

Opening the Barnes Door: How America's Most Paranoid Art Museum Got That Way, and How, Under New Management, Dramatic Changes Are on the Way. [Part 1]

By Lucinda Fleeson

The Barnes Foundation Museum in Montgomery County [Pennsylvania] has been, for decades, a great pain in the neck.

It has made a point of insulting art scholars, curators and connoisseurs, both foreign and domestic. It has ignored the accepted scientific methods of protecting and preserving great art. From the first, it hid its treasures away from the public, and when the state brought legal actions trying to make it behave like other museums—that is, let people come in and look—the Barnes Foundation resisted with all of its might.

It is not too much to say that the Barnes has been one of the world's most eccentric, secretive and even paranoid cultural institutions.

Now, that may change.

The man who would oversee the change is Richard H. Glanton, the newly elected president of the foundation. When I went to see him at the Barnes offices in Merion, Glanton readily acknowledged that nothing in his background had prepared him for this task. "I never purported to know anything about art," he said. "But I can lead."

As he slipped off his expensive, navy suit jacket and hung it over a cherry Windsor chair, he revealed a set of flashy black-and-white suspenders woven with an intricate pattern of French architectural monuments. "Well," he said, "I'm just a simple lawyer with a liberal arts background and an enduring interest in politics. By education and by birthright and by everything else, I qualify as an outsider."

Glanton, 43, is a black man born in rural Georgia. Despite what he tells you, he is a

lot more than a simple lawyer. He is a lifetime student of power.

His grandmother, a teacher, impressed upon him that books "were the key that unlocked the world." He graduated from West Georgia College and the University of Virginia Law School, and he voted Republican, spurning the traditional home of Southern blacks, the Democratic Party. "It was the Democrats who were the architects of segregation and institutionalized inequities to many blacks. I was resolved I would be whatever they weren't." He worked for the Nixon and Ford administrations in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Glanton was deputy counsel to then-Gov. Dick Thornburgh for a while, but fell out with Thornburgh and left to go into private practice. He remained active in GOP politics, was a major fundraiser for the George Bush campaign, and became a partner in the law firm of Reed, Smith, Shaw & McClay. There, he rates a commanding corner office on the 25th floor of Liberty Place, befitting his position as the firm's biggest rainmaker. Last year he brought in \$2 million worth of business.

The founder of the institution Glanton now runs was Dr. Albert C. Barnes, possibly the world's greatest private collector of art. He specialized in the great 19th- and early-20th-century masters—Cezanne, Matisse, Renoir, Picasso and others—who launched the movement we now know as modern art.

Barnes grew up in a South Philadelphia slum. He played pro baseball to pay for medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, then set out for Germany, where he



Photo courtesy: Towpak Digital Archives

Albert C. Barnes, 1923, as he returned from an art collecting trip to Paris.

recruited the partner with whom he developed the antiseptic Argyrol. This was before the discovery of antibiotics. After a worldwide marketing campaign had earned him a fortune, Barnes devoted himself to the serious study of art and collecting. He created his foundation in 1922.

Philadelphia critics panned his first exhibition of ultra-modern artists in 1923, and Barnes spent the rest of his life waging public wars with the art establishment. He was infamous for refusing to let renowned art scholars, collectors and critics view his collection. He rejected Sir Kenneth Clark, former director of London's National Gallery, because of Clark's alliance with the Philadelphia Museum of Art, or as Barnes called it in his rejection letter, "The House of Prostitution of Art and Education on the Parkway."

Art historians Meyer Schapiro and John Rewald had to sneak in under assumed identities. Rewald recalled that he usually saw "about a dozen people there—cab drivers, street cleaners, and the like. But if you were a teacher, artist, or wrote about art, it was hopeless."

Barnes spent decades trying without success to persuade area universities and colleges to adopt his unorthodox theories—including educational principles of American philosopher John Dewey that are widely accepted today. Nine months before he died, he rewrote his will to empower Lincoln University, the small black school in Chester County, to name the foundation's future caretakers. He stipulated that no trustee ever be named from "the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Bryn Mawr, Haverford or Swarthmore Colleges, or the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts."

It is insulting, Lincoln officials say, to suggest that Barnes willed his collection to them as a last nose-thumbing gesture at the Main Line. The doctor had demonstrated a long interest in black culture; he had assembled the first American collection of African sculpture, and he educated many of the black employees of his chemical factory. At the time of his death in 1951, Barnes and Lincoln were collaborating on a joint course of study.

For decades after Barnes' death, the trustees he had appointed continued to control his collection, and they closed even tighter the iron gates surrounding the French Chateau-style gallery and its 12-acre park. It became, in many ways, their private preserve.

A court battle forced the foundation to admit the public to its galleries on a limited basis beginning in 1961, but scholars and researchers still were refused access to records and historical information normally available from museums. Even the existence of many of the paintings is largely unknown throughout the world, as they have never been photographed in color for lectures and books. Because the foundation has a strict policy against loans, its paintings have never traveled anywhere since they were shipped to Merion—often directly from artists' studios in Paris in the 1920s. They have been, in a sense, buried alive.

Only after the last of the Barnes-appointed trustees died in 1988 did provisions



Photo courtesy Temple Urban Archives

Barnes showing philosopher Bertrand Russell his art collection in 1941.

of Barnes' will go into effect transferring control of the foundation to Lincoln University. Its responsibilities are extensive, including not only the museum, arboretum, family residence and grounds in Merion but also offices on Haywood Road and Barnes' Chester County estate, Ker-Feal. For the first time ever, these properties are now in the hands of a leadership that seems interested in real change.

Glanton seems to understand the tremendous force that the Barnes Foundation can unleash by opening itself up. He also is supremely aware of the cultural symbolism of Lincoln University's role in determining the future of the Barnes and is determined that it be both visionary and dignified.

Since his election as foundation president in July, Glanton has been courted with invitations to art events, lunches, dinners and private showings by museum leaders here

and around the country. All of which he has declined, except when making his own private investigations. On his desk, for instance, was a memo about a forthcoming trip to the J. Paul Getty museum in Malibu, Calif. "We want to look at their systems and building," he explained, "and the director there has graciously agreed."

Glanton and the other trustees have also been convening private meetings with curators and directors from the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And they have received a multitude of suggestions. In an age when museums conduct market surveys, package exhibitions like perfume, and offer "full-service entertainment facilities" with restaurants, films, gift shops, and mail-order catalogues, the Barnes Foundation remains virgin territory. Glanton and his colleagues want to figure out how to enter the modern



Photo courtesy Temple Urban Archives

The front of the main Barnes Foundation building as it looked in 1961.

age without selling the soul of this quirky, eccentric, yet charming place.

"There are some people who would tell you that you could really turn this foundation into a Smithsonian," he says. "But that would be totally inimical to the concept of its nature. It's not what Dr. Barnes had conceived of.... It would be a violation of the trust and the spirit of it."

On the other hand, Glanton appears to be taking a broad interpretation of the foundation's educational mission as described in the indenture of trust. He is already contemplating ventures that could transform this most private of institutions into a major cultural presence. Under consideration is a public television documentary about Barnes and his collection—although "the foundation would have to control its own production, of course."

Barnes' estate, Ker-Feal, has the potential for being converted into an artist's residence for lectures, courses, perhaps even fund-raising events. Glanton thinks Barnes' pre-Revolutionary farm house and its surrounding gardens and 137 acres of farmland

might possibly be transformed into an arboretum that could be one of the region's largest tourist attractions. "My view is that Ker-Feal could rival Longwood Gardens if proper resources were available," he says. "With the right resources I think we would all be surprised at what could be done."

Glanton is interviewing art publishers for the publication of a color catalogue of the Barnes collection. This would be a first for the Barnes. A grant writer is about to be hired to draft fund-raising proposals for the National Endowment for the Arts and major private foundations—the first time the foundation has ever solicited a dime of outside money. Staff members are working to develop a plan to convert the legions of alumni of the foundation's art-appreciation courses into a loyal—and financially supportive—membership.

The projects Glanton has in mind would take money and plenty of it. The foundation's original endowment of \$9 million—a generous sum at the time—has hardly grown at all, because of imprudent investments. Today, it generates only about

\$1 million a year in income, just barely enough, Glanton said, to support 40 or 50 employees, care for the art, and manage all the other foundation assets.

The assets, however, are mind-boggling.

Barnes was ahead of his time on many fronts. He bought, for instance, what now turns out to be the largest cache of Cezannes in existence, along with other post-impressionists, at a time when these works were being ignored by the French art establishment.

A few years ago, a tentative value of \$1 billion was set on the 1,000 works of art in the collection, but in today's art market, where impressionist and post-impressionist canvases bring top prices and guarantee block-buster attendance at museums, the collection's value is incalculable. It dwarfs all other collections of its type.

Take Cezannes, for instance.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art has 16 Cezannes. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has eight. All the museums in Paris combined have 55. The Barnes has 57.

A single canvas by Renoir sold earlier this year for \$78.1 million. The Barnes Foundation owns 171 Renoirs.

A van Gogh recently sold for \$53.9 million. The Barnes has seven van Goghs. It also has 54 Matisse's, a monumental Seurat, 19 Picassos (including *Two Harlequins*, which is probably far superior in quality and value to a similar canvas that sold last year for \$38.5 million), 17 Rousseaus, and 11 Modiglianis. Barnes is credited in part with discovering Modigliani.

Many people "both inside and outside the foundation," Glanton said, have suggested that the trustees sell some of the foundation's less glamorous holdings—Ker-Feal and its surrounding farmland, for instance, or the foundation offices on Haywood Road in Merion, or the American antique furniture that resides in both those houses. Glanton opposes selling these properties. He would rather see them developed

into a compound-style historic Barnes center. Even if all of those assets were sold, he argues, they probably wouldn't yield enough to provide the kind of stable financial base he'd like to have to ensure the foundation a comfortable future.

This raises an inevitable question: Will the new board seek to break the requirement in the indenture of trust that "no picture belonging to the collection shall ever be loaned, sold or otherwise disposed of." Other foundations have succeeded in getting themselves released from the terms of restrictive wills. And Glanton said he has "no fanatical commitment to following those aspects of the indenture that don't make sense."

Just selling a few Renoirs could make the Barnes one of this country's most richly endowed institutions. It would also virtually guarantee a furious debate, both within the foundation and throughout the museum community, over the merits of de-accession.

"It's premature to talk about that," Glanton said, pausing significantly. Still, a sale obviously is under discussion. "This is a very fundamental issue that the board will have to address in coming months," he said. "My goal and commitment is to make sure this board does not become Hamlet in the process of grappling with the question of how to build up the endowment."

Even as Glanton attempts to lead the foundation toward a new identity, he knows the place has long ago lost its standing as a strong voice in the art world. "When Dr. Barnes was alive," he said, "what the foundation did was world news. Now there's nothing coming out of here.

"When he died, the lights went out."

About two years ago, I attended one of the art classes at the Barnes. An old-fashioned school bell clanged loudly at precisely 3:25 p.m., and we students—about 110 of us—rushed to take our seats in the main art gallery. We had been informed several times of the strict rules. At 3:30 p.m. the door was

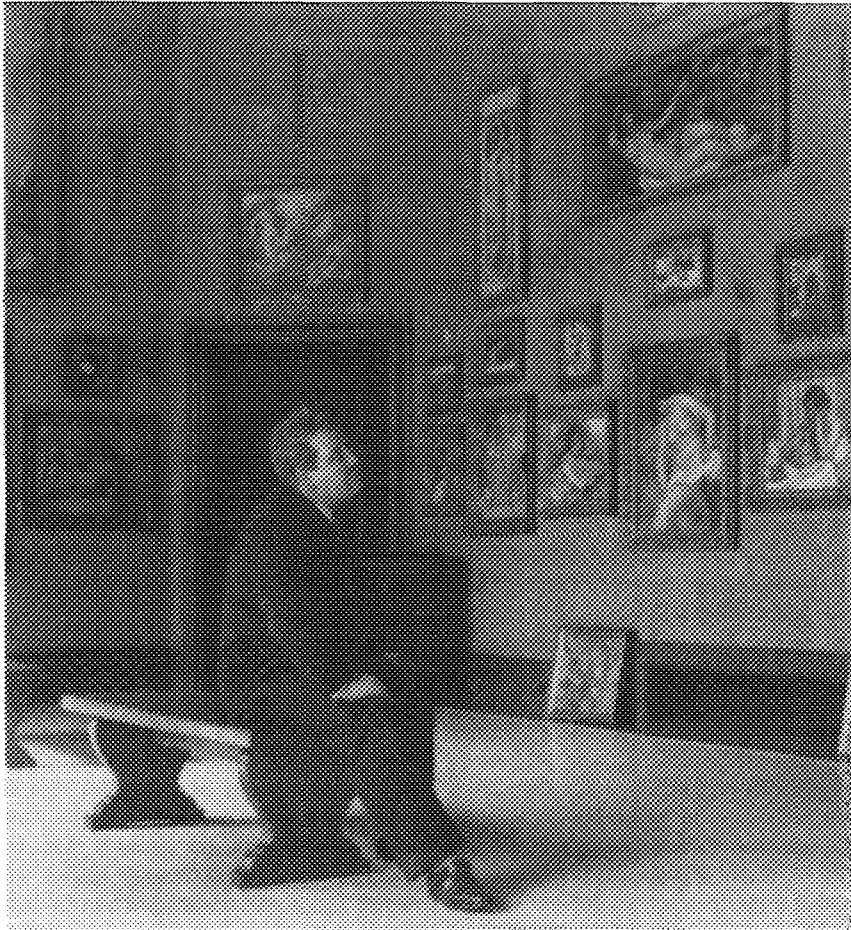


Photo courtesy Temple Urban Archives

The actor Charles Laughton views part of the Barnes collection in 1940.

locked, and no one who came late would be admitted. Two consecutive unexcused absences meant dismissal.

We sat in a soaring two-story room whose walls were covered to the ceiling with tiers of paintings, including three works that Joseph Rishel, curator of 19th-century European painting at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, ranks among the 10 most influential paintings of the 20th century—Cezanne’s monumental *Bathers*, his *Cardplayers*, and Seurat’s *Les Poseurs*. In addition, Matisse’s mural masterpiece, *La Dance*, seemed to leap between the second-story windows. Sitting on a table was a Cezanne still-life of

fruit, the painting Picasso credited with launching the cubist movement.

But even these riches were not enough for the lecture. From the far reaches of the other gallery rooms, a dozen more treasures—by Picasso, Monet, Manet and others—were brought and stacked on wooden easels fastened with clamps to stacked benches.

Richard Segal, a slight, soft-spoken man with a gray fringe of hair, introduced himself as the lecturer for first-year students at the Barnes Foundation—“Miss Violette de Mazia’s guest conductor.” It was a disappointment to many of the students that they were not able to hear Miss de Mazia herself.

Violette de Mazia had presided over the foundation's educational department and lectured for more than six decades. She was the last remaining person who had been closely associated with Dr. Barnes himself, and the chief proponent of his views. Just two weeks earlier, she had died, at the age of 89.

Segal, an Olney High School art teacher and former student at the foundation, paid tribute to them both: "Dr. Barnes and Violette de Mazia ventured into a field of art that still is a cloudy and murky area. There are many parallels to science and medicine in the Dark Ages.... They brought in the light of science and it was a powerful light indeed.

"Unfortunately," Segal ominously intoned, "great achievements and innovations have rarely been greeted with shouts of joy. More often, discoveries and advancement have been greeted with hostility or ridicule, or been simply ignored."

This was the accepted gospel at the Barnes Foundation. The teaching was not just about art history, or art techniques. It was also about the cult of the foundation itself, according to which Barnes and his followers had found the truth about art, while the rest of us—outsiders—were, if not scoffing fools, then at best ignorant, misled, misinformed, lost in the "Dark Ages" of art appreciation.

Segal duplicated almost word for word the lecture series that had been created by de Mazia, at times reading almost verbatim her essays published in the foundation's journals. Those who have heard both de Mazia and Segal say there is an uncanny echo of the elderly woman in Segal's voice, down to her phrasing, her expressions, even some of her gestures.

Miss de Mazia, as she was always called, didn't hesitate to say she didn't think Andrew Wyeth would be of enduring value. Segal continues that tradition, classifying the likes of Thomas Eakins, John Singer



Photo courtesy: Jasper J. Wilson/Artists

The artist Salvador Dali talks to woman believed to be Violette de Mazia at Barnes Foundation in 1945.

Sargent, Grant Wood, Andy Warhol and others as "not art." Jasper Johns, who'd been the subject of an acclaimed exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, received repeated attacks. "Decorative design," pronounced Segal, "but not art."

While there is a certain charm in the Barnes Foundation's willingness to poke holes in the views held by the know-it-all art establishment, many of the battles seemed to be tilting at very outdated windmills. One of Segal's lectures, for instance, was devoted to a defense of Cezanne against unnamed critics who condemned him for failing to follow perspective—a defense that Cezanne, by now, surely does not need.

Even the physical environment of the foundation seemed increasingly fragile. Because de Mazia and other Barnes followers maintained that Dr. Barnes intended the paintings to be hung in the particular "wall arrangements" he left at the time of his death, the placement of the paintings has never been changed.

The foundation lacked many modern improvements, including outside lighting. Students leaving class on early winter evenings were guided down the long, dark drive by flashlights set on plastic milk crates.

(Part 2 of this essay will appear in CC on April 15, 1991.)