



THE ART WORLD

# MOVING PICTURES

*The Barnes Foundation's new home.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The screamingly intense blue of Picasso's "The Ascetic" (1903), a portrait of a gaunt old man, at the Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, startled me. I said to the museum's press person, "That's been cleaned, right?" Wrong. After years of controversy and litigation, the art collection of Alfred C. Barnes has just reopened in a new building downtown. I remembered the painting from visits to the Barnes's former site, in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion, in a

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*Installing a gallery in the Philadelphia building.*

Photograph by Raymond Meier.

Palladian château built in 1925 to house the collection. The change I thought I detected was due to a clerestory window in the new building: sunlight ignites blues, which incandescent light dulls. Better visibility is the chief, and almost the only, alteration to the strange and wonderful arrangements of works, notably of School of Paris modern masters, left by Barnes, who died in 1951, at the age of seventy-nine. Applying today's favorite measure of quality, the figure of twenty-five billion dollars has been tossed around as the collection's market worth.

Barnes was born poor in Philadelphia in 1872, became a doctor, and made a fortune by trademarking a medicine that treated gonorrhea. He began collecting in 1912, and established an art foundation in 1922. Guided at first by the painter William Glackens, a childhood friend, Barnes developed an acquisition network of artists, dealers, and agents in Europe. (He didn't get along with Gertrude Stein, but was warmly befriended by her erudite brother, Leo.) Barnes hated—to put it mildly—the Main Line oligarchy and nearly all credentialled art authorities. He followed his friend the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, whose book on aesthetics is titled “Art as Experience,” in rejecting the meat-rack tidiness of standard museums. Art works, they thought, are events enmeshed in the lives of both their makers and their viewers. The study of art should be direct and immersive, like learning to swim by jumping into the deep end (without the dire consequence of an initial failure). Barnes juxtaposed pictures of wildly varying age, style, and quality—a great Tintoretto portrait under a perfunctory Renoir still-life next to a Rousseau jungle scene—and they goad one another to self-asserting eloquence.

Barnes endowed a trust that defined the Merion museum as an educational institution administered by Lincoln University, a traditionally African-American school. The foundation promulgated his ideas to



From the Barnes Foundation's new building.



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students who were valued for their innocence of academic training. It bristled with strictures: public access was severely limited; works were never loaned out; no color reproductions were allowed; visitors were not permitted to make sketches in the galleries. Those galleries include works in abundance by Cézanne, Renoir, Matisse, and Picasso, and substantial representations of Tintoretto, El Greco, Goya, Courbet, Manet, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, van Gogh, Seurat, Rousseau, Modigliani, Soutine, and de Chirico. There are many American moderns, as well as anonymous Renaissance Northern Europeans, Africans, and North American Indians.

The interior of the old Barnes has been reproduced in the new building, with minor decorative differences and a major technological one of automatically balanced natural and artificial light. Pictures cluster, as before, on yellowish-tan burlap-covered walls, in rooms that are sometimes tiny, along with myriad items of antique metalwork that impart a rhythmic accompaniment. The works remain unlabelled except for the artists' names. Barnes and Dewey's principle for art appreciation—roughly, to show and not tell—stays in force, and it feels more tonic than ever, in our era of yammering wall texts and audio guides.

Would Barnes have been pleased by the loving transit of his monumental achievement? That's easy: no. Some of his barbed-wire prohibitions remain: admission is still somewhat limited, and there is no sketching or loaning. But consider that the move satisfies the cravings of Philadelphian powers for a Center City tourist magnet, and that it entailed a legal assault on the conditions of Barnes's trust. (The most interesting of the issues concerns the rights of private ownership in conflict with a perceived public interest.) In this magazine, in 2004, I termed the proposed relocation "an aesthetic crime," because I couldn't imagine that the integrity of the collection—effectively



a site-specific, installational work of art, *avant la lettre*—would survive. But it does, magnificently.

The new museum is two buildings in one. The galleries have been inserted into a grand edifice of classrooms, a library, an auditorium, offices, conservation facilities, indoor and outdoor meeting spaces, and an atrium planted with trees and hanging vines. A colossal main hall seems scaled for visitors by the thousand, though only a hundred and fifty will be admitted per hour. The spectacular contemporary architecture, by the New York team of Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, cradles the modest graces of the Merion structure with an air of religious veneration.

What, in spiritual currency, is the worth of Matisse's "The Joy of Life" (1906)? The revolutionary picture of line-drawn dancers, musicians, lovers, and animals scattered amid bursts of pinks, greens, oranges, and yellows faced the landing of a staircase in Merion—a cramped situation that, infatuated with everything about the place, I chose to enjoy. In the only significant repositioning of a work, the painting now occupies an alcove off a second-floor balcony, opposite a great mural of dancing and tumbling nudes that Barnes commissioned from Matisse in 1929. "Joy" looks bigger than I remembered, and, while still plenty radical, less confusing. You get to register, head on, the surprise of color trumping every other formal determination. The painting has suffered a grave loss of cadmium yellow across a central area. (Matisse got stuck with some bad paint.) Conservators debate restoring it. They shouldn't. It's too large a flaw, and a little imagination can recover an inkling of the original effect. Come to that, a little imagination is your passport to rapture throughout the Barnes.

The arrangement of the works not only enables but requires the engagement of your own tastes and passions, which can't possibly emerge from the experience unchanged. Certainly, you'll have new



feelings about Barnes's two main, rather contradictory heroes: Renoir (with a hundred and eighty-one works, ranging from masterpieces to miserable daubs) and Cézanne (with sixty-nine, mostly splendid). Renoir's blushing effulgence and Cézanne's excruciating intelligence face off in a running scrimmage from room to room. It may be no contest for most of us: Cézanne wins. But a lifetime of art-history lectures will teach you less about his art's quiddity, and why and how it matters, than an hour at the Barnes.

A strong essay could be written about the small works that Barnes hung above the doorframes: often Bonnard's or de Chirico's, picking up the leitmotif of opposed color and pictorial structure from Renoir and Cézanne. There are a few passages of dithering incoherence in the galleries, usually when too many Renoirs pile up like rosy snowdrifts, and one room, punishingly packed with drawings, exhausts contemplation. But, in general, the Barnes is a museum that all but animatedly thinks and feels at every turn.

This special character of the Barnes is germane to debates about "reception theory" in art history and "relational aesthetics" in performance-based art. Those dry terms skirt a widespread dissatisfaction with the modernist dogma of art's hermetic autonomy, and also with the jokes on it played by Duchamp and his legions of progeny. The notion that art and life are somehow separate has worn out. Dewey argued, and the Barnes demonstrates, that art focusses and intensifies life in the present, invigorating memories of the past and whetting appetites for the future. Aesthetic experience differs from other kinds only in being dramatically cogent. It may happen even in conventional museums, though against the grain of their foregone conclusions. The Pharisees of proper taste deemed Barnes weird for his fanatical orchestration of artistic stimuli. In truth, he was crazy like a prophet. ♦