

This essay was originally published in The Main Line Times, Ardmore, Pennsylvania.

The Barnes Files

A Grateful Student Hopes for Preservation of The Barnes

By Michelle Osborn

I'm a graduate of Smith College, I learned Spanish at the University of Madrid, I studied business at Columbia University, and yet the most exciting educational experience of my long life was at the Barnes Foundation in Merion, PA.

By the middle of the last century, after living in Europe for four years and visiting many museums, I had become curious about what made something "art". One day, after we had moved to a Philadelphia suburb, I gave a lift to a college student who talked about the Foundation's art education.

I quickly visited the Foundation, where I was overwhelmed by the richness and variety of Dr. Albert C. Barnes' collection of Impressionist, post-Impressionist and African art, Pennsylvania Dutch chests, ironwork and much more. I applied to take the two-year art-appreciation course. By then (1959) Dr. Barnes had died in an automobile accident, but Violette de Mazia, co-author of his books on painting, was alive and teaching the first year.

She was a brilliant teacher. "Miss de Mazia has a markedly girlish quality, especially when she laughs. She speaks with a heavy French accent, but she has made of the English language a personal instrument of the most wonderful clarity and precision," Gil Cantor describes her.

Cantor's book, *Reality vs. Myth*, was written after Walter Annenberg, who then owned *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the Pennsylvania attorney general had filed to increase public access to the Barnes Foundation and to oust four out of five of its trustees.

The second year was taught by Harry Sefarbi, an equally brilliant teacher and a creative painter, who is still teaching at the Foundation. Dr. Barnes bought and hung one of his student paintings.

Half a century later, the Annenberg Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lenfest Foundation have at this moment been given the legal go-ahead to move this unique collection from the home Dr. Barnes had built to enshrine it in Montgomery County to a place in Philadelphia -- no more than five miles away.

The purpose: to lure more tourist dollars to the city. The cost: \$200 million and rising.

Though it was scorned in the early 20th century, Barnes' collection of art now is now acclaimed and valued in the billions. Even Chaim Soutine, a once-reviled painter whom Dr. Barnes "discovered," is seen as a major painter. But, as with Caesar, "the evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones."

Dr. Barnes believed that appreciation of works of art "can no more be absorbed by aimless wandering in galleries than can surgery be learned by casual visits to a hospital." (Foundation brochure) Tourists are scarcely going to engage in the "systematic study" Dr. Barnes prescribed.

Learning to see is the goal of the Foundation's educational program. Every picture and ironwork in the Foundation is hung in such a way as to create a pyramidal "wall picture" that helps the viewer learn to see.

Barnes insulted scores of people in his lifetime, and Annenberg was probably the most dangerous of them. His *Inquirer's* campaign against the Foundation continued for more than ten years in the middle of the last century. And the Annenberg Foundation continues today to work to overthrow Dr. Barnes' purpose.

I can only pray that the collection in its magnificent limestone building -- designed by Paul Cret, enhanced by Jacques Lipschitz carvings and home to a great Matisse mural -- is miraculously preserved as is, within its marvellous grounds. And that Dr. Barnes' educational philosophy, which John Dewey so esteemed, will continue to be taught in the home Dr. Barnes provided for it -- not torn apart for the sake of the tourist dollar.

--Michelle Osborn

Michelle Osborn lives in Haverford.