



Fact Sheet

THE BARNES FOUNDATION: A BRIEF HISTORY

Albert C. Barnes was born in a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia in 1872. Intelligent and highly motivated, he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania medical school in 1892 and continued his education in Germany, where he studied chemistry. While working for the H. K. Mulford pharmaceutical company in Philadelphia, he and his German colleague Hermann Hille co-invented the silver-based antiseptic Argyrol, which became the basis of Barnes's fortune. In June 1901 he married Laura Leggett of Brooklyn, New York. The couple built a new home, which they called "Lauraston," on Union Avenue (now Latch's Lane) in Merion, Pennsylvania, in 1905.

In 1907, Barnes bought out Hille's share of the Barnes and Hille company, and in 1908 he established the A. C. Barnes Company in Philadelphia, which he continued to run until 1929. Barnes organized his employees' work day to include a two-hour seminar, in which they discussed the writings of William James, George Santayana, and John Dewey, and examined original works of art.

Barnes's interest in art led to a resumption of his friendship with an old high-school friend, artist William Glackens. In 1912, Barnes sent Glackens to Paris to scout the galleries for Modern paintings. Glackens bought close to thirty works on Barnes's behalf. Subsequently, relying primarily on his own eye, Barnes acquired an outstanding collection of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and early Modern paintings; medieval manuscripts and sculptures; Old Master paintings; Native American fine crafts; Early American furniture and decorative art; and ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman art. He was also an early and influential collector of African sculpture.

In 1917, Barnes enrolled in a post-graduate philosophy seminar at Columbia University taught by John Dewey. Barnes and Dewey became close friends and ideological collaborators, whose correspondence eventually spanned more than three decades. Inspired by Dewey's theories of experiential education, "learning by doing" and social transformation, Barnes decided to expand his factory seminars into a more advanced experiment in education.

In October 1922, Barnes purchased a twelve-acre arboretum, established in 1880 by Captain Joseph Lapsley Wilson that stood down the road from "Lauraston." A few months later, on December 4, 1922, he received a charter from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to establish the Barnes Foundation, an educational institution dedicated to promoting the appreciation of fine art and horticulture. Barnes hired the noted architect Paul Philippe Cret to design a residence and a gallery on the arboretum grounds. The Barnes Foundation was officially dedicated on March 19, 1925.

Barnes's intended audience for the Foundation included factory and shop workers, poor and disenfranchised people, African-Americans and young artists. The Barnes educational method was based on experiencing original works, participating in class discussions, reading key texts in philosophy and the traditions of art and looking objectively at the use of color, line, light and space in each work of art. Barnes believed that students would not only learn about art but also would improve their critical thinking and their ability to learn and succeed in general, enabling them to be more productive participants in a democratic society.

In 1940, Barnes purchased an eighteenth-century fieldstone farmhouse, which he named Ker-Feal, situated on almost 138 acres of mixed farmland and forest in Chester County, Pennsylvania. In the historic house, Barnes intended to create a "living museum of art and to develop a botanical garden," which would become part of the Foundation's educational mission.

Barnes struggled for years with questions about the eventual disposition of his Foundation, including whether it should remain an independent organization or be affiliated with an established institution of learning such as the University of Pennsylvania. In 1947, Barnes made a donation to Lincoln University, a small, historically black college in Chester County, Pennsylvania, which was the beginning of an association between the Foundation and the college. In 1951, Barnes amended the Foundation's by-laws so that, eventually, Lincoln's board of trustees would nominate four of the five members of the Board of Trustees of the Barnes Foundation.

On the afternoon of July 24, 1951, with his dog, Fidèle, sitting at his side, Barnes drove off from Ker-Feal for an appointment at the Foundation in Merion. On a rural road in Chester County, a truck slammed into Barnes's automobile, killing him instantly.

After Barnes's death, Laura L. Barnes succeeded her husband as President of the Foundation. Within months, the Foundation was embroiled in litigation. In February 1952 Philadelphia Inquirer editor Harold J. Wiegand brought suit in state court, arguing that the Barnes Foundation should be open to the public without prior appointment. (At the time, visitors were required to make an appointment in advance and obtain an admission card.) The case was dismissed, and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court affirmed the decision in 1953. The subject arose again in April 1958, however, when Pennsylvania Attorney General Anne X. Alpern, along with Deputy Attorney General Lois G. Forer, petitioned the Montgomery County Orphans' Court to compel the opening of the Barnes Foundation's galleries to the public. Again the case was dismissed, but this time the ruling was overturned by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. The Foundation signed a consent decree on December 19, 1960, agreeing to open to the public on Fridays and Saturdays on a first-come, first-served basis.

Laura L. Barnes died on April 29, 1966. Longtime Barnes employee Nelle E. Mullen succeeded her as President and served until her death in 1967. At that time, the board voted to confirm the first Lincoln University nominee, George D. Cannon, as a member, while Sidney W. Frick became President.

On September 20, 1988, Violette de Mazia died. In addition to having been a trustee since 1951 and Vice President of the board (1966), she was a longtime teacher, Director of Art Education, co-author with Dr. Barnes of four books and an artist represented in the gallery collection. One year later, Franklin H. Williams, a Lincoln nominee, was elected President. After his untimely death in 1990, Richard Glanton was elected to succeed him.

During Glanton's tenure, the Barnes petitioned the Montgomery County Orphans' Court to approve a proposed tour of selected paintings from the gallery to raise money for renovations. The tour took place from 1993-1995, with works from the collection traveling to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Musée d'Orsay, Paris; the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo; the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas; the Art Gallery of Ontario; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany. After the completion of the tour, the renovated gallery reopened in late 1995.

In 1998, Kimberly Camp was appointed Executive Director and CEO of the Barnes, and Kenneth S. Sadler was elected to succeed Richard Glanton as President. Sadler was followed a year later by Bernard C. Watson. In 2000, The Getty Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts provided preliminary funding for a Collections Assessment Project to assess, catalogue, stabilize and provide scholarly research on the art and archival collections. The following year, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation began funding the bulk of the project, with further support from Pew and the Luce Foundation.

On September 24, 2002, the Barnes Foundation announced that it would petition the Montgomery County Orphans' Court for permission to expand its board of trustees and move its gallery collection to Philadelphia, where the Foundation would construct a new building. On December 15, 2004, the court approved the petition. Camp resigned in 2005, and in 2006 Derek Gillman was appointed Executive Director and President. The announcement of the selection of Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects as architects for the new building and 4.5 acre campus on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway was made in September 2007, and on November 13, 2009, a formal groundbreaking ceremony was held. The new campus is scheduled to open to the public on May 19, 2012.