

*Barnes Storming*

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“When Will We get Past the Tempest-in-a-Teapot Fight Over an Art Collection?”

by Liz Spikol

“This month, the Barnes Foundation shuts its Merion doors for good. Unfortunately, until sometime in 2012, the artwork from the museum will be unavailable to visitors. Fortunately, we have a vain chance that people will shut up about the whole thing for a while.

For a city that suffers so many grievous social ills – poverty, funding cuts, horrific public schools—it’s something of a mystery why this particular battle became the high-profile, attention-sucking bandit that it did. Perhaps it has something to do with money.

As Penn professor Gresham Riley pointed out back in 2007, the battle over the location was marked by class conflict from the start: “Dr. Barnes’s target audience was people who gain their livelihood by daily toil in shops, factories, schools, stores and similar places. Up to the present, the educational programs in Lower Merion have attracted primarily upper-middle-class ladies of a certain age with a lot of free time, retirees, a few professionals who can afford to leave their offices, and a smattering of art students.”

For many Philadelphians, the fate of Albert Barnes’s legacy is easily eclipsed by more urgent concerns: Will there be heat in the winter? Where are the jobs? How can people get prescription medications without health insurance? Even the privileged among us struggle with daily issues that make the Barnes fracas seem somewhat ridiculous.

Let’s be honest: Despite the success of the polemical film *The Art of the Steal*, this debate has been far out of proportion to its importance. We’re talking about a single art collector who arranged his paintings in a particular configuration. Period. The state of the world is deeply in flux—from Japan to Pakistan. This is not akin to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto; this is a small art collection, nothing more.

I’m sure the move to the Parkway, when it happens, will follow a familiar pattern: An institution announces a change; Philadelphians object vociferously. Changes are made, and they become champions of the other side. (Remember the outrage over the Rocky statue at the Museum of Art? The furor over building taller than City Hall?)

It is refreshing to imagine that the pro-Merion dowagers will be free to fill their time with something else. Will they spend their those ample hours working at a homeless shelter? Will they save the Orchestra and the musicians who work for it? Maybe not. But we can hope they choose ways to spend their energy – which is considerable – on struggles that affect more people. And dear god, let them stop talking about it for two seconds.”