

# Art & Auction

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## “Barnes Storm”

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**The legal fight to keep the world-class art collection of the Barnes Foundation, valued at around \$25 billion, in its longtime location in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion, ended in May 2008.**

On November 13 of this year, ground was broken for the works' new \$150 million home, five miles away on the tree-lined Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Nevertheless, opposition to the move continues to fester. And the naysayers are looking to get a boost from the wide release on February 26 of *The Art of the Steal*, a documentary film about how moneyed interests commandeered the foundation to bring the art to the city.

"We hope the movie will poison the well for fund-raisers because they'll see what nonsense this is," says Jay Raymond, a former teacher at the Barnes Foundation and member of the antitransfer organization **Friends of the Barnes Foundation**. "There's nobody outside of Philadelphia who thinks this is a good idea."

The seasoned New York art dealer Richard Feigen, who makes a cameo appearance in the film, agrees. "In a word, it's obscene. [The foundation trustees are] spending all this money needlessly and destructively," says Feigen, who compares the Barnes to New York's **Frick Collection**, Washington's **Phillips Collection** and Boston's **Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum**. "Where it is, is an important manifestation of a phase of American art patronage. It is crucial that we keep that phase of our history intact."

Barnes executive director and president Derek Gillman takes a different view. Characterizing opponents as "not a large group," he notes, "I'm not sure that many people realize the collection will be reinstalled in galleries of the same size, the same shape, the same relationship and in exactly the same way it is hung in Merion." Gillman, a former president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, located near the foundation's new downtown address, envisions it attracting 250,000 visitors a year, roughly four times the number currently allowed.

The foundation was established by the pharmaceutical magnate Albert C. Barnes in 1922 "to promote the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts." The collection itself is unrivaled. The mainly Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and early modern works include 69 **Cézannes**, 59 **Matisses**, 16 **Modiglianis**, 46 **Picassos**, 181 **Renoirs** and 7 **van Goghs**. Several pictures are widely acknowledged to be masterpieces — among them, Cézanne's 1890-92 *Card Players*, **Seurat's** 1887-88 *Models* and Matisse's 1932 mural *The Dance*.

At his death, in a car crash in 1951, Barnes, who had no heirs, left a trust indenture that placed **Lincoln University**, a small African-American college located in nearby Chester County, Pennsylvania, in charge of carrying out his idiosyncratic wishes concerning the

collection — namely, that none of the works be moved or loaned and that a restricted number of nonstudent visitors be allowed to tour it. A financial crisis in the early 1990s brought the Barnes into Montgomery County court, where a judge approved a plan to modify the indenture and eventually allowed the foundation to stage a blockbuster tour, "Great French Paintings from the Barnes Collection," which ran from 1993 through 1994, raising more than \$18 million.

Part of this money paid for a complete refurbishment of the foundation's original Paul Cret-designed building by **Robert Venturi** of the Philadelphia-based architecture firm **Venturi, Scott Brown**. Completed in 1996, the renovation brought the Barnes up to contemporary standards in terms of climate control and security. But while its physical plant was shored up, its financial situation was again imperiled. In 1996 the Barnes Foundation board sued Lower Merion Township on the grounds that its refusal to permit the addition of a 50-car parking lot was racist. When the suit was thrown out, in 1997, the foundation was forced to pay all legal fees.

In 2005, Lincoln was given a state-funded \$50 million golden parachute and replaced as the trust's overseer by a larger board. The new trustees were mostly Philadelphia blue-chip law firms, corporations and foundations, the kind of folks that the contrarian Barnes expressly wished to avoid. Still, they were able to do what their predecessors could not, pulling off a seemingly miraculous financial turnaround. Today the Barnes has in excess of \$100 million in cash, with another \$30 million committed by the state and \$25 million or so in pledges.

Even with that kind of money rolling in, the criticism hasn't stilled. Venturi summed it up best in a September 23 letter to the Friends of the Barnes (the group in turn sent it to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which never published it): "In our current economic and financial climate. . . the expenditure of \$200 million to \$300 million for a new site and building seems an indiscreet and ridiculous waste of money."

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