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Philadelphia Story

"Art Held Hostage" by John Anderson.

By Eric Gibson

At his death in 1917, powerhouse Philadelphia lawyer John G. Johnson left his home and vast collection of Renaissance art to his hometown. It was the kind of big-boned philanthropic gesture that has defined American cultural life: Private treasures are conveyed to the public--think of the art collections of Isabella Stewart Gardner and Duncan Phillips--and the donors expect little in return. They ask only that their testamentary wishes be honored and that the institutions they have built be preserved as they left them.

You can still visit the Gardner Museum in Boston and the Phillips Collection in Washington. Not so the Johnson collection. Within 20 years of his death, the Johnson house had been demolished and the collection moved to what was then called the Pennsylvania Museum of Art. The museum's director had gone to court to break Johnson's trust agreement and to take over the collection. "Prodded by many of the city's most powerful leaders, the judge granted the petition," writes John Anderson in "Art Held Hostage" (Norton, 237 pages, \$29.95). "It was a crime--even if it was technically legal."

History is now poised to repeat itself. For almost eight decades, the Barnes Foundation, outside Philadelphia, has housed the superb collection of Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951). Art lovers have long visited the suburb of Merion to see, among much else, his Renoirs, Matisses and Cezannes--arranged crowdedly on the walls of the small, stripped-down classical building designed by Paul Cret.

But in recent years, the Barnes collection has been in trouble, its fate uncertain, its coffers drained by legal battles and mismanagement. Mr. Anderson's book, a chronicle of chaos, contains one mind-boggling revelation after another. The biggest is the suggestion, implied by the evidence Mr. Anderson has gathered, that the foundation's current plight has left the Barnes ripe for a Johnson-style "legal theft." And by the same group: Philadelphia's cultural and political elite.

Alfred Barnes grew up poor but made a fortune with a pediatric antibiotic called Argyrol. Buying art between the wars, he amassed a great private collection of late-19th and early-20th century European modern masterpieces. The Barnes Foundation opened in 1925 primarily as an art school, its paintings serving as adjuncts to the textbooks that Barnes himself wrote. The public was admitted only one or two days each week and then in small numbers.

Barnes himself, souring early on the Philadelphia art establishment, drew up a detailed indenture, or trust document, to protect his collection after his death. Among its provisions: The paintings could not be lent, sold or rearranged. (Their floor-to-ceiling, nonchronological hanging is central to Barnes's ideas about the comparative, purely formal properties of art.) Shortly before he died, he gave nearby

Lincoln University, a historically black college, the authority to nominate replacement trustees as the original board members died or retired--with an eye toward the university eventually taking full control of the foundation.

From the first something about the Barnes Foundation got up the noses of the city's art elite, making it a target for attacks. The late Walter H. Annenberg, for example, bore an inexplicable animus. A mere seven months after Barnes's death, he successfully filed suit for greater public access. But the greatest damage may have come from within. Mr. Anderson's account turns on the events following the 1990 election of Richard H. Glanton, Lincoln's general counsel, as president of the board.

Determined to raise the profile of the Barnes--and concerned about the condition of the building housing the collection--Mr. Glanton and his board immediately worked to loosen the indenture's strictures. The hope was to raise money for refurbishment and to run the foundation with a free hand--free, that is, of Barnes's posthumous control. One of the board's principal strategies, it often seemed, was to file lawsuit after lawsuit and to intimidate opponents by shamelessly playing the race card.

The board initially proposed selling off some paintings. But a public outcry made it pull back. It decided to tour the cream of the collection instead, in 1993, netting \$16 million, and the renovated Barnes re-opened in 1995 to wide acclaim. But then the worm turned. Mr. Glanton went to court once too often, filing a civil-rights complaint accusing the foundation's suburban neighbors of racism when they opposed plans for a parking lot. The board would eventually lose this battle and the neighbors countersued. Litigation costs and overhead gradually whittled a \$20 million endowment down to nothing. By 2000, the Barnes was broke.

Much of this story has been already told in the press. The importance of Mr. Anderson's book lies in his extensive research and reporting. He shows that things at the Barnes were far worse than anyone knew.

According to Mr. Anderson, Mr. Glanton saw the Barnes presidency as a springboard to national political office. He was encouraged in this view by none other than Walter Annenberg. (Apparently, the idea to sell paintings had been Annenberg's.) In "Art Held Hostage," Mr. Glanton comes through as a kind of boardroom Borgia: pushing restive trustees out while bullying and manipulating those who remained. Cronyism was the order of the day. Mr. Glanton's legal business or his political prospects, says Mr. Anderson, guided major decisions about personnel, contracts and legal counsel.

Mr. Glanton was stripped of the board presidency in 1998 by a battle-weary board, and last fall a knight on horseback appeared. Local philanthropies, chiefly the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Lenfest Foundation and the Annenberg Foundation, pledged to help raise \$150 million to guarantee the Barnes's future.

But beware of Philadelphians bearing gifts. The deal would require that the Barnes move to downtown Philadelphia. What is more, the Pew and Lenfest foundations would control the board, dealing Lincoln out of the picture permanently. City officials like the idea of moving the Barnes because of the tourist dollars it will supposedly pull in. The location in mind is Benjamin Franklin Parkway, which just happens to be where the Philadelphia Museum of Art is to be found. What a coincidence.

Mr. Anderson notes that H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, head of the eponymous foundation, is also chairman of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. All three of the Barnes-interested foundations are major donors to the museum. And that's just the beginning of the web of influence surrounding this proposed deal. Reading about it, one finds it hard not to conclude that the fix is in: Sooner or later, Albert Barnes's paintings will be keeping company with John G. Johnson's.

Is that so bad? Yes, indeed it is. Albert Barnes brought great paintings together by consulting his taste and his sometimes idiosyncratic ideas about art. He opened his collection to the public in a spirit of goodwill and pedagogy. With his indenture, he signed a kind of contract with the future, a contract that made the collection visible to anyone who cared to travel to Merion to see it.

With this "generous" proposal from Philadelphia's new patricians, Barnes's ideas, the inviolability of his collection, the rules that governed its integrity and pedagogical logic--all will be destroyed. If this happens, future benefactors in all walks of life may find themselves asking whether, after they are gone, their own bequests will meet a similar fate. And they will be right to.

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