those who have raised their voices in protest, to people like Ed Sozanski in *The Inquirer*, to Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*, to Christopher Knight in *The Los Angeles Times*, to Richard Feigen, and to Tom Freudenheim, who has come to be with us tonight. Thanks to those voices that have been raised in the political community, and to those whose voices have promised their support and from whom we wait to hear. Thanks to all of you, for coming here tonight and lending us your voice and support on behalf of our community, on behalf of the Barnes Foundation itself, and on behalf of preserving one of the great historical and cultural sites in America, a treasure no less dear to this country than Mount Vernon and Monticello, and no more to be dismantled and commercialized for the sake of a few extra tourist dollars than they.

Let us understand what the Barnes Foundation is, and what it represents. It is not merely a collection of great art in a pretty place. The Foundation building itself is a masterpiece of American architecture, planned from its inception and down to its last detail to house its collection. The garden and arboretum that surround it, the result of no less careful planning and integrated design, was the product of years of work, and contains thousands of rare species. It was created to complement the collection, and extend the artistic values it represents. The curriculum of its educational program, for

which it exists, was created in collaboration with such figures as John Dewey, America's greatest educational philosopher, and taught by such men as Bertrand Russell, the foremost English philosopher of modern times. It has been visited by Henri Matisse himself, who declared it the only civilized place for displaying art in America, and created a site-specific work of art for it, as did other of the foremost figures in twentieth-century art. It is a place where the some of the most important traditions and movements of modern American culture--Pragmatism, Progressivism, and the movement for racial and social equality--have intersected, and have created the unique artifact that is the Barnes Foundation in its totality and richness; not only a work of art in itself, not only, in the words of Peter Schjeldahl, one of the great art installations in the world, but a place in which the history of our country is deeply embedded and expressed, no less than in our country's other great monuments. It is an unspeakable act of desecration to think of breaking it up. It is, as I have said, an act of vandalism, of the profoundest cultural barbarism.

If the Barnes Foundation were in deep financial trouble, as is claimed, then it would be the responsibility of the state, of the art world, of the philanthropic community, and of each of us, to support and sustain it. It is not. I cannot say this too emphatically, because this and this alone is the pretext for destroying it. It is not. The Foundation's representatives, with what reckless and contemptible disregard for the truth I leave you to judge, came into court claiming to run an annual operating deficit of \$2.5 million. The actual figure, as attested by audit, was \$1.0-1.2 million; but, instead of throwing the Trustee petition out on the spot, Judge Ott of the Orphans' Court permitted it to continue. Even this far lower figure could be significantly reduced by simply admitting visitors

permitted under the current attendance cap and charging the full admission already authorized. It would be entirely eliminated by the proposals we have made, endorsed by the Lower Merion Township Commission, for raising the attendance limits to over 100,000 and opening the Foundation to visitors during the summer months. The Foundation has been repeatedly invited to apply for a variance to raise these limits; it has refused to do so, or even to acknowledge the offer. It is clear that those who currently control it have no interest in closing the operating deficit. Rather, the reverse is true: they wish only to perpetuate it in order to justify the move, which would otherwise be as bereft of legal foundation as it is of aesthetic, moral, and historical ones. They *must* sustain the deficit, in short, or see the whole rationale for their scheme collapse.

There is one other lie that has been perpetuated in the course of this heist that must be exposed and refuted for good and all. That is the false and baseless claim that the Barnes' neighbors have "fought" with it, and do not wish it to remain. The exact opposite is true. It is the Foundation that brought suit against the neighbors ten years ago on a scurrilous and disgraceful charge of racism that was intended, I believe, to pave the way for the Barnes' move, and was promptly and justly thrown out of court. In fact, the residents of North Latch's Lane have been in the forefront of the move to *keep* the Barnes in Merion, as the statement signed by virtually all of them and presented here tonight attests. Furthermore: by the term "neighbors," all the residents of Lower Merion and Montgomery County have been impugned. The world has been told that we are indifferent to our cultural heritage, and therefore that it is well removed from our trust and care. Like it or not, it is our good name that is under assault. By deliberately restricting attendance and making the Barnes as difficult as possible of access to the

public, those who now administer it not only perpetuate their spurious deficit; they perpetuate as well the big lie about the Barnes' neighbors--about all of us. They don't have to repeat it--they dare not, for judgment has been given against them in open court, and costs assessed that have yet to be paid--but by their conduct they continue to imply that they live in a sea of hostility. Our task, therefore, is not only to save our most precious heritage. It is also to redeem our good name.

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