

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 2]

By Lucinda Fleeson

When Barnes was in command, his foundation was a lively, often controversial center for high-level discussion of art. At first, Barnes attracted to Merion noted scholars as teachers. John Dewey, one of America's most respected philosophers, was the foundation's first director of education. Thomas Mann and Albert Einstein dined at the foundation together. Bertrand Russell lectured there in the 1940s before he was fired by Barnes. He was one of many teachers who had been at first embraced, then summarily dumped by the irascible doctor.

The only teachers who seemed to satisfy Barnes were members of a coterie of unmarried female employees whom Barnes personally trained and promoted. Sisters Mary and Nelle Mullen, for instance, had worked in his West Philadelphia Argyrol bottling factory as bottlers and accountants. They were taken along to Merion to work in the office and be trained as instructors, and eventually became trustees of the foundation.

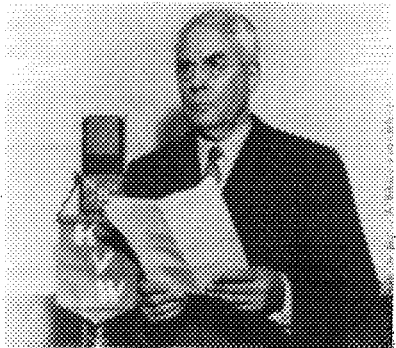


Photo courtesy Temple Urban Archives

Albert C. Barnes, 1936, telling the nation of recent art purchases made in Europe.

Not everyone was enthralled with these Barnes vestal virgins. Henry Hart, who received a scholarship to study at the foundation and later became a Barnes friend, wrote in his memoir of the doctor: "When the lecture was given by Barnes, it was a rewarding, intellectual experience, but when given by one of the three women he was then trying to transform into teachers, it was a manifestation of everything, I thought, to which he was opposed. I was aghast at their ineptitude and astonished that he did not appear to be aware of it."

[Miss Violette] de Mazia was the disciple who outlived the others and rose to preeminence after Barnes' death, although what her precise role was remains something of a mystery. She arrived at the foundation in the 1920s to teach French classes and two years later was made into an art instructor by Barnes. She was in her 20s, Barnes in his 50s. They became close collaborators on four of his five books (many credit her for lightening up his weighty prose) and traveling companions on art- and antiques-buying sprees in Europe and Pennsylvania-Dutch country.

Rumors were widely circulated in Philadelphia that she was Barnes' longtime mistress. Common gossip had it that Dr. Barnes drove home from his Chester County farm early on Sunday afternoons expressly for trysts with her while Mrs. Barnes stayed in the country.

De Mazia clearly dedicated her life to Dr. Barnes' work, both before and after his death. Some people who knew them late in their lives, however, expressed some doubts about whether their relationship was romantic. Regardless, the two were clearly soul



Photo courtesy Temple Urban Archives

A view of the Barnes Foundation as it appeared in 1967.

mates and travel mates and a source of enduring pain for Mrs. Barnes.

Barnes' wife, Laura, established an arboretum of rare plants surrounding the foundation, exhibiting as much zeal for horticulture as her husband had for art. She also founded a school, but unlike the art gallery, it was successful in attracting noted horticulture and botany scholars to teach and in establishing cooperative programs with other universities that are maintained to this day.

Mrs. Barnes confided to Helen Fogg and her husband, John M. Fogg Jr., the first director of the arboretum, about what a disturbing presence in her life de Mazia was. In an interview, Helen Fogg recalled Laura Barnes as "a very determined person. But mouselike in appearance and dominated by him. He would say terrible things to her. 'You don't know what you're talking about, Laura. Shut your mouth.' The way he treated her upset us...."

"She told us about the art-collecting trips and how neglected she was.... Mrs. Barnes hated de Mazia, just despised her. When they went abroad, Laura would be like the third member to their party. The two of them would go out to look at art, or take notes, and leave her behind." Mrs. Barnes was convinced, said Helen Fogg, that "something was going on" between her husband and the young art teacher.

De Mazia was not exempt from rough treatment by Barnes either. Julia Bond, wife of Horace Mann Bond, president of Lincoln University in the 1940s, who persuaded Barnes to name Lincoln as eventual trustee of the foundation, recalled how Barnes treated de Mazia:

"I remember going to the foundation and meeting Miss de Mazia. Dr. Barnes was there and he shouted, 'Where is that bitch? Tell that bitch to come here.' And she came and acted like nothing happened. It didn't seem to touch her. She didn't show any emotion." De Mazia seemed unwilling to oppose him on the slightest matter. "The one pervasive thought in her life was to carry out the wishes of Dr. Barnes, and she was utterly and totally devoted to his cause," recalled Louise Hill, the wife of another Lincoln official who used to visit the foundation in those days.

Before Dr. Barnes died, Laura Barnes confided her worries to the Foggs that her husband would leave de Mazia in charge of the foundation.

On July 24, 1951, at the age of 78, Barnes was on his way home from his Chester County estate when he drove through a stop sign at the dangerous intersection of Routes 401 and 29 in Phoenixville. A tractor-trailer smashed into his Packard, and Barnes was killed instantly. After his death, there was



Photo courtesy Philadelphia Inquirer/Temple Urban Archives

Violette de Mazia, center-left, arriving for 1962 court hearing.

comment in the art world that Barnes was a man who ignored stop signs all his life.

De Mazia was only a lecturer at the time of his death, but her control grew gradually and expanded each time another devoted employee died, until de Mazia was the last living link to Dr. Barnes.

De Mazia made a lasting impression with her flowered dresses and fresh flowers in her hair, chosen to coordinate with her lectures of the day. Robert L. Herbert, now professor of art history at Yale University, remembers obtaining permission to visit as a student in the 1950s and was greeted in midafternoon by de Mazia wearing a long, sequined ball gown.

In old age, she continued to wear 10 rings at a time, including silver jingling thumb rings and large quantities of Western silver jewelry. Her hair grew thinner and thinner, although she would continue to stroke it flirtatiously. One of her associates likened her mannerisms to those of Greta Garbo.

"People thought highly of her, or they didn't," said Helen Fogg. "People called her an old witch, and that's how she came across to people, with these silly little curls of hair."

The art gallery and the arboretum existed as if separate countries. By mutual consent, Mrs. Barnes and de Mazia avoided each other. After Laura Barnes died in 1966, de Mazia, then age 66, assumed even more duties.

After Mrs. Barnes' death, gardeners at the arboretum continued to order flower bulbs by the hundreds to force indoors for the 30 vases a day for the house, which had been the standing order of Mrs. Barnes. The arboretum's three greenhouses continued to grow orchids and dozens of poinsettias and hydrangeas for Christmas. Many of the flowers ended up being thrown away, recalled former employee Paul Woodyard.

Even when Mrs. Barnes was gone, the war between the arboretum and the mistress of the art gallery continued, and there were frequent quarrels over use of staff at the foundation and over budgets.

Ed Read, a former gardener, recalls that the bitter feud between de Mazia and Dr. Fogg, director of the arboretum, erupted one day into a yelling match between the two. "It was some incident that had to do with the borrowing of a stool that wasn't returned. It led to an enormous blowup." After that, he and the rest of the arboretum staff were instructed by de Mazia that "we weren't to speak to the people at the gallery."

Gallery attendants were similarly instructed not to associate with the arboretum staff or to walk on the grounds. Students admitted to de Mazia's classes received written regulations with the order: "Walking on the grounds is not permissible."

Barnes specified in his will that his residence, connected to the gallery by a second-story bridge, be used for classes. Advanced seminar students were therefore allowed inside one room for lectures and to use the library. Otherwise, the public was never allowed inside the house, unoccupied except for one retired housekeeper, now in her 90s, who lives alone in one of the servants' rooms.

Inside are dozens of paintings never seen by the public, including a large Courbet, *The Shepherdess*, in the center hall, several Soutines and Pascins, whose existence are virtually unknown, in the now-empty guest bedrooms. A de Chirico oil portrait of Barnes as a young man depicts him as fresh and rugged.

The upstairs rooms were almost entirely empty. Most of the furniture was sold at auction or donated to the Brooklyn Museum of Art after the death of Mrs. Barnes—where it has since been entombed in storage for more than 30 years, unseen.

Barnes' bedroom remained as it was at his death, with a tiger-maple single bed and thin, horse-hair mattress, covered with an Early American-style woven bedspread. A simple maple dressing table still held his ivory combs and brushes. The bathrooms were equipped with 1920s state-of-the-art gadgets: a glass tube heat lamp, and a marble shower ringed with stainless-steel tubing to shoot jets of water like a verticle Jacuzzi.

Just seven months after Barnes' death, the foundation faced what its leaders then considered its gravest threat. Walter Annenberg, then publisher of *The Inquirer* and himself a collector of post-impressionist art, brought suit against the foundation, arguing that it should be open to the public. The taxpayers' suit was dismissed for lack of standing, but the state attorney general's office took up the same cause in 1957. Six days before that suit was to go to trial, the foundation signed a consent agreement in 1960 agreeing to allow public access on Fridays and Saturdays. After Mrs. Barnes died, the foundation added Sunday afternoons.

For years afterward, the state continued to bring the foundation into court on various charges. At one point, the state attempted—unsuccessfully—to remove de Mazia and other trustees for allegedly abusing finances and failing to take care of the artwork. Photographs of the Barnes women during these court hearings portray them as fearful and pathetic-looking. The Mullen sisters were forced to admit that they had no art training, and de Mazia was humiliated on the stand, first testifying about her educational degrees from European institutions and then, in a whisper, admitting under cross examination that she had never been registered at those universities.

The threat of court action left a bitter legacy of distrust and fear among the foundation trustees that was paralyzing. For years, memos from trustees allude to the threat of a



Photo courtesy Philadelphia Inquirer/Temple Urban Archives

Albert Barnes's wife, Laura, arriving for 1962 court hearing.

court appearance as a reason not to take any action that would require approval from Orphans Court, charged with overseeing charitable trusts in Pennsylvania.

This fear cost the foundation income, perhaps as much as many millions of dollars. Barnes had left the foundation with a healthy endowment of \$9.35 million—almost four times the \$2.5 million endowment of the Philadelphia Museum of Art at the time. But the Barnes endowment was used to meet expenses and dipped to a low of \$6 million during the 1970s. It currently stands at \$8.97 million. (In contrast, the Philadelphia Art Museum's endowment has since grown to \$51 million.)

Barnes specified in the trust agreement that the foundation invest its money solely in federal, state and municipal or railroad bonds. An Orphans Court judge chastised trustees in 1962 for so blindly following Dr. Barnes' directions that they held \$7.5 million in municipal bonds paying a lowly 2½ percent interest. Even after this rebuke, the foundation insisted on maintaining some of these investments until the early 1980s.

Partly because its investment income was so low, and partly because the Barnes Foundation has never received a government grant nor engaged in a single fund-raising activity, it operated on a shoe-string budget. Many salaries are barely above minimum wage.

Many of the foundation's multimillion-dollar assets languished. According to court records, Ker-Feal was sometimes used only twice a year, for visits by the foundation's horticulture classes. Some of the surrounding farmland in recent years was leased to a local farmer without charge.

Throughout the court battles over access, foundation officials and their attorneys argued that admission of the public would interfere with the courses taught at the foundation and would be akin to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School allowing the public into their laboratories.

Dr. Barnes considered art appreciation almost exclusively a matter of line, form and color relationships. Historical and biographical information about painters, or even titles on the paintings, confused the issue, he believed. Consequently, a trip to the Barnes museum is both a wonderful and a frustrating experience. The paintings are simply presented in their raw form—no dates, no titles, no supplementary information of any kind. This is not all bad, and yet one cannot help leaving the gallery a little hungry for such details. There is not even a catalogue to illuminate the collection. (During de Mazia's day, there was not even an internal inventory for security purposes.) There is no place to read that Matisse's *Joie de Vivre*, hung in the stairwell and difficult to see at full advantage, is believed by many to be his greatest masterpiece, his response to Picasso. Or that Seurat's *Les Poseurs* is as much of a masterpiece as his well-known *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The Barnesian methods have been criticized as banal and obvious. And critics have long questioned whether they were original—even in the 1920s. "Barnes was repeating already well-established notions, which were current among authors, critics, historians of art since 1880s," said art historian Meyer Schapiro.

Barnes had always limited classes at the foundation to about a dozen students. Perhaps in response to the complaints of insufficient public access, de Mazia increased class size to its current 100 students or

more. Because the classes could no longer fit into some of the small gallery rooms, she directed janitors to move the paintings to the main gallery hall—a practice she was admonished for by museum officials. Charles Jacques Sterling, curator of The Louvre in Paris, testified in court in 1962, "If you move pictures very often, you multiply the chance of their being dropped and, if it is an old painting, then it suffers enormously from being suddenly dropped."

Something like that did happen in 1978, according to former gallery assistant Paul Woodyard, when de Mazia asked him to fetch a small Picasso for class that was hanging high on a wall: "I couldn't get the damn thing off the wall, and then suddenly it goes flying across the room," recalls Woodyard. "I said, 'Whoops.' Then I picked it up, it looked all right, went out, and said, 'Here's the Picasso.'"

Another gallery assistant once stepped on a Modigliani by mistake. And Woodyard remembers how he accidentally punctured a hole in a Glackens nude.

One of de Mazia's last and most fervent battles—and perhaps her most far-sighted—was against restoration and conservation of paintings in the gallery. Barnes, in rejecting the conventional wisdom of the art world, also rejected the so-called experts who specialize in painting conservation and restoration, a policy de Mazia steadfastly continued after Barnes' death. As a result, the kind of drastic conservation work that now has been repudiated for having ruined paintings in museums all over the world was never performed at the Barnes. Examinations of the collection by experts today conclude that it is one of the last collections in existence to be in such pristine condition, virtually untouched and undamaged by restorers' hands.

Barnes specified in his trust that the educational program of his foundation be for "the plain people." Academic degrees and honors, he maintained, were educational hooey. "It's something we don't believe in," Segal explained. "Dr. Barnes considered degrees intellectually immoral. He considered them a carrot, inducing people to take

courses for degrees rather than for learning and personal growth. That is the main reason we never sought and, in fact, rejected accreditation."

Even so, after Barnes died, de Mazia collected honorary degrees from local colleges and elsewhere, all of which are displayed in a small office off the foundation's main entrance.

Richard Nenneman, the editor of the *Christian Science Monitor* and a former trust banker who was appointed for a five-year term beginning in 1978 to oversee foundation finances, said trustees were easily dominated by de Mazia, "by her sheer tenacity and strength of will." Her wishes became the force behind most things that went on at the Barnes Foundation. To any suggestion she did not like, de Mazia's ready answer was that Dr. Barnes would not have done it.

Other museums were never consulted on policy; indeed, such contact was shunned. Recent foundation budgets show that during the last three years of de Mazia's life, a total of \$326 was spent on travel.

Against the suggestion by other trustees that a color catalogue be printed, she argued that any reproduction distorts the true color of an artwork and "fools" people into thinking they have seen the original. It was a policy that was particularly confusing because both she and her successor, Segal, illustrated lectures with hundreds of color prints from other museums—prints of considerable age and poor quality, taped with Scotch tape to dog-eared mats.

As de Mazia grew older, her almost fanatical obsession over control of the foundation grew. Employees who lived on the foundation grounds remember her with a mixture of fond respect and near terror. Ed Read, 34, now a computer programmer at the University of Pennsylvania, was evicted from his living quarters in a garage apartment on the property because he was going to be married. He said de Mazia was "very arbitrary in her likes and dislikes. She did like me for a while.... We stayed there not because of the money but because of everything else. The whole aura of the foundation."

Sometimes the outside world intruded on the bastion in Merion in ways that must have been trying. In the early 1970s, de Mazia invited William Fagg, then director of the Museum of Mankind in London and perhaps the world's most renowned scholar of African art, to visit the Barnes Foundation to view its collection of African pieces. David J. Crownover, formerly an administrator at the University Museum, was host to Fagg on that visit to Philadelphia, and remembered that Fagg "was very polite, but said that some of the tribal attributions were wrong. But instead of changing the labels, Miss de Mazia had the labels taped over."

To this day, one can visit the Barnes Foundation's second floor and see that all the brass name and date labels on the African art have been painted over with what looks like pink nail polish, or covered over with irregularly snipped pieces of brown tape.

After de Mazia's death in 1988, her house near the foundation was put up for sale, and her extensive art and furniture collection—gifts from Dr. Barnes, and other objects apparently picked up cheaply on their buying tours—were catalogued and sold by Christie's auction house in New York. A Philadelphia preview of the sale turned into a society event, bringing out many of Philadelphia's leading museum officials and collectors.

In all, the sale yielded \$8 million, which was deposited in a supporting trust set up to "benefit and advance the purposes of" the Barnes Foundation. This nearly doubled the foundation's endowment, adding \$400,000 a year to its operating income. Everything of any significant value was given over completely to the trust.

Richard Glanton declines to talk about the odd goings-on at the foundation for the last several decades. "I am really resolved and resolute that I would not, in any way, shape or form, criticize those who had gone before me," he said.

However, he clearly believes that "the collection is a national treasure," and he even commends Walter Annenberg for his role in forcing the foundation to hold public hours.

(Glanton has invited Annenberg to lunch at the foundation.)

Glanton now spends two or three afternoons a week at the foundation, primarily attending to housekeeping matters. He has renovated Barnes' old residence and moved the foundation offices there. The trust of indenture charges that "all buildings and improvements of Donee shall at all times be kept in first-class order and repair." Clearly, they are not.

But already the climate-control and security systems have been assessed. Plans are being made to update management policies and even increase pay for employees, "which right now is inadequate for people who have dedicated their lives to the foundation," Glanton says.

The Barnes' public visiting hours are still among the most restrictive anywhere. They are closed four days a week, as well as during peak visiting periods, all of July and August, and all holidays. No children under 12 are allowed at any time.

For now, Glanton says he foresees no changes in visiting hours. "I can envision, after some of the larger issues have been addressed, that could be revisited," he adds.

A committee headed by the president of Lincoln University, Niara Sudarkasa, Glanton says, will likely recommend opening the archives to scholars.

And already, Glanton, the lawyer turned museum president, has developed some personal favorites in the collection—Picasso's *Two Harlequins* and the van Gogh self-portrait. And it is evident that he has spent much time poking among the cobwebs of the foundation, unearthing tales and history that may soon become public knowledge.

"You know the three Matisse paintings on the second floor?" he asks, referring to a massive triptych, *Three Sisters*, that was broken up for sale shortly after the artist finished painting them. "Matisse painted them to hang together, and when he came to the foundation and saw them together again, he cried."

Editorial Schedule Change

With the first issue of 1991, ISI® implemented a schedule change in the front matter for *Current Contents*.® *Citation Classics*® and the *ISI® Press Digest*, including *Hot Topics*, now appear every other week. They alternate with either an essay by Eugene Garfield, a reprint with an appropriate introduction, or an essay by an invited guest.