

The Devil and Dr. Barnes

Portrait of an American Art Collector

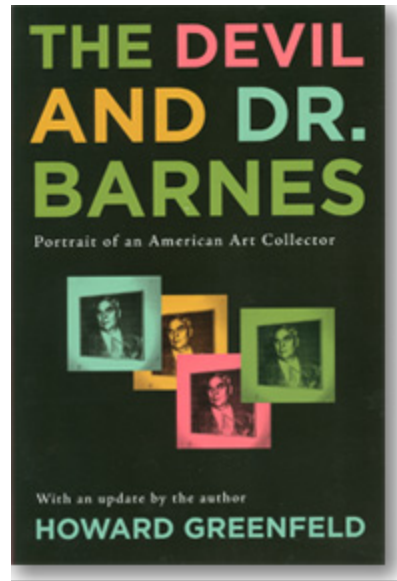
Howard Greenfeld

From "The Barnes Revisited"

In the years following the first publication of this book in 1987, many of the changes that seemed inevitable at that time have come to pass. Violette de Mazia, Barnes's most faithful disciple, died in September 1988.

Her death, at the age of eighty-nine, signaled the beginning of profound changes in the Barnes Foundation, for she was the last, and most powerful, member of that generation of trustees who had ruled the Foundation since the death of the Doctor. These trustees had made certain that Barnes's wishes were carried out, but they would no longer be in the majority, and the future of the Barnes Foundation would hereafter be in the hands of trustees appointed by Lincoln University.

De Mazia's death did mark the beginning of a new era, but it seemed, at first, that changes would be minimal and gradual. The new president of the Foundation, Franklin H. Williams, was a highly respected educator and diplomat--he had served as United States Ambassador to Ghana. His stated aim was to preserve the character as well as the physical facilities of the Foundation, its galleries and its educational program, just as its founder would have wanted. Williams's tenure was short, however. He died not long after assuming his duties and was replaced in July 1990 by a forty-three-year-old attorney, Richard H. Glanton. Glanton, a very successful corporate lawyer, counsel to the Barnes Foundation and general counsel to Lincoln University, was neither an educator nor an art historian. He admitted that his experience in the world of art consisted of one course in art appreciation while in college. "I never purported to know anything about



art," he acknowledged, "but I can lead." A partner in a distinguished Philadelphia law firm, he had brought in two million dollars' worth of business during the year preceding his election to the presidency of the Foundation.

Glanton quickly took charge. In the spring of 1991, as part of an effort to raise money to meet operating expenses and to make repairs to the building, he and his colleagues on the board of the Foundation filed a petition with the Montgomery County Orphan's Court, which has jurisdiction over all local trusts and charities, requesting amendments to the trust's indenture. Most of these were reasonable and aroused little opposition. One offered a plan to eliminate the policy that restricted the Foundation's investments to government securities and railroad stocks. "If we'd invested in the sorts of equities purchased by other institutions," Glanton explained, "we would now have some thirty million dollars in the endowment. We have nine million instead." Another proposed that the visiting hours be expanded and that the entrance fee be raised to five dollars--it had been only one dollar since 1961. Furthermore, the board would be allowed to authorize use of the gallery for a limited number of fund-raising events and receptions. "If President Mitterand came to look at our French paintings," Glanton commented, "we'd like to be permitted to give him a reception."

One proposed amendment, however, unleashed a storm of criticism. Claiming that "expenses have increased so much that it has become prohibitive and impossible for the Foundation to properly maintain and preserve" the collection, the board asked permission to sell as many as fifteen of the Foundation's paintings, which presumably would yield between twelve and fifteen million dollars. Though such a sale was specifically prohibited under the terms of Dr. Barnes's will, Glanton reportedly contacted the auction firm of Sotheby's concerning the sale of these works and also contacted officials of the wealthy J. Paul Getty Center in California to see if they might be interested in purchasing some of these paintings.

Reaction to the news of the proposed sale, which would effectively break up this unique collection, was angry; art historians and curators protested vigorously. Though it was customary for American museums to sell works in their collections in order to purchase other works, sales made in order to maintain operating expenses or make repairs to an existing structure were morally, if not legally, forbidden. Furthermore, the Barnes was not a museum but an educational institution, and to alter it in any way would destroy its character as such.

The prominent New York art dealer Richard L. Feigen, who had been advising the Foundation, called the proposed sale "immoral, as well as a cultural tragedy." Tom L. Freudenheim, the Smithsonian's assistant secretary for museums, who had also been advising the Foundation, noted that the collection "was put together by one person with a special purpose in mind, and it ought to be sacrosanct." While conceding that not all of the works in the collection were masterpieces, he said, "The Barnes is less a museum than an archive. Its collection is a unit. Once you start pruning 'lesser' objects, then every museum starts to look like every other. This proposal goes to the center of Barnes's individuality and idiosyncrasy . . . It's just that mix of first-rate and second-rate and third-rate things that make it so wonderful. How are you going to learn connoisseurship unless you can compare great pictures with ones that are not great at all?"

And Richard Wattenmaker, director of the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, who had studied at the Foundation for seven years, called the proposal "lamentable." "There is more to this than meets the eye," he commented. "They are trying to get the Orphan's Court to grant them powers to do all sorts of things. Selling paintings, I'm afraid, would only be the beginning. The trustees are charged with protecting the donor's intent, and they ought to do just that. . . . I'm not against change. I don't object to improving the lighting, or putting labels by the pictures, or refining attributions, or publishing a catalogue. The building ought to be brought up to modern standards--there is no controversy about that. But you can't just rush in and start changing things. My attitude is that these questions should

be the subject of very careful long-term deliberations by the board of trustees. There is no hurry. . . . "

The outrage that followed word of the proposed decision was effective. Glanton abandoned this one plan even before he had made the formal request to the court to agree to it. Other plans followed, however, one of which provoked almost as much anger as had his plan to sell some of the Foundation's paintings. This involved the authorization of the publication of a catalogue of some eighty works from the collection, all reproduced in color (heretofore forbidden), which would be tied to a tour that would mean dismantling the collection for at least two years, while the paintings were away from Merion.

There were two principal reasons given for this request: for one, such a tour would raise money for essential renovations of the building; for another, temporary removal of these paintings would allow work on the renovations to proceed.

In spite of strong opposition to this tour, not only because it violated Barnes's trust, but also because of the potential damage to these fragile works of art, which would be crated and shipped all over the world, the court ruled, in 1992, that the tour could be undertaken. It would, however, be a one-time tour, the educational program had to continue in Merion, and the collection had to be reinstalled as originally directed by Dr. Barnes.

At the end of February 1993, the gallery of the Barnes Foundation was officially closed, so that some eighty works could be prepared and packed for shipment and the museum readied for renovation.