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Institutional morality ■ *By Richard L. Feigen*

The Barnes Collection is not being saved, it is being stolen



Disgruntled? Albert Barnes

The biggest heist in history is afoot, some \$20bn to \$30bn worth. On 13 November, ground was broken in Philadelphia on a fake reconstruction of the Barnes Foundation (see *The Art Newspaper*, p14).

The late Dr Albert Barnes, a physician, inventor and one of the greatest art collectors in American history, created the Barnes Foundation in the 1920s to serve as a study collection for art appreciation and stipulated that the collection remain in the building he had designed for it in Merion, Pennsylvania.

Barnes's will has been violated. The former custodian of the foundation, Lincoln University, has been bribed out of its inherited responsibility with state funding. The greatest collection of impressionist, post-impressionist and modern paintings in the world—including 181 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes, 59 Matisses, 46 Picassos, 18 Rousseaus and 11 by Degas, 7 Van Goghs, 6 Seurats, 4 Manets and 4 by Monet—is about to be kidnapped from Merion and abducted to the Philadelphia Mall in the interest of tourism.

This heist has been meticulously, even brilliantly orchestrated by Barnes's enemies—the Philadelphia establishment, led by Governor Rendell and the city's vested foundations and citizens. Certainly they think what they're doing is best for their city. They're wrong. It is wrong to break a will. It is wrong to violate the testament of a man who devoted his life to making what he considered an important statement. But it is also a mistake. The public is the victim.

In the fine 1920s neo-classical building that was designed for it, the Barnes Collection is greater even than the great parts of which it is composed. To eradicate this unique document of American cultural patronage, this evidence of our national prescience in collecting, is an irreversible mistake. One could wonder whether the only reason not to homogenise the Frick Collection into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Gardner Museum into the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Phillips Collection into the National Gallery of Art, is that they have endowments large enough to keep predators at bay. They too are idiosyncratic, small museums, and the public is their beneficiary, as it is of the Barnes in its present building.

The arguments for this foolish project are specious. The present Barnes building could easily be made more accessible. Hours could be extended. Shuttle-buses could run continuously from the Philadelphia Museum, a short 4.6 miles away. Impingement on the Merion community is nonsense. The residents of Merion want the Barnes to stay. Their congressman, Jim Gerlach, opposes the move. As for an enlarged audience, the publicity will create an initial surge; it will then subside. There will be no new tourism dollars pouring into the city.

These are tough times. Unemployment worsens: people are out of jobs and are losing their homes. There are no funds for healthcare, education, infrastructure. Yet this \$200m folly charges on, like Ahab chasing the White Whale. A small part, perhaps \$25m, of the vague financing plans, which include \$107m earmarked from the state capital budget for the new building, could easily provide an endowment for the Barnes in its historic location. Insufficient effort has been made to tap private sources for the old Barnes. Insufficient effort has been made to sell the redundant real estate of Barnes's valuable farm, its 19th-century American pottery collection or unrestricted paintings in the offices, which have been appraised at more than \$30m. Despite its claims that the Barnes had run through its money and had to be "saved", the establishment did not really want to "save" it, only steal it. ■

The writer is a Manhattan-based dealer who was dismissed from the Barnes Foundation's art advisory committee in 1991 after protesting at the chairman's plan, which was later abandoned, to sell works from the collection to bolster its endowment.