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UNTOUCHABLE; The **Barnes Foundation** and its fate, by PETER SCHJELDAHL

Last month, I visited the **Barnes Foundation** for the first time. This is an embarrassing admission for a veteran art critic, but it relieves my sour conscience at having sometimes let people assume that, of course, I knew the Barnes—I just had remarkably little to say about it. The place's awkward location out on Philadelphia's Main Line, in Lower Merion Township; its admission-by-application-only policy; and, not least, its crabby, cultish aura, generated by the strange Dr. Albert Barnes and maintained since his death, in 1951—these factors enfeebled my resolution to go there. Now they give me a compassionate pause in what I feel obliged to say apropos of current proposals that aim to resolve the foundation's chronic financial and administrative woes by moving the collection to a new home downtown: Altering so much as a molecule of one of the greatest art installations I have ever seen would be an aesthetic crime. It would also give hosts of my fellow art lovers access to treasures that they might otherwise never see. And it's not as if aesthetic crimes don't happen all the time. Life goes on. But something extraordinary would be lost in the event.

Thousands of wonderful objects fill a graceful chateau that was finished in 1925. Among them, hundreds of School of Paris modern paintings and a smattering of Old Masters and American moderns are massed on walls covered in warm tan burlap, labelled only with the artists' names. The pictures are interspersed with items of skilled metalwork (hinges, lock plates, utensils). Antique furniture, African sculpture, Pennsylvania folk art, Egyptian and Greek antiquities, and Southwest Indian rugs and ceramics and jewelry cluster throughout. There are enough andirons to outfit an andiron museum. The over-all level of connoisseurship is sublime, though riddled with idiosyncrasies, such as a gluttonous avidity for Renoirs—a hundred and eighty-one, many of them small, perfunctory daubs. If Rembrandtesque chiaroscuro suggests brown soup, Renoiresque chroma is orange juice. Its fruity effulgence suffuses the Barnes.

Barnes was a poor boy who became a patent-medicine millionaire. He was introduced to art by a school friend, the Ashcan realist painter William Glackens. Barnes's taste was sensual, with a special tilt toward randy nudes. (There's a startling one by van Gogh, of a swarthy prostitute nestled in what looks like an explosion of swan feathers.) He thought well of himself and ill of others, notably those in Philadelphia high society whose ideas—or aversion to ideas—opposed his own. He took a paternalistic interest in "plain people," as he called them. He left control of the foundation's board to Lincoln University, a local, historically African-American institution, and the collection's fate now rests with a county judge, who will decide on the board's petition to facilitate a move. Legal approval would release a flood of money: a hundred and fifty million dollars toward costs and an endowment for the Barnes, to be raised by the Lenfest and Annenberg foundations and the Pew Charitable Trusts. It would also break Barnes's original stipulation, which forbids moving any of the foundation's pieces and asserts that the foundation is not a museum but a school, dedicated to furthering his philosophy of art appreciation. That philosophy, derived from pragmatism, emphasizes close study of artists' decisions and their intellectual and emotional import, in line with the book "Art as Experience," by Barnes's friend and supporter John Dewey. Barnes's own prose, in books on Renoir, Cezanne, and Matisse, is, like Dewey's, clearly written, firmly reasoned, and numbingly dull.

The weirdness and the glory of the Barnes come down to the same thing: a relentlessly pedagogical intention behind the placement of everything. The lessons are rarely obvious. Most have to do with contrasts and comparisons of composition, line, color, texture, and other formal qualities. Some seem trivial (the rhyming of a teapot spout with the angle of a piece of driftwood in a Gauguin), if not crudely jokey (two unusually wide wooden chairs beneath two massive Renoir nudes). The particulars of Barnes's thinking count for far less, in any case, than their subliminal effect: a pressure of fierce attentiveness, which gives mysterious order to arrangements that appear chaotic at first glance. Paintings complement or provoke one

another. Inferior works defer to superior ones, which respond with noblesse oblige. Each work contributes according to its means and is indulged according to its needs. At times, one feels presented with an overwhelming theorem. I think of the lineup on one wall of a Redon, a Veronese, a van Gogh, a Tintoretto, a Rousseau, a Courbet, another Tintoretto, a Soutine, and a Renoir. Scanning this array as if it were a rune, I felt momentarily possessed of a secret that might save the world, on the impossible condition that I could understand it.

The Barnes is immersive. An aesthetic rapture descends when you walk through the front door and reigns uninterrupted until you leave. This is exhausting, of course, but far less so than the tenor of a normal museum, which groups works by adventitious categories of period and style. Continually stopping and re-starting our contemplation in museums, from work to work and department to department, we wear out pretty swiftly. Not so at the Barnes, where the pre-considered, pre-loved character of the exhibits—a sort of spiritual cruise control—enables steady enjoyment. If the installation has a weakness, it is, ironically, in regard to education. The plodding but conceptually structured organization of regular museum collections serves learning. Using the Barnes for introductory teaching is like starting a basic arithmetic course with calculus; it's more apt to daunt naive minds than to develop them.

Matisse's "Le Bonheur de Vivre" (1906), the single most consequential modern painting before "Les Femmes d'Alger" (which is often considered to be Picasso's competitive response to it), hangs in a staircase landing, as if it were nothing much. In truth, it's a thunderclap of audacities, each shattering some conventional expectation. If you haven't seen it in person, you have no idea. (Until last month, I had no idea.) You may arrive on the second floor a somewhat different person than you were on the first. At that point, you confront from a balcony another Matisse—the great mural "La Danse" (1932-33), which Barnes commissioned—and understand the odd liveliness of its schematic, cavorting nudes as you saw them from the floor of the great hall below. Matisse painted shadows that pop the figures forward from their abstractly patterned ground. Turning to your left, on the balcony, you behold African tribal sculptures and Navajo blankets that seem to absorb the mural's iconographic and formal energies and to bounce them back, enhanced.

Such epiphanies occur around many a corner of the Barnes. (A few sad rooms suggest a jumbled open storage of things that didn't fit elsewhere, but they afford a pleasure of their own, inviting treasure hunts.) The most striking leitmotif of the collection is its numerous juxtapositions of Cezanne and Renoir: the chiselled bone and melting flesh of modern painting. I hardly share Barnes's lust for Renoir, but I will now never forget that artist's exacerbating effect on Cezanne, whose cobbled form and pensive color tense against Renoir's work as if leaning into a hot, fragrant wind. The Barnes similarly dramatizes the distinctive qualities of all its artists, relative to one another. I came away with a new thought about almost every one.

The Barnes is a work of art in itself, more than the sum of its fabulous parts. The same may be said for other institutionalized private collections—New York's Frick, Boston's Gardner—but without equal justice. None so engages visitors in an adventure of sensibility. As you test the virtues of the collection, they test you, probing the depths and exposing the limits of your perceptive powers. You don't view the installation so much as live it, undergoing an experience that will persist in your memory like a love affair that taught you some thrilling, and some dismaying, things about your character. If there were other places like the Barnes, dispensing with it would not be tragic. But one minus one is zero.