The Collector as Artist

By R. C. Baker

The art collector Albert C. Barnes was difficult and opinionated, and the museum he created is no different. He built it to order, a 23-gallery mansion in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion. He mounted each object and painting in a specific place on his walls, then commanded in his will that none of it be moved. Everything is there today as it was when he died in 1951. But the Barnes had money in 1951. Today, it is effectively broke.

Philadelphia's art-minded wealthy citizens — a class Barnes fought his way into and hated — are waiting for the Barnes Foundation to knuckle under and allow the collection to be moved to the city's museum district, even scattered about among museums. The best proposal is to move the entire mansion, thus keeping to the spirit, if not the letter, of Barnes's will. The scheme seems fantastic, pharaonic. But there has never been a collector quite like Barnes, and his fantastic collection deserves a fantastic rescue.

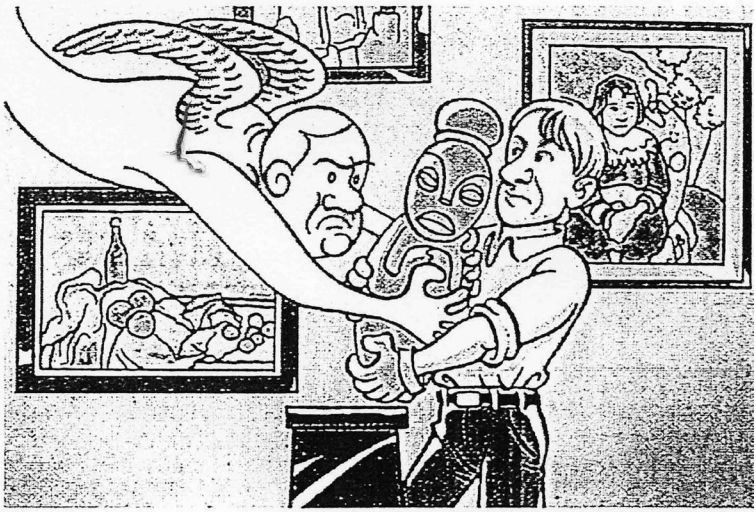
At Baltimore's Maryland Institute, where I was a student in the early 80's, we received a classical training: drawing from life, Greco-Roman sculpture and Old Master paintings. Even for those among us chafing to go abstract or conceptual, this conservative grounding was a requirement. And for anyone seriously worshiping at the altar of art, the Barnes Collection was more pilgrimage than field trip. I went there to witness Cezanne's "Card Players." I'd seen the Metropolitan Museum of Art's version, and a color photo of the one in Paris, but because of Dr. Barnes's ban on outside reproductions I knew only by an instructor's assurance that the canvas in Philly was a "monster," bigger than the other two combined and ravishing in its subtle complexity. "Give it at least an hour," he said.

At that age, I didn't think I could look for that long at anything that didn't move. But the Barnes invited a contemplation different from that in other museums, more akin to what I felt years later in Italian churches, where paintings are as pervasive and essential as nature. Barnes conveyed this by the way he grouped paintings on a wall: Old Master here, African carving there, two Picassos bracketing a Medieval bas relief. The affinities between them were difficult to articulate but easily felt. Barnes composed his walls like a painter working over a canvas, searching for something ineffable, something greater than the sum of its parts.

Albert Barnes's museum deserves an unlikely rescue.

In this setting, hours in front of a Cezanne were not a chore but a revelation: a communion of heads, one dark, one bright, a third bisected by shadow; a row of tobacco pipes like periscopes jutting from the ocean of color that is the back wall; an improbable backgammon board center stage, its vibrant green and red the gravitational core of this particular universe. Thanks to Dr. Barnes's passion, I learned that with great paintings an hour is the barest introduction.

Barnes was at ground zero of the modern age, founding his museum and school early in the 20's. To a skeptical nation, he championed the new masters from Europe, and he delved deeply enough into their works, theories and lives to confidently present such diverse influences as African sculpture and Baroque dynamos. (He knew that art ignores chronologies and artists will take whatever they can use, like Cezanne obsessively copying Rubens.) To house everything, he built a mansion with Doric columns and African friezes; he was a white man who sent students South to record Negro spirituals, lest the music he loved in his hardscrabble youth be lost.



Predictably, this fearless mixing of history and media and race did not sit well with the burghers and press of Philadelphia, and so began a lifelong feud. His school was for those with desire but little means; the well-off were scorned as too narrowly educated to appreciate his methods.

And so his strictures on the accessibility and financing of the collection have hamstrung the dissemination of his unique vision to the point of threatening its existence. Talk of rehousing his collection in the Philadelphia Museum, an institution Barnes reviled, must have his spirit writhing and spitting at the possible rearrangement, or even sale, of integral works.

Dr. Barnes's rigid arrangements may seem outdated; but sometimes pure visions can teach us as nothing else can. They make us struggle against them, think for ourselves, gain confidence in the affinities and connections we sense.

So diagram those wall layouts, jack up the mansion, pack the tiles, the lunette-shaped Matisses, the ornate frames and Navajo rugs, and reconstruct all of it to his exacting specifications in downtown Philly, where the Everyman that Barnes genuinely respected can more readily partake of his vision. Then finally, perhaps, the good doctor can make peace with the City of Brotherly Love. □

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