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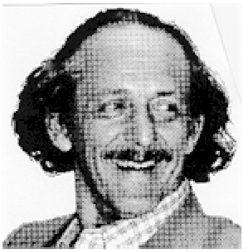

Current Comments

The Legacy of Albert C. Barnes. Part 1. The Tempestuous Life of a Scientist/Art Collector

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Throughout the past year, I have written about the many fine works of art we have gradually acquired for ISI®'s headquarters in Philadelphia.[1-4] It is gratifying to find that many art lovers now recognize that the "ISI gallery" is unique and gaining in stature.

But now I'd like to tell you about one of the most intriguing and impressive collections of art in the world. Also located in the Philadelphia area, it is just a short drive from the ISI building on Market Street. I refer not to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, nor the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Though all of them are superb, I have in mind the Barnes Foundation in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion.

The Barnes Foundation possesses what is probably one of the most comprehensive collections of French modern paintings in the world, as well as works by such masters as Rubens, Titian, Bosch, Goya, El Greco, and others too numerous to list here. In 1961, the collection was conservatively estimated to be worth $300 million;[5] its value today is perhaps in the billions.

Yet the Barnes Foundation, once a common subject of Philadelphia-area newspapers and well known to the general public, has now retreated into obscurity, apparently remembered only by art intellectuals, cultural elitists, and the wealthy residents of Philadelphia's Main Line suburbs. Ironically, these are precisely the kinds of people whom Albert Coombs Barnes, creator of the Foundation that bears his name, detested and gleefully fought throughout most of his adult life. In this essay we'll examine his tumultuous life, while a future essay will focus on his Foundation and the fabulous art collection Barnes bequeathed to it.

Barnes was such an eccentric, controversial figure, and was so often in the public eye under such bizarre circumstances, that it is difficult now to distinguish between truth and legend. Barnes was apparently not one to shy away from saying what he thought, and it seems that what he thought of people with credentials or pedigrees was generally unprintable. Certainly he did not endear himself to many of the powerful or influential people of the period from World War I to World War II, and articles about him from that time are likely to be biased. This is especially true of the art press, which Barnes regularly blasted as, at best, posturing and incompetent. On the other hand, even information given out by Barnes about himself is suspect, since he took no pains to be accurate with most journalists. Thus, although most accounts of him agree on certain major points, they vary widely in detail. Depending upon what account of him you read, he was either a modern-day Robin Hood, full of rugged individualism, or an egomaniacal demon.

Barnes was born in Philadelphia in 1872. His father, a butcher by trade, was chronically unemployed as a result of the loss of an arm in the American Civil War. Thus Barnes grew up in poverty amid the slums of a section of South Philadelphia marshland known as "the Neck," located between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers.[6,7] They have long since been razed. He got his first job, as a newspaper carrier, at the age of 11 and held it until he was 18, getting up at 4 am to walk a 12-mile route before going to school. His schoolmates remembered him as a tough kid who was always telling the teacher she was wrong.[7]

Following his graduation from public high school, Barnes received a scholarship that enabled him to enroll in a three-year medical course at the University of Pennsylvania. He paid his living expenses by tutoring and playing semiprofessional baseball. Graduating from Penn in 1892, he spent a year in residency at a mental institution to study abnormal psychology,[6,7] where he allegedly earned spending money by gambling with the other interns.[7] He then returned to Penn for further courses in chemistry and philosophy. Once again, he tutored, played ball, and worked odd jobs. By 1894, he had saved enough money to continue his postgraduate education in advanced chemistry at the University of Berlin in Germany.[6,7] His money ran out before he was able to complete the curriculum there, however, and he returned home on a tramp steamer, where he sang spirituals in return for a bunk.

But it wasn't long before Barnes had once again saved enough money to return to Germany to study chemistry, this time at the University of Heidelberg, where he studied until 1899.[6,7] His doctoral dissertation, written in German, allegedly attracted the attention of the renowned bacteriologist Paul Ehrlich, who was so impressed that he asked Barnes to be his assistant. Barnes declined. He also declined to pay the $50 fee required to get his degree, and so left Germany without a PhD.[7] However, according to William Schack, art and drama journalist and author of *Art and Argyrol: The Life and Career of Dr. Albert C. Barnes*, there is no record of Barnes's enrollment at the University of Berlin, and he attended only one laboratory course while at the University of Heidelberg. Moreover, "...Barnes never wrote a thesis at all," according to Schack. "He was not even formally qualified for an undergraduate degree in chemistry."[8] (p. 338)

While in Heidelberg, Barnes met a student named Hermann Hille, with whom he would later develop an antiseptic silver protein compound that would be used primarily on the mucous membranes of the nose and throat and as an alternative to silver nitrate in preventing blindness in newborn infants.[6] In this era before antibiotics, silver nitrate was commonly used as an antiseptic. But it caused stinging and burning, tended to discolor the eyes and skin, and coagulated the membranes to which it was applied. Further, its effectiveness was limited to the surface area of the tissue. Several alternatives to silver nitrate had been developed in the form of mild silver protein compounds, but while each lacked silver nitrate's unwanted side effects, all shared a similar lack of even its limited therapeutic power. None dissolved readily, so only small quantities of silver ions, the active ingredient, were released, and none were able to penetrate tissue any better than silver nitrate.[8]

Barnes and Hille thus searched for a mild silver protein compound that would not only release substantial amounts of silver ions when it contacted infected tissue, but would also penetrate that tissue as silver nitrate could not. They managed to extract gliadin, a protein found in wheat and other grains, and convert it to vitellin, a protein that occurs naturally in egg yolk, but which, presumably, was difficult or uneconomical to derive from that source. To a solution of vitellin and saline, they added a concentrated solution of silver nitrate. The resulting compound was the mild silver protein antiseptic they had hoped for. It released large amounts of silver ions, was noncaustic, noncoagulative, and extremely penetrating.[8]

Accounts vary, however, as to the exact history of the development of the Barnes and Hille disinfectant, which Barnes dubbed Argyrol, from the Greek word for silver, *argyros*. In one version, Barnes and Hille were in full partnership, each contributing more or less equally to Argyrol's development.[6] By 1902, the Barnes and Hille Company had been formed, its headquarters located in Philadelphia, about five blocks away from ISI's present office. Boosted by the recommendations of the leading physicians of the day, to whom Barnes had sent preliminary samples of the antiseptic, Argyrol turned a substantial profit even in its first year of production. By 1908, the company had made so much money that Barnes could afford to buy out Hille's interest in the partnership for "several hundred thousand dollars," a staggering sum in those days.[6]

In another version of the story, however, Hille is relegated to the minor role of a technician who merely followed Barnes's instructions. In fact, according to a four-part article that appeared in consecutive issues of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1942, Barnes claimed complete credit for the development of Argyrol.[9] According to journalist Carl W. McCardle, who apparently received his information from Barnes himself, Barnes had spent years thinking about inventing an antiseptic that lacked silver nitrate's stinging burn. When Edward Martin, a nationally known surgeon who had been one of Barnes's teachers in medical school, reported that Argyrol was superior to any other antiseptic then in use, Barnes pleaded with him to put his remarks in writing. Reproducing this endorsement by the thousands, Barnes mailed copies to medical professionals throughout the US, Europe, and Australia. Argyrol's success was assured, and Barnes became a millionaire by the time he was 35 years old.[6,9,10]

Barnes never patented Argyrol, preferring to keep the formula safe in his head, but after dropping Hille's name from the company, he shrewdly sold the A.C. Barnes Company and the rights to the trade name "Argyrol" for six million dollars in 1929—just before the stock market crash and not long before the discovery of antibiotics, which would displace Argyrol in most of its uses.[6] Ironically, one of the uses to which Argyrol was suited—the prevention of blindness in newborns by inhibiting gonococcal infections—was taken over not by the new antibiotics, but by silver nitrate. Today, silver nitrate is administered routinely to newborns in every hospital in the US.[11] Argyrol itself is still being manufactured under that name by CooperVision Pharmaceuticals, Inc., but it no longer enjoys widespread application.

As a businessman, Barnes was far ahead of his time in the area of employee relations. For example, many of the workers in Barnes's factory were both unskilled and uneducated. So for two hours out of each eight-hour day, employees attended lectures on science and philosophy. Included in the curriculum were the thoughts and teachings of such intellectuals as William James, George Santayana, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey.[9] The filling of bottles with Argyrol crystals (Argyrol left the factory in crystalline form, to be mixed into a solution by druggists) was accompanied by the singing of spirituals by all employees, in which Barnes himself would join. Fine art adorned the factory's walls. And Barnes took such an interest in the personal well-being of his employees, and fancied himself such a judge of human nature, that he strove to match as closely as possible his employees' talents with their work. One woman, Nelle Mullen, whose job was sealing envelopes for $11 a week, was perceived by Barnes to possess the talents of an executive. He raised her annual salary to $15,000 and turned over the management of the company to her.[7] (In fact, she attended to the details of the 1929 sale of the company while Barnes was in Paris writing a book on French primitive art forms!) Barnes also invested $250,000 in municipal bonds as a trust fund for his employees, who received the income in monthly installments for the rest of their lives, whether they continued to work for Barnes or not.[9]

Barnes found that his business success was not without its hurdles. When complaints of Argyrol's ineffectiveness and even of dangerous side effects began to trickle in from physicians in 1908, Barnes learned that fake Argyrol was being made and sold with the connivance of certain druggists. He organized an informal squad of "enforcers" and traveled throughout the US, searching for the sources of the bootleg drug. After discovering a ring operating out of New York City, he called the city's police commissioner and asked for a search warrant. Instead, the commissioner supplied him with a burly officer who, the commissioner told Barnes, would be more effective than any search warrant. Barnes and his escort confiscated over 100,000 bottles of counterfeit Argyrol in their New York raid.[9]

Once Argyrol's safety and its applications were established, however, Barnes had very little to do but watch the money pile up. He dabbled in the traditional pursuits of the wealthy—fox hunting, painting, and collecting the work of fashionable artists. But he soon became disenchanted with his attempts at painting, and burned each of the 106 canvases he felt he had desecrated with his efforts. He also conceded that his collection of paintings by the then-popular Barbizon school of artists lacked quality, but his interest in art did not wane. In fact, he called upon his old high school friend William Glackens to teach him the fundamentals of art appreciation.[6]

Like Barnes, Glackens was born in Philadelphia. He was an accomplished painter whose realistic portrayal of urban and middle-class life rejected the more pretentious elements of nineteenth-century academic art, which emphasized painting noble and uplifting subjects. He greatly influenced the development of American Social Realist painters of the 1920s. Together with such artists as Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, and Maurice Prendergast, Glackens founded the "Ashcan" school of painting (so-called because of the founding artists' renderings of street scenes).[12] It was Glackens who introduced Barnes to the new wave of French painters—such as Renoir, Gauguin, Monet, and Cézanne—who were just beginning to stir the public's awareness. Though Barnes later admitted that he didn't quite fully appreciate the work of these artists when first presented with it, he nevertheless gave Glackens $20,000 in 1912 and asked him to go to Paris and buy whatever he thought was worthwhile.[6]

After living for a period of time with the paintings that Glackens brought back, Barnes became caught up with the same fire and spirit that had moved the artists, and it wasn't long before he was reading every book on art and aesthetics that he could find.[6] He began taking regular trips to Paris and became friends with many of the dealers, painters, and leaders of the modern art movement, including Leo and Gertrude Stein, dealers Paul Guillaume and Ambroise Vollard, sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, and artists such as Modigliani, Pascin, and Soutine.[6]

Barnes soon became an acknowledged master at distinguishing important work. An unknown painter's fortune was made if Barnes bought one of his paintings. In fact, Soutine himself had been a struggling artist, at one point reduced to stealing bottles in order to get enough money to eat. But Barnes saw one of Soutine's paintings in a Paris café, liked it, bought it, and searched for the artist.[9,13] Barnes found him in a garret that had been stripped bare of everything that could be pawned, except for 52 of the artist's paintings. Barnes bought all 52 for an average of $30 each. In two years, the best of Soutine's paintings were selling for anywhere from five to six thousand dollars.[9]

Most of the paintings in Barnes's collection were acquired over a span of many years and in much the same fashion as the Soutines. His first Picasso, for instance, cost him $20; his first Matisse, $50.[14] Both paintings were valued at $20,000 by 1951. He found a $40,000 Henri Rousseau in a pile of rubbish in a Paris jewelry shop and paid $10 for it.[14] Since he was still quite wealthy during the depression, he was also able to pick up even acknowledged masterpieces at bargain prices because few who had to sell their treasured art were in a position to quibble over the price. Thus, for instance, Barnes acquired one of Cézanne's many variations of his painting "The Bathers" from Vollard for $70,000, though Vollard had once turned down an offer of $200,000.[15]

Barnes not only bought paintings—he diligently studied them.[14] He spent day after day taking notes on the major works exhibited in museums and galleries throughout Europe. Out of his intense interest and years of study and discussion, he evolved what he termed a scientific system of art appreciation, based on objective—rather than subjective—analysis. He thought that a painting should be studied for its use of color, light, line, and space, not searched for "statements" by the painter or any shared experience or viewpoint that might exist between the artist and the viewer. Barnes believed in the systematic study of art. His burgeoning collection provided him an opportunity to not only put his own theories into practice, but also the educational principles of James and Dewey, whose thoughts greatly influenced Barnes's ideas on art.[6] Thus, in 1922, the Barnes Foundation was endowed and established.[5]

The spirit with which the Foundation was started is best summed up by the following statement, taken from a World War II-vintage pamphlet issued by the Foundation: "Appreciation of works of art requires organized effort and systematic study, on the same principle that it requires effort and study to become a lawyer, an engineer, or a physician. Art appreciation can no more be absorbed by aimless wandering in galleries than can surgery be learned by casual visits to a hospital." The Foundation's charter, drawn up by Barnes's old friend Owen J. Roberts, later a justice on the US Supreme Court, stipulated that access to the collection would be restricted mainly to students, though limited numbers of the general public would be admitted two days a week.[6]

Before the Barnes Foundation officially opened its doors in 1923, however, a portion of the collection was exhibited to the art world and the general public at the invitation of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. But the art of the bold and daring impressionists, post-impressionists, and fauvists shocked the critics.[6] They ridiculed the landscapes as "incomprehensible masses of paint." The figure drawings were called "pictures of alleged human beings," and the artists themselves were variously characterized as "diseased," "moral degenerates," "unclean," or simply "crazy."[6] Barnes, enraged and, perhaps, more than a little hurt at the avalanche of rejection his proudly assembled collection had received, retaliated by slamming the doors of the Foundation in the face of the public. However, he did go through with his plan of establishing the Foundation as a tuition-free educational institution for those who wished to learn his methods of art appreciation.

An in-depth discussion of the educational goals of the Barnes Foundation and its tumultuous history will appear in a future essay. Suffice it to say that as modern art gradually gained acceptance and popularity, Barnes was assailed with requests to see his collection from persons not enrolled in his school. Although some of these requests were granted, most often they were rejected, with biting malice and a touch of sardonic humor. What infuriated suppliants more than mere refusals of admittance, however, was the seemingly arbitrary nature of Barnes's decisions. Admitted to view the collections were such notables as Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, and actors Charles Laughton and Edward G. Robinson. Yet the list of those rejected would fill pages, and there seems to be no rhyme or reason for rejection, save the whim of Barnes.[6]

In many cases, the more well-known and influential the petitioner, the more spectacular and humiliating was Barnes's refusal. Masquerading as a secretary, he replied to auto magnate Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., "It is impossible at this time for me to show Dr. Barnes your letter [requesting permission to view the collection] because he gave strict orders that he is not to be disturbed during his present strenuous efforts to break the world's record for goldfish swallowing."[6] On another occasion, author and actor Alexander Woollcott was told that Barnes was out on the front lawn singing to the birds, and could not be disturbed at his regular Sunday-morning nature worship. That letter was signed, "Fidèle de Port-Manech, Secrétaire de Dr. Barnes," the name of Barnes's pet dog. While an honor student at Swarthmore College, author James A. Michener was turned down three times in his efforts to gain entrance to the Foundation. But he was granted admission immediately when he posed as an illiterate young steelworker from Pittsburgh.[16] When a member of European nobility asked if she might be permitted the privilege of viewing his collection, Barnes replied that the Foundation had already been reserved for a striptease contest for debutantes.[6,9]

More often than not, the texts of Barnes's letters were unprintable, and too hot for the US postal system to handle. They had to be hand-delivered by messenger. A note to one of the critics who had disparaged his paintings during their exhibition contained explicit suggestions about her sex life.[6] When Barnes discovered Michener's ruse, neither deletions nor rewording could suitably clean up his letter for publication, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported.[16] In trying to arrange access to the gallery for Bryn Mawr College students, the president of that school casually wondered if she herself might be permitted entrance. She was told, among other things, that she could view the collection if she passed an intelligence test.[17]

If incurring Barnes's enmity was none too safe for one's vanity, being befriended by him was no guarantee of security either. When Bertrand Russell was dismissed from the College of the City of New York in 1940 because of his ultraliberal opinions, Barnes considered it a serious infringement of academic freedom and invited him to become a salaried teacher at the Barnes Foundation, where he could "speak his piece." However, a falling-out ensued between Barnes and Russell within two years, resulting in the termination of Russell's five-year contract and a $24,000 lawsuit brought by Russell against Barnes in an attempt to recover three years' worth of salary. Details vary wildly as to what caused the dispute.

In one version, the rift began as both Russell and his wife came to resent

Barnes's intrusions into their private lives, such as the unsolicited advice Barnes gave them on the proper upbringing of their four-year-old son.[18] In another account, however, it was friction between Barnes and Mrs. Russell that had resulted in her husband's dismissal. Barnes was reported to have been infuriated with Mrs. Russell's persistence in calling herself "Lady Russell," even though Russell himself had renounced his title of earl and preferred to be called "Mr. Russell" rather than "Lord Russell."[15] Still a third variant reports that all Mrs. Russell had done to bring Barnes's wrath down upon herself and her husband was to tour Barnes's collection and declare, a bit too loudly, that she didn't much care for it.[6] Barnes himself claimed that Russell had been fired simply because he had broken his contract.[19] In any event, the courts awarded Russell $20,000.

Although Barnes relished a good fight and took delight in using the media to embarrass or humiliate opponents, he was often less than pleased with his own treatment in the press. He was outraged, for instance, by the *Saturday Evening Post* series on him by McCardle.[7,9,15,17] "Many of the incidents and events and most of the quotations ascribed to me in McCardle's articles," he said, "I learned of for the first time in the galley proofs; indeed, some of the tales and nearly all of the supposedly verbatim reports of my sayings are really whoppers."[20] So incensed was Barnes that he attempted to prove the article wrong and set the record straight. When the issue containing the first of these *Post* articles hit the newsstands, Barnes drove up and down the Main Line, barged into 25 drugstores, and ripped down posters advertising it. Into every copy of the *Post* that was on display, he stuffed a seven-page pamphlet entitled "How It Happened."[20]

Barnes, active and fiery to the end, died on July 24, 1951, at the age of 79 when the car he was driving collided with a ten-ton tractor-trailer.[8] He was survived by his wife, the former Laura Leggett, of Brooklyn, New York. They had no children. When the news of Barnes's violent death reached Henri Marceau, then-curator of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, his only remark was, "How natural."[21]

In many of Barnes's disputes with the art establishment, which will be reviewed in a future essay, Barnes seemed to have had a valid point—only to have weakened his position by his stubbornly bellicose and churlish behavior. Barnes's belief in the validity and worthiness of modern art, in the face of stiff opposition from acknowledged art experts, has of course been vindicated. Years after the ill-fated 1923 public exhibition which saw a portion of his collection ridiculed, admission to his Foundation had become one of the most highly prized and sought after privileges in the Western art world. Hindsight seems to justify his opinion that the art establishment of the early twentieth century was too sentimental and caught up in bygone painting traditions to be able to quickly appreciate the genius of new techniques and developments. Whether one can "justify" Barnes's public airing of his famous gutter-language opinions of art experts is debatable. His remarks served only to infuriate the parties concerned and to reduce his own public image.[22] And, in fact, Barnes's many accomplishments in life were overshadowed by the view of him as an unreasoning and unreasonable ogre. But I suspect it could not have been otherwise. Genius is often a blend of intellect and madness. Remember, this is the same man of whom noted philosopher, psychologist, and educator Dewey once said, "I have never met his equal for sheer brain power."[7]

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