

The New Republic

Postcards from Nowhere

by Jed Perl

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I wish more museum directors and trustees understood how hungry--and how disgruntled--museumgoers in America really are. Again and again, people are pointed in precisely the wrong direction. It is depressing to think how many people have visited LACMA in recent months to see BCAM without sparing a minute for the Ahmanson Building. They literally do not know what they are missing. From Los Angeles I went up to San Francisco, and it is more or less the same story. Everybody rushes to the Museum of Modern Art and the De Young, two overblown buildings with sporadically important collections, while the most beautiful museum in the city--the Legion of Honor, in which masterpieces by Watteau, Le Nain, and Seurat have been given a thrillingly elegant installation--is hardly ever mentioned.

Shortly after returning to New York, I went down to Philadelphia to visit the Barnes Foundation, a sacred place for anybody who loves modern art. And the news there is bad as well, for most likely the Barnes will soon be torn out of its historic home in suburban Merion and reconstituted as part of a projected museum district in downtown Philadelphia. I wish that the cultural commissars who now control the Barnes's financial future and believe that the downtown move is a favor to the public would take another look at the way visitors are responding to the collection in its present location. What a thrill it is to see how vigorously museumgoers engage with this most personal of installations, where the world's greatest collection of Cézannes and key works by Seurat and Matisse and Renoir are brilliantly juxtaposed with pieces of Pennsylvania German ironwork and paintings by El Greco and the Venetians and sculpture from Africa. When I was there, everybody looked keyed up--they looked happy, the way nobody looks at BCAM.

The Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania is a somewhere, make no mistake about it. Matisse, who visited the foundation when he was in America, painted one of his most deeply pondered murals, *The Dance*, for the central gallery, shaping his monumental figures to fit the curiously curved spaces above the three huge windows. To see this seminal work by Matisse in the room for which it was intended, hard by Cézanne's greatest *Card Players* and Seurat's *Models*, is one of the essential experiences that a museumgoer can have in the United States. Nothing could be more magnificently particular than this museum on a quiet street in a Philadelphia suburb. It is a monument to modern art, and to the reception of modern art in America. And yet there are people--powerful people--who want to depersonalize this most personal of places. Only bureaucrats who have become inured to a world in which works of art are nothings and museums of art are nowheres could consider such a plan. But this is where we are today. Before I left the Barnes I went down to the shop and bought a few postcards. I am looking at one of those postcards now, of the wall in the main gallery with the Cézanne *Card Players* and Seurat's *Models* and three other Cézannes and a Corot and a number of pieces of early American metalwork. This is a postcard from somewhere.