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“The new Barnes is forgetting its founding principles”

“The Barnes Foundation Board has a unique mandate to serve working class people, spelled out in its governing document”

Last May, the Barnes Foundation moved its legendary collection of Impressionist, Post-impressionist, early Modern, and African art from Merion, Pennsylvania to an immense, sleek structure on a busy boulevard four miles away in Philadelphia. The removal of the Barnes Foundation collection from its purpose-built gallery remains one of the most outrageous undertakings ever to affect an American cultural institution. The Barnes Foundation has been transformed from a low-budget, contemplative place for art appreciation to a high stakes “must see” art tourism destination. A monument of international cultural significance has been destroyed and made into a replica for use as an economic stimulus for an ailing city. Many people are also disgusted at the perversion of donor intent laws and the overwhelming influence of big Philanthropy on the legal process that sealed the Barnes’s fate. But now what? Now, so soon after its makeover, the Barnes Foundation is apparently experiencing growing pains. The Foundation recently announced a new ticket price structure, ostensibly designed to motivate people to visit at less popular hours, with increases from 22%-33%. Visitors who come before 2:30pm will pay \$22. If they come from 3pm until closing, they will pay the old price - \$18. Senior citizens will pay \$20 in prime time, up from \$15. Student prices remain unchanged at \$10. Admission tickets now include a bizarre bonus – an audio tour that includes the Foundation’s British director explaining how to behave: “We’re seeing many more people not familiar...with what is proper behavior,” says Derek Gillman, the Barnes’s president and chief executive in the Philadelphia Inquirer (18 April 2013). Between the director’s admonitions and the 22%-33% increase, people of modest income may be discouraged from visiting at all. That is a terrible outcome, since accessibility for the “plain people” was the pretext for the move to the city. The Barnes administration denies that raising revenue was the objective, but this claim inspires more skepticism. Are lacklustre fund-raising results, weak party bookings and stupendous executive staff salaries being foisted on the public with high entrance fees, even as the local paper crows about stellar attendance figures? Most American museums do not count heavily on gate receipts; they get the bulk of their money from donations, income from their endowment and board members. The Barnes Foundation Board has a unique mandate to serve working class people, spelled out in its governing document: “It will be incumbent upon the Board...to make such...regulations as will ensure that the plain people, that is, men and women who gain their livelihood by daily toil in shops, factories...and similar places, shall have free access to the art gallery...” Long-time Barnes Board chairman Bernard Watson often quoted from that passage in the Foundation’s Indenture of Trust as justification for the move to the City. Evidently, Mr. Watson has changed his mind. Or perhaps he and the Board have new priorities, such as keeping the place afloat.

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