



Albert C. Barnes  
with Fidèle  
(copy print),  
1995.

Photographed by Angelo Pinto. Photograph Collection, Barnes Foundation Archives.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

Today's art world has hedge fund managers and oligarchs snapping up investment-grade Damien Hirst pickled sharks and Jeff Koons puppies. That's kids' stuff compared to the collecting prowess of Albert C. Barnes, the Philadelphia pharmaceutical magnate who built the greatest private collection of early modern art in the world.

Barnes began collecting in the 1910s and by mid-century had amassed around 2,500 artworks, including hoards of pictures by renowned masters: 181 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes, 59 MatisSES, 46 Picassos and more. He outpaced all his contemporaries, including the museums.

It's considered crass to talk about money and art in the same breath, but even the most laded would be awed that the Barnes collection today is worth something like \$30 billion. A single Cézanne—inferior to at least one owned by Barnes—sold last year to the royal family of Qatar for a reported \$250 million. That's believed to be the highest price ever paid for a work of art, and remember, Barnes had 69 Cézannes, more than remain in all the museums of Paris.

The Barnes Foundation recently opened a new building in central Philadelphia. How it got there is more than a story about art collecting. It's about an anti-establishment American visionary, his pharmaceutical fortune, legal and political maneuvering, and a city's efforts to redefine itself for the 21st century.

For 80-odd years, the collection was tucked away in a leafy suburb where Barnes created a special gallery and art school. A Philly native, he'd grown up poor, put himself through the University of Pennsylvania medical school, then struck it rich developing and marketing an antiseptic (Argyrol) used to prevent the passage of gonorrhoea from mother to infant during childbirth. He bought out his partner in 1908, and after two decades of exponential growth, sold the company for \$6 million, closing the deal just months before the stock crash of 1929. ▶

## From Obscurity to Fame

Albert C. Barnes' \$30 billion art collection was once Philadelphia's best-kept secret, but its recent, headline-grabbing move to a new location is giving it the star treatment it deserves.



Paul Cézanne, French, 1839-1906.  
The Card Players (Les Joueurs de  
cartes), 1890-1892. Oil on canvas,  
53 1/4 x 71 7/8 in.

With his assets in tax-exempt bonds, the collector thrived in the Great Depression. "My specialty was robbing the suckers who had invested all their money in flimsy securities and then had to sell their priceless paintings to keep a roof over their heads," he later smirked. He'd begun buying American and European art in 1912, sending painter-friend William Glackens on a buying spree to Paris where, for \$20,000, he scooped up Impressionists and Post-Impressionists like Renoir, Cézanne and van Gogh. And he had a taste for modernists then considered outlandish, such as Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani and Soutine, buying not just one or two canvases by each, but sometimes dozens. Today their values are astronomical.

In the 1920s Barnes transferred his art and a large endowment into an art-educational foundation housed in a French-style château that he built in an arboretum adjacent to his home in the Philadelphia Mainline township of Lower Merion. Headed by philosopher John Dewey (inventor of the library decimal system), the school offered classes based on Barnes' art theories and his wife's interest in horticulture.

He believed art appreciation could improve the lives of ordinary people, and he loved nothing more than preaching his ideas to workers in his factory and the handful of students he admitted to his school. He used his gallery to illustrate how▷

Barnes loathed the art establishment of Philadelphia, where an exhibit of his collection had been savaged in the press.



Amedeo Modigliani, Italian, 1884-1920.  
Redheaded Girl in Evening Dress (Jeune  
fille roussée en robe de soir), 1918. Oil on  
canvas, 45 3/4 x 28 3/4 in.



Right: Claude Monet, French, 1840-1926, The Studio Boat (Le Bateau-atelier), 1876, Oil on canvas, 28 5/8 x 23 5/8 in.

Below right: Edgar Degas, French, 1834-1917, Group of Dancers (Groupe de danseuses), 1900, Oil pastel on paper, 22 7/4 x 16 1/8 in.

composition, form, color and texture were shared by art throughout the ages. Rooms combined modern art with Old Masters, African sculptures, Pennsylvania folk furniture and wrought-iron metalwork, forming quirky ensembles that allowed Barnes to point out how the curving lines of a metal hinge might rhyme with the curving buttocks of a Renoir nude. Traditionalists hated it, but Barnes was his own man.

He made access to his collection by application only, turning away art historians, curators, collectors and anyone else he deemed a snob. When blue-blood collectors and university dons begged for an invitation, Barnes rejected them with sarcastic letters—some signed with his dog's paw print.

He died in a car crash in 1951, leaving control of the foundation's board to Lincoln University, a nearby African-American college. It was not only an expression of his egalitarianism, but a dig at Philadelphia plutocrats who coveted the collection. He also decreed that his gallery remain exactly as it was in perpetuity. But after decades of fiscal mismanagement and failures to relax operating restrictions imposed by Merton, by the late 1990s the foundation was in financial trouble.

Philadelphia's power brokers, led by the governor and three regional foundations, resolved to relocate the trove downtown and make it a tourist attraction. Despite opposition from Barnes alumni and county officials, who belatedly realized that a national treasure was slipping through their fingers, the consortium wrested control of the board and won court approval to move the collection to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway near the city's art museum. The nasty legal battle is recounted in the documentary film "The Art of the Steal." ▽



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Vincent van Gogh, Dutch, 1853-1890, The Postman (Joseph-Etienne Roulin), 1889, Oil on canvas, 25 7/8 x 21 3/4 in.





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Above left: Paul Gauguin, French, 1848-1903. Mr. Loulou (Louis Le Ray), 1890. Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 18 1/4 in.

Above right: Henri Rousseau, French, 1844-1910. Woman Walking in an Exotic Forest (Femme se promenant dans un forêt exotique), 1905. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 31 3/4 in.

Well, it's a done deal now. And the surprise for art world naysayers, who bemoaned the injustice of breaking Barnes' trust indenture, is that the new building by New York architect duo Tod Williams and Billie Tsien is a triumph. Critics have been swayed by the serene modernist treasure box, which reconstructs the scale and layout in the galleries and adds improved lighting, an auditorium and classrooms, a restaurant and shop, and galleries for changing shows. A degree of authenticity has been lost, but the consensus is that the essential features of the original gallery are preserved and access enhanced, promising renewed life for this astounding collection.

The Barnes alone is worth a pilgrimage, and visitors also can stroll next door to the Rodin Museum and to the nearby Philadelphia Museum of Art, one of the best encyclopedic museums in North America. With more Post-Impressionist and early Modern artworks than anywhere outside of France, Philadelphia is banking on its new Museum Mile as a magnet that will transform the city's cultural profile and enrich its economic future. [barnesfoundation.org](http://barnesfoundation.org) ♦

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