

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION AT THE BARNES FOUNDATION

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Through the foundation that bears his name, Albert C. Barnes put into practice John Dewey's notions of education, democracy, and scientific method. A description of the egalitarian and empirical aspects of the institution known as The Barnes Foundation confirms the instrumental function of art for education. The Barnes Foundation served as a learning laboratory rather than as a museum of art; in this manner works of art served an instrumental function through indicating Deweyan theory about democracy and education.

The Borderline Between Art and Education at The Barnes Foundation

There is a fine line distinguishing art and education at The Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania. The Foundation defines itself not as a museum but as an educational institution. Even today it is easier to view this extraordinary collection of art as a student than as a public spectator. When Dr. Albert C. Barnes established his Foundation in 1922 he designated it an institution concerned with education in art. But it took nearly forty years of litigation, first by The Philadelphia Inquirer, later by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, to open the Foundation doors to limited public viewing.

Today one hundred people with reservations, and one hundred without, are granted admittance to The Barnes Foundation every weekend excepting the months of July and August when the gallery is closed. Upon registering at the gate and paying a one dollar fee, visitors may view the collection, half the gallery at a time, without guides, or catalogues, or even labels for the works of art.

But Barnes' collection is well worth seeing, for the art, and for the education. It includes two hundred Reniors, nearly a hundred Cezannes, over sixty Matisses and forty Picassos, all nearly impossible to find in reproduction.<1>

Jam-packed in the gallery, the works offer a wide survey of the artists' development.<2> In addition, the gallery presents a range of art objects from antique to modern, and folk to fine.

The press and some biographers (Chanin, 1961; Harris, 1982; Schack, 1960) have often emphasized difficulties encountered with gaining admittance to the Foundation, with dealing with Barnes, and with the contents of the gallery itself. However, the borderline between art and education remains the focus of The Barnes Foundation: the instrumental value of art to education is intrinsic. Barnes' art collection was instrumental to a realization of John Dewey's philosophical ideas about the science of the social and art as education. An historical description of the egalitarian and empirical aspects of the institution confirms this.

Art as Experience, Dewey, and Barnes

Albert Barnes established The Barnes Foundation in 1922, "to promote the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts" (article II of the By-Laws of The Barnes Foundation, in Cantor, 1974, p.173). Barnes appointed John Dewey to its staff as Director of Education and endowed the Foundation with ten million dollars. A photograph of Dewey hangs in The Barnes Foundation office; it is inscribed, "To The Barnes Foundation which puts into practice my beliefs and hopes

for democracy and education."

Dewey attributed the presence of the paintings and other objects of art at The Barnes Foundation as one factor in the development of his aesthetic philosophy. When Dewey dedicated Art as Experience to "Albert C. Barnes, in gratitude" for their conversations "in the presence of the unrivaled collection of pictures he has assembled," Dewey noted, "The influence of these conversations, together with that of his book, has been a chief factor in shaping my own thinking about the philosophy of esthetics." (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. viii)

Albert Coombs Barnes (1872-1951) lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He shared an interest in art with high school classmates John Sloan and William Glackens. But Barnes became a chemist, not an artist. After attending medical school Barnes studied in Germany. There he met Hermann Hille, a chemist with whom he collaborated and later developed the patent medicine Argyrol.^{<3>} When Barnes' Argyrol factory began to prosper in Philadelphia, he resumed his earlier interest in painting. But one day, realizing his own work was without merit, Barnes burned all 190 of his paintings (Schack, 1960).

Argyrol made Barnes a millionaire while he was still in his thirties (Harris, 1982). In 1905 he built the house where the Foundation later was to be, on Latches Lanes, in Merion, just west of Philadelphia. That year too Barnes bought a small Italian landscape by Corot (Harris, 1982), and added to his collection by buying from conservative Philadelphia and New York galleries (Schack, 1960).

When Barnes renewed his friendship with Glackens some five years later, he was influenced to begin collecting modern art. In 1912, Barnes sent Glackens to Paris with \$20,000 to buy works by Renoir, Cezanne, and other French artists (Schack, 1960). Barnes became a

self-taught collector and critic; and, in an educational experiment begun in Argyrol factory, Barnes put into practice the social and scientific aspects of John Dewey's philosophy of democracy and education.

EGALITARIAN ASPECTS The Educational Experiment: The Factory as Educational Laboratory

Although the Foundation opened in 1924, the start of the educational experiment with the Argyrol factory workers began a number of years earlier. It often happened that some of Barnes' employees got into trouble with the police. To solve the consequent problem of employee turnover, Barnes became personally interested in his workers' out-of-factory concerns. He attributed his worker's personal difficulties to the fact that their earlier education had been negligible, and he determined to rectify the situation.

So from the beginning the art in the Barnes Collection was used for educational purposes. The initial educational experiment emphasized discussions of psychology using William James' Principles of Psychology (1890). With the publication of Dewey's Democracy and Education (1916), Barnes was inspired to broaden the course of study to matters of economic and personal interest to his workers. Discussions included social conditions and evolution, topics taken from Bertrand Russell's Why Men Fight (1917) and H.G. Wells' Outline of History (1920). In addition, the environment was enhanced by original works of art. Barnes spoke of the origins of visual arts in his educational experiment as follows:

We always had pictures in the building. One fellow came to me one time with drawings of some of our pictures. And all the boys were excited. His name was

Theodore. We had half a dozen Negroes around. I said, "What do you think of that thing of Theodore's?" I think it was very credible [sic]. I didn't want to give him any false opinion. I said, "Theodore, that is a good copy of what you have there, but what is the use of copying? I would not want to copy someone else. Why don't you do something of your own?" They got interested in pictures, and they studied them. (Barnes, in Cantor, 1974, pp. 81-82).

One of Barnes' assistants at the factory, Mary Mullen, planned the educational programs and led the discussions. She wrote of the lunch-time seminars:

At first the discussion was dominated rather by feeling than intelligence: imagination constantly tended to encroach upon the sphere of reflection. The leader of the group did not repress feeling and imagination but analyzed them when they intruded in the wrong place ... Thanks to the keenness of their interest, and to their powers of picturesque expression, the discussion retained a color, a vividness, and intensity which visitors to the class, men who occupy chairs in colleges and universities, declared to be a welcome contrast to the dullness and perfunctoriness characteristically found in the ordinary academic classroom. (Mullen, in Schack, 1960, p. 99).

Violet de Mazia provided more details about the educational experiment in her essay "An Experiment in Educational Method at The Barnes Foundation" (1942). The essay is included in Art in Education: A Collection of Essays published by The Barnes Foundation (1954). De Mazia wrote that two hours of each workday were set aside for class instruction. The tools necessary for "the experiment" (p. 136) were of two kinds: a)

paintings from Barnes' collection which covered the walls of the factory's six office rooms; and b) the workers' own curiosity and their practical duties at the plant. De Mazia wrote of the egalitarian atmosphere at the factory as a result of the class sessions:

In an atmosphere that was completely democratic, the workers developed initiative and found greater incentive to expansion of their individual abilities, which led to growing efficiency in operation and management of the plant, to increased financial returns for the enterprise and its employees, and to more leisure time resulting from both. The additional leisure was employed for further cultivation of the workers' interests, and was directed, in part, to discussing some of their personal problems with the purpose of inculcating the essential if sound thinking stripped of academic trappings. The fundamental concepts in Dewey's epoch-making books, Democracy and Education and School and Society, were simplified and brought within the comprehension of all the workers, no matter what their previous education. (1954, p. 136).

From Factory to Foundation: Growth in the Educational Experiment

When practicing artists and students heard about the experiment and began to visit the collection asking to join the classes, it became apparent that the program and facilities needed to grow. Consequently the Foundation was formally organized in December, 1922. Thus it was that the earlier experiment in adult education provided impetus and philosophical direction for the educational institution that is The Barnes Foundation.

The by-laws of The Barnes Foundation stipulate that the appreciation of the collection shall indeed be egalitarian:

On three days a week (one of them shall be Sunday) the gallery shall be open to the public under such regulations as will ensure that it is the plain people, that is, men and women who gain their livelihood by daily toil in the shops, factories, schools, stores and similar places, who shall have free access to the art gallery upon those days when the gallery is to be open to the public. (from Article IX, paragraph 30, of the By-Laws of The Barnes Foundation, in Cantor, 1974).

Paragraphs 32 and 33 of the by-laws pay special regard to the Foundation's philosophy, "The establishment of the art gallery is an experiment to determine how much practical good to the public of all classes and stations of life" such an experiment will be; and the "purpose of the gift is democratic and educational in the true meaning of those words, and special privileges are forbidden."

In 1917 Barnes enrolled as a special student in Dewey's social philosophy seminar at Columbia University, commuting between Philadelphia and New York to attend. This marked the beginning of the lifelong friendship of the two men; cemented by shared interests in education, democracy, art, and scientific method. Their association was sealed with Dewey's appointment to the staff of the Foundation as educational advisor and consultant in 1922. The by-laws of the Foundation, Dated January 24, 1940, delivered to Dewey the sum of five thousand dollars a year for the rest of his life.

Dewey's conception of democracy as a mode of association which provides its members ample room for experimentation, opportunity, and growth through experience, is embodied in Barnes' experiment in an

egalitarian approach to education in and through art. Democracy and education as philosophy and method were realized through the Foundation's effort to take art out of the esoteric world of the cultural elite and link it to the lives of the working class society. Even today, a pamphlet published by the Foundation notes, "Art is not a phase of life apart from the workaday world to which one turns in moments of leisure, or perhaps in the name of 'culture'. The Foundation's approach takes art out of its usually-detached, esoteric world and links it up with life itself."

EMPIRICAL ASPECTS Social Value of the Scientific Method as Employed by The Barnes Foundation

Dewey considered his philosophical ideas part of a movement toward empiricism based on a new concept of experience, combining a naturalistic vision with an appreciation for the experimental method practiced by the sciences. As expressed in his books Democracy and Education (1916) and Experience & Nature (1925), Dewey's concept of empiricism is seen to be instrumental to social and intellectual progress utilizing a scientific model of inquiry.

In Democracy and Education Dewey wrote of the function of science in the school curriculum as an organ of general social progress. He saw instrumental value in the experimental method, praising the function it performs for the human race. According to Dewey, "in emancipating an idea from the particular context in which it originated and giving it a wider reference the results of the experience of any individual are put at the disposal of all men" (1916/-1966, p. 230).

Further, Dewey wrote in Experience & Nature (1916) of the value of scientific method in releasing the mind from captivity to dogma. He

noted that Leonardo had said that true knowledge begins with opinion, thereby announcing the birth of the method of modern science: "Not that opinion as such is anything more than opinion or an unconfirmed and unwarranted surmise; but that such surmises may be used; when employed as hypotheses they induce experimentation. They then become forerunners of truth, and mind is released from captivity to antecedent beliefs" (1925/1971, p. 129).<4>

Scientific Method at The Barnes Foundation

Dewey was very concerned with educating the masses; he was seriously interested in bringing art to many people in a way that affects their lives, integrating the aesthetic with ongoing experience. Dewey's socially instrumental scientific approach to learning was the educational method at The Barnes Foundation. In his foreword to Barnes' book The Art of Renior (1935), Dewey noted that his own "educational ideas have been criticized for undue emphasis upon intelligence and the use of the method of thinking that has its best exemplification in science;" therefore he took satisfaction in the fact that an institution concerned with education in art embodied his educational ideas (Dewey, in Barnes and de Mazia, 1935, p. x).

This use of scientific method is discussed by Barnes in The Art in Painting (1928). The book was intended as a text to correspond to the method of education in art at the Foundation. Barnes wrote that the book was an experiment in the adaptation of the principles of scientific method to the study of art, and that as far as he knew, this was a new technique which owed its origin to Dewey's writings (1928, pp. 11-12). Specifically, the "method comprises the observation of facts, reflection upon them, and the testing of the conclusions by their success in application. It stipulates that an

understanding and appreciation of paintings is an experience that can come only from contact with the paintings themselves." (1928, p. 10).

Dewey agreed that The Barnes Foundation exemplified what theory meant in practice (1954, p. 8). Learning took place in the experience of the object being studied, with the Foundation serving as the laboratory for the analysis of visual art. The art object was a source and a solution in a problem and student-oriented learning environment. But there were social as well as aesthetic goals in the learning laboratory within the Foundation walls.

Dewey wrote of the social value of paintings beyond being mere museum pieces isolated from a social context in his essay "Affective Thought in Logic and Painting" (originally written for the Journal of The Barnes Foundation, April, 1926):

"...paintings when taken out of their specialized niche are the basis of an educational experience which counteracts the disrupting tendencies of the hard-and-fast specializations, compartmental divisions and rigid segregations which so confuse and nullify our present life" (1954, p. 104).

Dewey expanded his thoughts upon the subject in Art as Experience. Presenting historic reasons for the compartmental conception of fine art, Dewey cited nationalism, imperialism, and the growth of capitalism (1934/-1980, pp. 8-9); then he defined the solution to the problem as "that of recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" (p. 10). Within The Barnes Foundation works of art are not compartmentalized according to artist, era, or even social caste, as with the separation of the popular and the so called fine arts.

The Contents of the Laboratory and Their Arrangement

Barnes' "unrivaled collection" of pictures (Dewey, 1980, p. viii), includes the work of the forementioned modern French masters. In addition, the collection ranges from American primitives to American moderns, and includes Flemish, early Italian, and Renaissance paintings as well. But the fact that these paintings share wall space with Pennsylvania German metalwork, with pewter and pottery, antique desks and dower chests, indicates the educative function of the collection as Dewey would have it: without separating art from life; without pandering to the elite, and without being captive to the dogma of established aesthetic theory.

Critics of the display of Barnes' collection complain that the paintings are not hung in a conventional museum manner; they are crowded and in poor light, with modern and antique paintings and furniture juxtaposed without titles or dates (Harris, 1982, p. 18). Violette de Mazia, the current Vice-President and Director of Education of The Barnes Foundation, countered criticisms of the display of the collection by pointing to the explicit educational intention of the artworks through their arrangement. She wrote that a school such as The Barnes Foundation, "selects and assembles its materials primarily according to their ability to foster understanding of objective investigation and to help in demonstrating the principles of aesthetics." (1983, p. 2). Further, the arrangement of the paintings and other works of art is not static; the works are moved about for specific educational discussions.

De Mazia likened the walls of The Barnes Foundation to larger "wall-pictures" (1983, p.6). Characteristics from the works making up the wall-pictures promote "informed perception" on the part of the viewer who is "readily led to transfer qualities appearing in one item into the makeup of the others" (p. 6). In

fact in the authors experience, this does happen. The viewer finds herself quite spontaneously sensing new relationships in colors, rhythms, patterns, and meanings. In drawing out relationships between groupings of works diverse in period or style, the viewer's experience is enriched by the discoveries and insights derived from the active and creative aspect of appreciation.

Also to promote the gestalt of an overall impression, labels of the artworks are purposefully absent from the walls, again an "intentional omission" to enhance objective perception of the works; and again, to enhance the educational function of the wall-pictures. De Mazia underscored the approach the Foundation takes to the viewer's education; by omitting titles for the works of art, the viewer's attention is not deflected "from any intrinsic aesthetic significance the makeup of the picture of object, as the thing it is, might offer" (1983, p. 11).

The Art Department of The Barnes Foundation continues to offer classes in the appreciation and understanding of art. The educational program continues to be based upon Dewey's philosophy of democracy and education. As egalitarian as always, participants include art students, artists, and laymen. A Foundation pamphlet lists the requisites for admission as "the assurance of regular and punctual attendance, and the possession of an open mind and of a genuine interest in taking an active part in the work and in doing all designated reading" (pamphlet published by The Barnes Foundation, no date). The annual tuition charge is \$100, although full time students in high school and college are exempt from this fee. The two-year courses consist of lectures and seminar sessions; and observations are verified empirically, in the works themselves.

While The Barnes Foundation promotes itself as egalitarian based

on Dewey's principles of social democracy and scientific method, in practice there are two problems. First, the lack of identification of the artwork - the title, date, place of origin - removes the artwork from its social/genetic context. Therefore, the work of art loses some of the socially contextual value of the democratic education Dewey envisioned, disallowing the role of works of art as social artifacts. Second, although self-defined as democratic and egalitarian, it could very well be argued that the admissions policy

of The Barnes Foundation even today is exclusionary and therefore as elitist as the high/fine arts milieu which Barnes stood against. But for those students or visitors who can get in, The Barnes Foundation continues to function as a public learning laboratory.

Aside from these contradictions, The Barnes Foundation continues to tie art to education, promoting a consequent enrichment of life, as Dewey would want it, by offering the aesthetic within the continuity of ordinary life experience.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Black and white reproductions of some of the works of art are found in publications of the Barnes Foundation. The original edition of Art as Experience includes five reproductions from Barnes' collection.
- ² Harris (1982) wrote that viewing Barnes' Matisses is crucial to an "adequate understanding" of the artist's development; he added that the Cezannes

"constitute the most important single group of the painter's works in existence, its significance having less to do with the number of pictures involved than with their quality and representativeness" (1982, p. 14).

- ³ Argyrol is the precursor of the silver nitrate put in the newborn's eyes to prevent blindness caused by conjunctivitis neotorum.
- ⁴ When applied to aesthetics, Dewey's empiricism resembles Fechner's (1876) science of aesthetics, where induction replaces deduction, and individual aesthetic dogma. Fechner, the founder of psycho-physics, published a treatise about a scientific approach to aesthetics, "which should proceed by observation and induction, rising to generalizations 'from below' instead of working downward by deduction from metaphysics" (Munro, 1956, p. 5).

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