

# City Paper

## “Populism and Propriety”

Don Argott's ballad of the Barnes Foundation hits the silver screen.

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By Julia Harte

It's a story that needs to be told," says Aram Jerrehian, one of about 30 agitated elderly Merion residents packed into a midnight bus home from New York City on Sept. 29. Their outrage freshly piqued, the group excitedly rehashes the long-unwinding drama surrounding the proposed relocation of Albert Barnes' unparalleled collection of Impressionist and early modern art from their hometown to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway — a move they believe would violate Barnes' wishes and alter his collection's unique character, while costing at least \$150 million, and possibly much more. (The architectural plans for the new building are scheduled for an official unveiling Oct. 7, after this newspaper went to press.)

A few hours earlier that Tuesday evening, they stood in the lobby of Alice Tully Hall in Manhattan, passing out fliers and trying to rally passers-by to join their cause. Inside, documentarian Don Argott's cinematic take on the now-familiar controversy flickered on the silver screen as part of the New York Film Festival before a spellbound crowd of 1,000, all dressed to the nines. Philadelphia's dirty laundry was on full display.

On the screen, the faces of Gov. Ed Rendell, former Mayor John Street and other Philly luminaries loomed enormous —and sinister. Introduced as a heist movie and a whodunit, *The Art of the Steal* probes the motives of the individuals behind the campaign to move the Barnes' collection from Merion, where the educational foundation was founded in 1922. It's unabashedly one-sided. The political and philanthropic titans who championed the move to the site of a former juvenile detention facility on the Parkway in Philadelphia — formally announced in 2007 — as the only way to save the Foundation from financial woes and inaccessibility are cast as venal, scheming villains, blindly pursuing increased tourism revenue and private gain.

Argott insists that the film wasn't intended as a hit piece. Aside from Rendell, none of the Philadelphia power players who have promoted the move granted him an interview. The Barnes' governing body denied Argott's team permission to film inside the Foundation. The Street administration even excluded the filmmaker from mayoral press conferences.

"They flagged us because they knew who we were at a certain point," Argott says.

As *The Art of the Steal* travels to festivals around the world — and eventually, Argott promises, to a theater in Philly — the film is likely to stir a fundamental debate about the propriety of commercial art museums and the ethics of private art collections.

Ultimately, it begs a single underlying question: Who should control access to a collection of art as highly valued and historic as the Barnes?

Most of the New York audience seemed sympathetic to Argott's perspective. During a post-screening Q&A with the filmmakers, the first few audience members to speak asked if there were any available legal avenues left to stop the move (answer: not really). But not everyone was convinced. During that Q&A, one audience member said he was puzzled by the film's ultimate stance. Why, he asked, was it so wrong for the city to bring the *real* heroes of the film — Renoir, Cézanne, Matisse — to a more public space?

His question elicited a smattering of applause. The film, after all, made much of Barnes' staunch populism and sympathy for humble, working-class art lovers. Barnes himself came from a poor Philadelphia family and made his fortune from pharmaceuticals.

But the film also portrayed Barnes' hostile detachment from Philadelphia society after his collection was panned as too modern by local critics, including the *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Barnes, who died in 1951, shunned the city's elite after that first nasty review, allowing only occasional visitors into his collection. The Foundation became primarily known as an art school, where teachers offered classes that adhered to Barnes' Deweyesque educational and aesthetic philosophy.

To the relocation's opponents, this isn't a minor point. "It's not a museum!" shouted an audience member after another asked the filmmakers a question about "the Barnes museum." The Barnes' identity as a school is critical to those who have studied there. Throughout his life, Barnes scorned commercial museums, calling the Philadelphia Museum of Art "a house of artistic and intellectual prostitution."

That's precisely why many former students of the Foundation oppose its relocation. Known collectively as "Friends of the Barnes," they argue that the Barnes board has allowed the Foundation's original mission to fade while exaggerating its financial troubles and limited access.

"The education is already being watered down. The people who teach there now aren't rooted in Barnes' tradition," Jay Raymond, who has both studied and taught at the Barnes, laments after the screening. The number of students taking the core Barnes art course has dropped sharply, he says. He expects interest in that traditional course to diminish even more after the move.

As for the Barnes' financial predicament, the Friends of the Barnes believe the relocation's costs outweigh the financial benefits. Several pieces in the Barnes collection were created especially for its space in Merion, such as Matisse's triptych mural, *The Dance II*. In a letter he wrote after the work's installation, Matisse recalled that "when I saw the canvas put in place, it was detached from me and became part of the building."

Given that and similar histories, the extra profits the Barnes would accrue in a new building seem insignificant to former Barnes students like Sandy Bressler: "In this

economic climate, in the midst of a severe recession, the idea of spending millions of dollars to try to re-create something that can't be recreated is absurd."

The Friends of the Barnes also think the most populist argument for its relocation — making the world-class collection more accessible to the public — is oversold. "The Barnes Foundation never sells all its tickets where it is now," argues Raymond.

The low visitation rate, however, might have something to do with the fact that all visits must be arranged and paid for at least a day in advance — something that may or may not change with the move. At its current location, the Barnes can admit up to 140,000 people each year. On the Parkway, it will accommodate an extra 60,000.

Protestations aside, the Barnes Foundation will likely reside on the Parkway eventually, whether the city meets its 2012 target or logistical travails stall the process for another few years. But nobody — neither the Friends of the Barnes, the board of trustees, the Philadelphia establishment nor even Barnes' pedagogical ghost — can arbitrate the purpose to which the paintings will be put by viewers in years to come. If the controversy has made anything clear, it's that priceless art defies moral and intellectual ownership.

Meanwhile, it's fitting that Barnes' vision is receiving its most attention in 50 years from audiences distant from the Philadelphia cultural politics he despised so much. Barnes, who called Philadelphia a "depressing intellectual slum," would be livid at how the city has co-opted his collection, says Bressler. She shakes her head angrily: "Unfortunately, the city government is looking to Barnes to be the salvation of the city."

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