

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

The Barnes Files

Visionary Collectors Like Albert Barnes are Themselves Unique Treasures”

By Nancy Herman

When the average Philadelphian was of the opinion that Modigliani was an exotic pasta, that nothing African could be considered ‘art’ and that Renoir was a pornographer, Albert C. Barnes was collecting this art. Not only was he collecting masterpieces from all over the world, he was thinking deeply about how that art could best be appreciated and enjoyed by everyone. He believed in the power of great art to elevate the human spirit and, along with John Dewey, he developed theories about art education that he used to educate hundreds of Philadelphians. People claim to have been transformed by that experience. I am amazed really at how many repeat the same phrase, “The Barnes changed my life”. Those few people in every generation who have the money and the interest to collect art are in themselves treasures. They are the instruments through which our cultural heritage is formed. Without them, artists would not be able to continue to produce work. They are the see –ers who make up the other half of the artistic experience.

Barnes also chose the architect to design the building to house his collection and the setting for the building. It was the same eye and the same aesthetic behind those decisions that made those choices. These twelve acres in Merion with this building and these paintings in these arrangements are his gift to us. Those who would take these paintings to a new place, dishonoring Barnes’ intent and wrenching the art from its context are doing our area and the world a great disservice. Derek Gillman is part of the sophistry that is now beginning to justify this mistake. He told Linda Dormant in an interview for Art Matters that “while Barnes selected Cret to design his Gallery, he could have

chosen someone else from among the superb architects working in his time. They would have designed a different style of building, but you would still have this great collection. The collection is not dependent on a particular building for its greatness”It is hard to believe that Mr. Gillman could believe in this thesis. The whole point is that Dr. Barnes, the same man who chose the paintings that are now so desired, chose Paul Cret specifically in the same way he chose Matisse and not John Doe. He also selected the specific twelve acres using the same aesthetic.

Today there are people like Barnes searching out art around the world and helping to support artists who may be the Cezannes of the future. Without them, there would be no future for this art. It is easy after many years distance to see which art should be preserved and which goes by the way side. The people who are collecting Matisse these days don’t need any special skills to know they are making a sound investment. It is the few men like Barnes who collect while the artist lives and by doing so help them continue to produce who have a special ability. This sort of vision is unique but vital to our civilization.

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