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**LEISURE & ARTS**

# An Opening Needn't Mean a Closing

How to save the Barnes museum? With a bus.

**BY PETER LINETT**

*Tuesday, February 24, 2004 12:01 a.m. EST*

While museum directors in America talk about how "transporting" art can be, their London colleagues have taken the idea more literally. Witness the "Tate to Tate" riverboat--a sleek 220-seat catamaran whose paint job and interiors were designed by bad-boy conceptual artist Damien Hirst--now shuttling hip museumgoers from the Pre-Raphaelites at Tate Britain to the thronged "Weather Project" at Tate Modern.

It's a scene that cultural leaders on our shores would do well to keep in mind, especially if they have anything to do with the fate of the Barnes Foundation. The Barnes, an art education program and museum in the leafy Philadelphia suburb of Merion, is as famous these days for management scandals and legal battles as for its spectacular collection of Impressionist and early-Modern masters--180 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes, 60 Matisse, dozens of Picassos and Modiglianis, and other treasures. (For perspective, the Met owns 27 Renoirs.)

A group of Philadelphia-based charitable foundations has offered to rescue the bankrupt Barnes, but only if they can transplant it to downtown Philadelphia in hopes of making it more accessible--geographically and socially--to more people. Opponents of the move, represented in court by students from the Barnes's art education programs and on op-ed pages by art critics and historians around the country, argue that to



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dismantle founder Albert Barnes's deeply considered installation of his collection--crowded, resonant juxtapositions of different kinds of artworks and craft objects that express the principles of aesthetic education Barnes developed under the influence of his friend, the philosopher John Dewey--would be a cultural crime.

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But is this really an either-or decision? What if the promised money from the foundations indeed went toward a new Barnes facility in Philadelphia but the original estate remained open and intact? Imagine, instead of a replica installation of the whole collection in an incongruously modern edifice downtown, a new urban Barnes Center that would connect visitors first to the idea of the Barnes and then to the strange jewel of a museum itself. The downtown center could exhibit works from the collection that aren't on view in Merion anyway, as well as displays about Barnes himself, his educational philosophy, and how he built the collection. It could also house classrooms, a lecture and performance hall, workspaces for conservators, and galleries for those lucrative temporary shows that the Barnes trustees say are necessary for survival. Oh yes, and an all-weather bus depot.

Pardon? Well, of course--a place for the BarnesBus, as it will inevitably be dubbed, to pick up visitors for the 20-minute drive to the main attraction in Merion. Picture it: a rolling public-awareness vehicle, painted by an American artist as notable as Britain's Mr. Hirst, that Philadelphians and tourists point out in the streets, and that guidebooks run in boldface in their pages on Philadelphia culture. Inside the bus, a smart video about the collection makes the ride part of the historical and educational experience of the Barnes. The BarnesBus rolls up to the porticoed entrance in Merion, literally bypassing the parking and traffic problems that the foundation's neighbors have been suing about.

On the return ride, a docent answers questions and passes out membership brochures and calendars of classes. The bus drops visitors back at the downtown Barnes, where their cars are parked nearby and public transit or taxis are just steps away.

And the Barnes gets to stay the Barnes, while becoming as accessible, in the physical sense, as any cultural destination in central Philly and more accessible, in the social and intellectual sense, than perhaps any other great art museum in the nation.

It wouldn't be the first American museum to defeat geography with a bus. For seven bucks you can hop on the National Air & Space Museum Express (no artistic paint job, but a nice logo) to get from the main museum on Washington's mall out to the new annex at Dulles Airport. Similar shuttles ferry museumgoers from Pasadena's historic district to the Norton Simon Museum and around Cleveland's University Circle to, among other cultural destinations, the Cleveland Museum of Art. And several museums and a zoo on Chicago's North Side just won a federal grant for a new trolley to bring visitors up from downtown.

The judge in the Barnes case recently ordered the museum's trustees and their would-be rescuers to investigate alternatives to the proposed move. It's not too late to decide to celebrate Barnes instead of making an end run around him in the name of the public good. If Philadelphia's culture brokers can see past the move-it-or-lose-it fallacy, they might realize that they have an opportunity to preserve an unforgettable aesthetic experience while simultaneously extending its reach. If Albert Barnes were alive today, the only question is who he'd pick to paint the first bus.

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