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Art: Friends of Barnes keep up the good fight

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To paraphrase the eminent metaphysician L.P. Berra, an event has not concluded until all activity associated with that event has ceased. By that measure, the 20-year struggle for the body and soul of the Barnes Foundation might still have wobbly legs, even if, legally, *la guerre* appears to be *fini*.

Although their last-gasp legal challenge to moving the fabulous Barnes collection to Philadelphia has been peremptorily swatted aside by Judge Stanley R. Ott, the Friends of the Barnes Foundation remain undaunted, at least for the record. "We have lost a battle, but we have not been defeated," said Walter Herman, a leader of the group.

The Friends and the three Montgomery County commissioners, who filed their own petition to reopen court hearings on the move, were rebuffed last month on a technicality. Ott opined that neither enjoyed sufficient legal standing, even though in a letter he had encouraged the Friends to take the action they did.

The Friends, who have been admirably persistent in challenging the logic, the morality and the practical ramifications of moving the collection, might be invisible to the law, but they have always enjoyed moral standing.

By filing their petition, they were representing the person who truly lacked standing, and whose historical and aesthetic legacy is being threatened by a cabal of interests that appear not to appreciate its essential nature.

That person is Albert Coombs Barnes, whose acumen, imagination, passion for art, and dedication to an ideal created the foundation. His values, and the opposition to them, ignited this long-running War of the de Mazia Succession.

In truth, the Barnes was transformed in a stroke on Sept. 20, 1988, when Violette de Mazia, the keeper of the Barnes flame since 1951, died age 89.

Control of the foundation passed to Lincoln University in Chester County, and 20 years of open warfare began between the foundation's nominal custodians and its alumni and other strict constructionists regarding the founder's intentions.

It seemed probable then that the Barnes could never be preserved in a way that seemed appropriate for a place that should be a National Historic Landmark. When the fractious trustee Richard Glanton seized operational control of Barnes affairs in 1990, it quickly became obvious that he envisioned a more commercial operation.

And now, with the track cleared for the most audacious art heist in American history, the real prospect of a more commercial incarnation is finally upon us.

The most cogent argument for not hijacking the Barnes to Philadelphia wasn't that it shouldn't be changed at all, that Dr. Barnes wouldn't approve. He has been dead for 57 years.

It was that the foundation represented a rare historical artifact, whose distinctive genius loci, like that of Bartram's Garden in Southwest Philadelphia, described a precious and irreplaceable historical context for novel innovations in art education.

Discount the validity of Barnes' philosophy today, which can always be adapted, improved, refined. After all, much of what the good doctor wrote about art and artists is gibberish. (Skeptical? Try to read a single page of one of his books.) But he did know how to acculturate ordinary people to looking at art, a rare achievement.

In any event, arguing a case for preserving the Barnes in the most rigorous meaning of the word must rest on a foundation of history and aesthetics. Unfortunately, in America, history isn't taken seriously unless it can turn a profit. As for aesthetics, it musters about as much force against a balance sheet as a ping-pong ball against a steamroller.

So all that the Friends have left in what I expect will be a continuing guerrilla campaign is the moral argument. Stalin, referring to the pope, famously defined their position: How many divisions do they have to put up against the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Lenfest Foundation, the Annenberg Foundation, Gov. Rendell, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corp., the state attorney general, and the foundation trustees themselves, all of whom appear to have standing? Oh, and Judge Ott.

Still, the Friends continue to ask whether this grandiose relocation plan, spending hundreds of millions of dollars for a new gallery building to house a tourist attraction that might not be able to support itself, is viable in the long run. There are too many imponderable variables. For instance:

How much is this project eventually going to cost? At the moment, no one can say. Is the 200,000-a-year visitor projection realistic for an unchanging collection? Can the foundation, now responsible for two "campuses" - the Merion gallery and a 137-acre estate in Chester County - avoid deficits? If not, who will cover them?

Three sugar-daddy foundations have been subsidizing the Barnes for several years; how much longer will they stay in the game? If they drop out, are city and state taxpayers on the hook? Probably, because already \$107 million in tax money has been reserved by the state to facilitate the move of this private museum.

And if Barnes II fails, will Ott order the art returned to Merion? Not likely, because Barnes II will never be allowed to fail. Too many reputations are at stake.

The people who best understand and appreciate the significance of the Barnes collection and its educational program within the context of American cultural history have been ridiculed as cranks, crackpots and cultists. And yet they have been mostly right all along. They still are, despite the fact that momentum for the move, generated by powerful political, economic, social and cultural pressures, now appears too inevitable to overcome.

Ott's decision, coupled with that momentum, suggests that before the end of the year, the Parkway site will finally be cleared of the Youth Study Center so construction of Barnes II can begin. When that happens, the Friends will have to concede that the dreaded inevitable has arrived.

As for Dr. Barnes, he of no standing, I wouldn't be surprised if he were gradually air-brushed out of Barnes II, or at least marginalized, his philosophy reduced to a vestigial presence, if the courses are retained at all. He is, after all, often embarrassing about art and social etiquette.

The spotlight will shift, not to the artists he admired - Renoir, Cezanne, Matisse - but to the Barnes II architects, Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, and their marquee building. Before you know it, a unique bit of Americana will have become just another routine stop on the Gray Line tours.

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