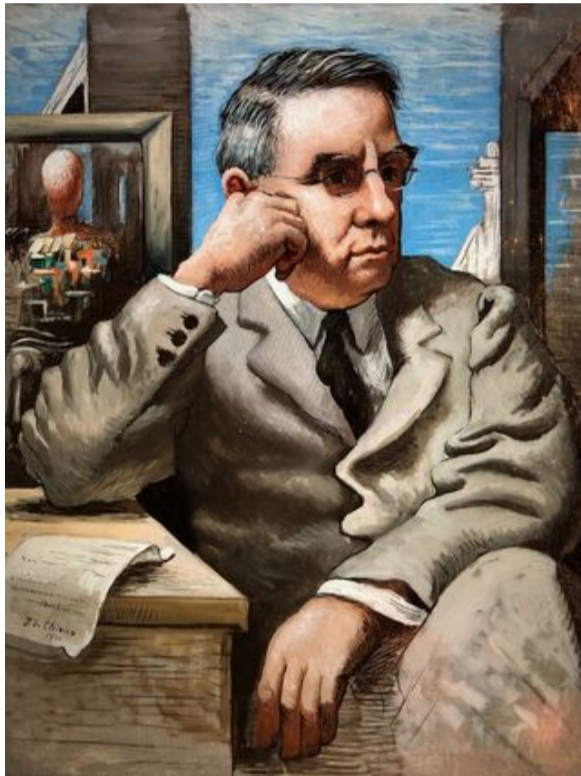


Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.
The Gravity of Weight

Black Artists, Racial Equality, and Dr. Albert C. Barnes

Known for his art collection, he is less well known for championing civil rights

Posted Aug 11, 2020



Portrait of Dr. Albert C. Barnes, 1926, by Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978)
Source: Barnes Foundation Collection. Copyright 2020, Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/SIAE, Rome. Used with permission of the Barnes Foundation (Philadelphia, Pa.) and ARS.

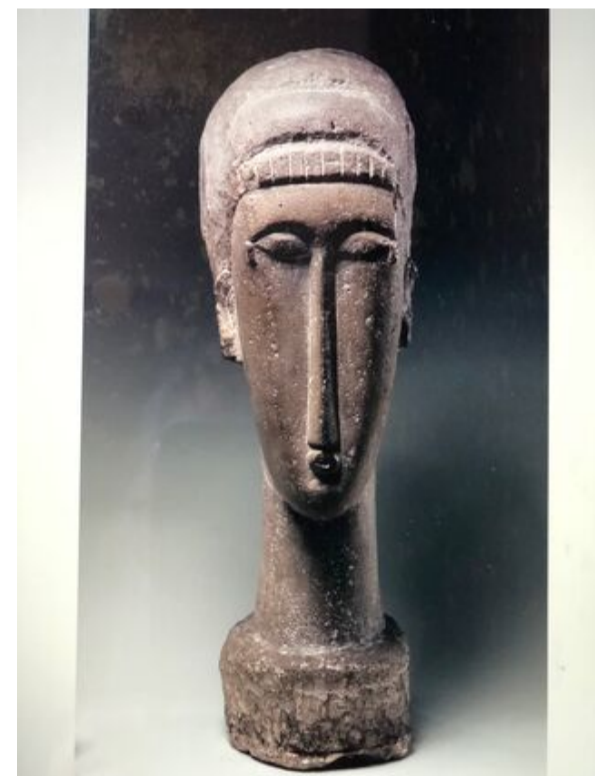
He was “the local Shakespeare of vituperation” (Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture*, 2009), with a “litigious soul,” (Anderson, *Art Held Hostage*, 2013), “notorious irascibility, well-documented rudeness, and a penchant for vulgarity.” (Meyers, 2009)

He could be domineering and even brutal to his adversaries. (Wattenmaker, *American Paintings and Works on Paper in the Barnes Foundation*, 2010). “Ostentatiously aggressive”(Shaw, *The New Yorker*, 9/22/28), with a “magnesium-flared terrible temper,” he possessed “the most scathing tongue in America.”(McCardle, *Saturday Evening Post*, 3/14/42) His own worst enemy, he was pugnacious and oppositional and had a particular flair for antagonizing almost anyone or any institution. He once called the major art museum in Philadelphia “a house of artistic and intellectual prostitution.”(Meyers, 2009) “Iconoclastic” was “the “kindest adjective” that could be used to describe him (Anderson, 2013).

He despised those art critics who failed to accept him. In 1923, when he lent works by Picasso, Soutine, Modigliani,

Lipchitz, and Matisse to the Pennsylvania Academy for his first U.S. show, his collection was severely panned.(Greenfeld, *The Devil and Dr. Barnes*, 2006) Those so-called scholars called it “debased art,” “incomprehensible masses of paint” “trash,” “painted by the “dregs of humanity” and “emotionally and physically sickened...as if the room were infested with an infectious scourge.”(Greenfeld, 2006; Meyers, 2009). Deeply injured by these criticisms, Barnes would tell a journalist years later, “Remember these will be the Old Masters of the future.”(Greenfeld, 2006)

He was, of course, correct. No one who has ever seen his vast treasure trove of art can fail to appreciate the passion, brilliance, and foresight he brought to collecting. He loved to be surrounded by his collection, “Good paintings are more satisfying companions than the best books and infinitely more so than most very nice people.”(Wattenmaker, 2010)



Head (1911-12) by Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) Art by Modigliani was panned by critics in 1923.
Source: The Barnes Foundation, Phila., Pa., Public Domain.

To say he was a study in contrasts is an understatement. No one, for example, who has also seen his steadfast commitment and staunch advocacy for racial equality, can fail to appreciate his genuine “moral sensibility.”(Edouard, *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 2011) He was, of course, Albert Coombs Barnes, M.D.

Barnes (1872-1951) had humble beginnings in a gang-ridden, poverty-stricken area of Philadelphia. One of the most significant—even “religious”—experiences of his life occurred when he first heard black spirituals sung at a camp meeting to which his mother had taken him as a young child. (Meyers, 2009) He called these spirituals the “greatest art America has produced,” representing “the collective grief and aspirations of their race.”(Meyers,

2009) Years later, once he had established his Foundation, he would invite a local black school choir to sing spirituals for weekly Sunday afternoon concerts followed by a lecture on African-American aesthetics.(Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, 2015) Barnes saw these as “first steps in breaking down prejudices...blacks should have an equal place in American life.”(Wattenmaker, 2010)



Wooden African door for inner room, late 19th century.
Source: Copyright 2020, The Barnes Foundation, Phila., Pa. Used with permission.

After receiving his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania and obtaining postgraduate training in chemistry and pharmacology in Germany, Barnes returned to the U.S. and made his fortune by developing, with his partner Hermann Hille, the hugely successful compound Argyrol, used primarily to treat *ophthalmia neonatorum*, a conjunctivitis secondary to gonorrhea, seen in the eyes of newborns exposed during birth from an infected mother. Barnes ultimately severed ties with Hille and formed the A.C. Barnes Company, which he was to keep until its fortuitous sale (for \$6 million) just before the 1929 crash.

It was at his factory, though, that Barnes hired 12 African-American men “when little more than 1% of the black population in Philadelphia was employed in industry.”(Meyers, 2009) This was even more striking because abolitionist Frederick

Douglass, just ten years before Barnes was born, had described Philadelphia as nowhere “to be found a city in which prejudice against color is more rampant.”(Meyers, 2009) “The emancipation of the Negro slave in America gave him only nominal freedom...he is still a slave to the ignorance, the prejudice, the cruelty which were the fate of his forefathers.”(Barnes, *The New Negro*, Alain Locke, ed. 1925)



African Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble, 19th-20th century. Artist unknown.
Source: Copyright 2020, The Barnes Foundation, Phila., Pa. Used with permission.



Horace Pippin (1888-1946), "Supper Time," c. 1940. Dr. Barnes, a strong advocate for black artists, saw Pippin's art as a counterpart to black spirituals.
Source: The Barnes Foundation Collection. Public Domain.

Barnes created a six-hour workday for his employees, with two additional voluntary hours for educational classes. Most of the men were uneducated and some even illiterate but he believed in a democratic approach to education along the lines of John Dewey, whom they studied, as well as William James, H.G. Wells, and Bertrand Russell. The teacher fostered discussions of race, injustice, and psychology, with a focus on social and economic handicaps under which blacks suffered. (Mullen, *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, 1926) Calling it an “experiment in education,” Barnes used this successful and unprecedented experience as a template for the courses he would create at his Foundation years later. Further, Barnes provided pensions for his employees and their widows for the remainder of their lives; sometimes, he even helped them purchase

houses, ever mindful of discriminatory practices to which blacks were subject.(Wattenmaker, 2010) As Barnes began to collect his art, and his employees expressed their interest, he brought and exhibited his paintings on the walls of his factory.(Mullen, 1926)

Throughout his life, Barnes valued black artists, musicians, and professionals. Barnes was particularly supportive of Horace Pippin, whose art Barnes saw as a counterpart to spirituals...expressive of the American spirit..." (Wattenmaker, 2010) He made it possible for a physician to spend a residency year in Paris at a time when black physicians found it difficult to obtain graduate training in American hospitals, as well as for a black musician to study with a world-renowned organist at Barnes' expense in Paris.(Meyers, 2009)

In 1922, Barnes began collecting African art (mostly masks and sculpture from West Africa), valuing it for its “forward thinking” and “successful execution of three dimensions.”(Clarke, *African Arts*, 2003) He saw African art for its “usefulness to his Foundation’s socially progressive mission.”(Clarke, 2015) Even the entrance to the building he had commissioned in Merion, Pennsylvania, the original home of his Foundation, used an African art motif.(Clarke, 2003) In the spring of 1925, when the Foundation officially opened, it was historic: the first permanent collection of African objects as “fine art” in the U.S. (Clarke, 2015)



"Seated Couple," late 19th-early 20th century, African. Dr. Barnes had one of the most extensive collections of African art in the U.S. Source: Copyright, 2020, The Barnes Foundation, Phila., Pa. Used with permission.

Barnes regularly attended NAACP dinners, donated to black churches, provided scholarships for black students, supported demands for equal opportunities, and met frequently with leaders of the Harlem Renaissance.

(Meyers, 2009) At one point, he purchased and distributed 1000 copies of a journal meant to recruit black talent. In Paris, he met with poet Langston Hughes, whose poem *Cubes* (1934) that begins, “In the days of the broken cubes of Picasso...” was possibly inspired by Barnes.(Meyers, 2009)

A chance meeting at a funeral held for a distinguished black physician where both Barnes and Horace Mann Bond gave eulogies led to an alliance between them. Bond, father of the future civil rights leader Julian Bond, was then president of Lincoln University, the oldest Black university in the U.S whose curriculum was modeled on Princeton’s. Barnes

ultimately bequeathed control of his priceless collection to Lincoln—a decision that would result in years of controversy. (Wattenmaker, 2010)

Bottom line: Despite those initial scathing reviews, Dr. Barnes would gain international acclaim for his incomparable collection of Impressionist, Post-impressionist, and African art. He deserves as much recognition, though, for promoting racial equality years before the Civil Rights Movement. In the current climate of “Black Lives Matter,” we would do well to remember this vitriolic curmudgeon was, in those days of Picasso’s broken cubes, unusual not only for his savvy appreciation of art but for his remarkable social consciousness.



African face mask, unidentified artist, early 20th century. Dr. Barnes collected West African masks and sculpture and thought this art useful for his Foundation's "socially progressive mission." Source: Copyright, 2020, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, Pa. Used with permission.

About the Author



[Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D.](#), is a clinical professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College and the senior author of *The Gravity of Weight*.

Online: [my own website](#)