

COMMENTARY

Antisepsis with Argyrol, Acrimony and Advocacy for African Art

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Abstract

Despite lack of evidence regarding its antiseptic superiority over silver nitrate for preventing ophthalmia neonatorum, Argyrol was promoted so savvily by Albert Coombs Barnes that the revenues enabled him to amass a unique art collection reflecting his early appreciation of the African influence on European painters. He addressed social disparities specially through access for disadvantaged individuals to his iconoclastic foundation and collaboration with a local African-American university. Legal wrangling over complex management issues and distinctive display arrangements, led to fiscal anguish, cultural torment and local affliction over that trove which is currently relocating to downtown Philadelphia (*Afr J Reprod Health 2011; 15[3]:9-14*).

Résumé

Antisepticisme avec argyrol, l'acrimonie et le plaidoyer pour l'art africain: Albert Coombs a tellement promu Argyrol d'une manière futée sans le manque d'évidence à l'égard de sa supériorité antiseptique par rapport au nitrate d'argent pour la prévention de la conjonctivite gonococcique du nouveau-né, de sorte que l'argent lui ait permis d'amasser une collection unique d'art qui reflète ses appréciations initiales de l'influence africaine sur les peintres européens. Il s'est adressé aux disparités sociales surtout à travers l'accès à la fondation iconoclaste par des individus défavorisés et la collaboration avec une université Afro-Américaine locale. La dispute légale sur les questions administratives et les arrangements d'exposition distincts ont entraîné l'angoisse fiscale, la torture culturelle et l'affliction locale à cause du trésor qui actuellement s'installe ailleurs au centre de la Philadelphie (*Afr J Reprod Health 2011; 15[3]:9-14*).

Keywords: Sexually transmitted infections; Newborn; Maternal health; Mother-to-child transmission; Partnerships; Equity

Agenda

With tax exemption playing a substantial role in philanthropy for the support of charitable causes in some countries, the vision of certain individuals has led to the establishment of extraordinary institutions for the promotion of culture and fine arts in certain countries, outstanding examples being the J. Paul Getty Museum in California, Wallace Collection in London and Frick Collection in New York. Eccentric collectors often had exceptional, albeit rigorous, restrictions on loans and sales as exemplified by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

Born in 1872 in a deprived environment, Albert Barnes paid for his medical studies through fees earned by boxing and playing baseball. He was a shrewd entrepreneur¹ who demonstrated those skills by (a) drawing upon his pharmacological background to focus his research efforts on seeking a drug formulation that produced a specific effect, (b) manufacturing and marketing the ensuing pharmaceutical product most unconventionally, (c) investing his resulting substantial profits, as a bold and innovative collector, in impressionism art though it was not well appreciated at the time and (d) selling his pharmaceutical company to the Zonite Products Corporation in July 1929 when the stock market was at a record high. When the stock market

crashed three months later on 25 October 1929, Black Friday, his assets were mainly in cash which he largely directed towards his art collection, estimated to be currently worth more than US\$25 billion.²

With the increasing recognition of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility to address inequities,³ there is value in reinvesting contributions from the private sector, such as the pharmaceutical industry, into the community for the benefit of both disadvantaged groups and deprived fields, such as art, which do not receive substantial public funding despite their valuable role for improving the quality of life in societies. Tax exemption is especially appropriate for art foundations that have non-profit charity status and provide public access. However, restrictive clauses from the stringent stipulations of the Albert Barnes have lately limited certain vital financial operations of his foundation and in the future, it would be most desirable for the management of charitable trusts to have the possibility, when facing compelling conditions and changing circumstances, to adjust their procedures for the protection of the bequest.

Argyrol

Ophthalmia neonatorum was largely caused by gonorrhoea in 1881 when Carl Credé described its prophylaxis with the instillation of eye drops consisting of a 2% aqueous solution of silver nitrate. Irritation, due to chemical conjunctivitis, could be minimised with colloidal silver as demonstrated in 1896, albeit with a substantial decrease in effectiveness. Having graduated four years earlier in medicine from the University of Pennsylvania at the age of 20, Albert Barnes was then getting ready for further studies in chemistry and pharmacology in Germany. He returned there again in 1900, as an employee of the Mulford pharmaceutical company, to recruit Hermann Hille as a colleague. Believing in the potential for a better antiseptic formulation of silver, Barnes encouraged Hille to develop a technique for producing a non-irritant formulation: this effort was successful, through the use of a protein found in wheat and rye, to produce silver vitellin, an organic formulation that was named Argyrol.⁴

Presenting their results at a scientific meeting in May 1902, they deliberately described the methodology erroneously to preserve confidentiality of their innovative technique. By preventing others from producing Argyrol, they ensured a continuing income from the commercial marketing of their unique product.⁵

Soon afterwards in 1902, they left their employee positions with Mulford to start their commercial partnership known as the Barnes and Hille Company. The commercial production of Argyrol was both simple and cheap. Besides, it was easy to ship the crystalline product to pharmacists who would only have to prepare a brown solution. The only other important product of their company was Ovoidin which consisted of iron vitellin, a well-absorbed iron salt prepared with iron tartrate and serum albumen: it was used for the clinical management of anaemia but it was far from being as financially successful as Argyrol. Whereas Barnes had registered the names Argyrol and Ovoidin as trademarks to enable the successful prosecution of counterfeiters of those products, he did not patent their actual preparations to avoid both having to divulge their contents and facing a restriction of exclusive rights to 20 years only.⁵

Despite being a physician, Barnes had the mandate of drug representative with their company. During his trips to clinics in the main capitals of the world, his marketing strategy directly targeted physicians as opposed to pharmacists: this approach was contrary to the prevailing practice.⁶ Exploiting opportunities long before the emergence of an evidence-based approach to health care, Barnes considered specialist physicians endorsing their products as being their “most valuable advertising capital because they write a lot and they talk a lot, and what they say reaches not only other specialists but a great many general practitioners who accept their statements as authoritative”.⁷ Whilst the role of Hille was limited to technical procedures within the laboratory, there was equal sharing of profits with Barnes. However, personality problems led to numerous disputes and through a court case, Barnes bought off his partner in 1908 to start the A. C. Barnes Company which became operational only after Hille had successfully taught him to

prepare the two products, as stipulated in the court decision. Argyrol became so popular that it was also used for infections at numerous other sites ranging from the nose and throat, through the rectum and genitourinary tract, to the skin where it was additionally recommended for other non-infectious conditions such as psoriasis. Though not proven to be better, Argyrol was still preferred over silver nitrate as late as 1943⁸ and it was only with the availability of antibiotic therapy, after the World War II, that there was a decrease in the use of Argyrol.

Unlike antibiotics, silver nitrate is not effective against *Chlamydia trachomatis* which is increasingly more important than *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* in the aetiology of ophthalmia neonatorum. In 2005, silver nitrate eye solution was deleted from the 14th Model List of Essential Medicines of the World Health Organisation due to inadequate evidence regarding its safety besides the complication of chemical conjunctivitis from the evaporation of solvent specially in the tropics. Instead, the utilisation of tetracycline ointment was recommended.⁹

Acquisitions and assets

Having earned the fortune of a magnate by 1910, Barnes then focussed on impressionism² for his art collection: as that style of painting was not yet fully appreciated, those purchases represented a risk venture. With dogmatic views on art, he was the first major buyer to appreciate the potential of Chaim Soutine. Barnes made substantial purchases during his numerous visits to Europe. He recognised the aesthetic value of African art, and its influence on Modigliani and Picasso, largely through his personal relationship with Paul Guillaume, an art dealer in Paris. With a preference for items from Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon and Mali, Barnes was successful in getting his own art criteria to be adopted by Guillaume in the selection of artworks.¹⁰

The Barnes Foundation was set up in 1922 on the grounds of an arboretum of twelve acres that was adjacent to his residence in Merion: he transferred his personal art collection together with a substantial endowment. The Foundation had the mandate of an educational institution, as opposed

to a public museum, and was based in a two-storey limestone chateau, of French renaissance style, with Doric columns. African art was represented in (a) the motifs on the windows and external walls, (b) the colourful ceramic tile reliefs at the entrance and (c) the frieze on the ground floor. The Gallery was opened in 1925 and soon afterwards, the Education Department of the Barnes Foundation offered courses in horticulture which was the main interest of his wife. The Gallery and Arboretum School used complementary approaches to display their contents.

As a guest of Barnes in Merion in 1930 soon after visiting Tahiti, Matisse was commissioned to paint the mural of about 10 metres for the lunettes above the windows in the lobby of the Gallery. Due to mistaken measurements by Matisse, there was undue delay in the finalisation of the mural entitled *The Dance*. The current holdings of the 23 rooms of the gallery include 181 works by Renoir, 69 by Cezanne, 59 by Matisse and 46 by Picasso besides those by Soutine, Rousseau and Modigliani among others. This dazzling collection is overwhelming with its profusion of paintings fully covering the entire walls of those rooms through 'ensemble' groupings and pairings besides idiosyncratic displays with lateral symmetry. Barnes arranged, with meticulous care, a sprinkling jumble of various patterns of wrought metal hardware consisting of iron hinges, trowels, fireplace tools, household utensils, door-pulls, bolts, locks and keys on the walls besides African and native American art that had influenced those painters. Those seemingly quirky displays should not be perceived as resulting from random purchases: they reflect his theories on perceived links pertaining to colour, form and texture across various media for artworks. Prime examples are the hat-shaped ironwork above *Woman in a Green Hat* by Cezanne and the positioning of paintings by Modigliani, with their prominent geometrical features especially of the head and neck, spread amongst African masks, sculptures and carvings. Those juxtapositions and the lack of descriptive labels were intended to encourage visitors to think and seek associations that unite cultures visually.

Alliance

Growing up in a poor neighbourhood near Merion, Albert Barnes had been impressed by camp meetings of African-Americans that he had attended as a child. His interest in black culture was reflected in his fondness for negro spirituals whereas his involvement included tangible support to Paul Robeson, a radical black singer. He also maintained a long-standing commitment to the promotion of the wellbeing of deprived groups in society by addressing inequity. The A. C. Barnes Company employed disadvantaged individuals at its factory and the eight-hour working day included two hours for the discussion of life issues, including gender-based violence, but specially art appreciation as newly-acquired paintings were hung there.

Having been shunned by the upper crust of Philadelphia society when he sought to collaborate with its established art community, Barnes vested

control of the Foundation in Lincoln University which was located near his country estate: it was poorly endowed despite being the oldest African-American university in the United States of America. Its alumni include Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah, the first presidents of Nigeria and Ghana, who graduated in 1930 and 1939 respectively. He arranged for the trustees of the Foundation to be nominated, in the long term, by Lincoln University. The timing of this decision proved to be crucial in view of his untimely death in a road traffic accident in 1951.

Access

Barnes had already arranged for close collaboration with Lincoln University through access by its students to the resources of the Foundation. He ensured personal tours for his factory workers. Most importantly, he considered his eclectic art collection to be a school, within a



Ensemble view, Room 22, South Wall, The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania.
Photograph © 2011 The Barnes Foundation.

gallery, rather than a museum. The educational mission of the Foundation addressed disparities and it strived to help ordinary people who sought to learn art. Demands of the local deprived population were met through priority access for their disadvantaged individuals. Eschewing the establishment, celebrities, scholars and experts, Barnes rejected their applications for visits with sarcastic letters, signed in the name of his pet dog. He confirmed his eccentric personality by hanging several ordinary paintings, by employees and even a child, among masterpieces in the gallery besides mixing cocktail drinks in chemistry beakers at dinner parties.

The tradition of limited and controlled access continued through 2011 in Merion. Admission was by appointment only with the advance purchase of tickets. Visitors were greeted personally at the gate through checking of the name on a list: it was a quite different experience from the anonymity whilst queuing at the entrance to a museum. Furthermore, food and beverages were neither sold nor allowed to be consumed on the premises. Whereas the inside temperature was kept at 21°C, jackets, coats and “similar bulky garments, which do not fit against the body”, were not allowed. Other prohibitions included “shoes with heels smaller than 2 inches in diameter” and fine art activities such as painting, sketching and drawing.

Allegations and arguments

The first travelling exhibition of this world-class collection, focussing on impressionist, post-impressionist and early modern paintings, sought funds that were much needed for renovations. The exhibition, of about 80 paintings, went on a world tour for 18 months from 1993, with stops including the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the National Gallery in Washington DC and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia. Following its return in 1995, the Foundation faced allegations of a major breach in its founding charter as Barnes had stipulated that the paintings should not be moved from their positions on the walls. Besides, there were allegations of financial mismanagement of the endowment. Facing a financial crisis, the Foundation sought to increase revenues from

admission fees by increasing the number of visitors: its plan for the construction of a car park unfortunately led to bitter opposition from the affluent neighbourhood that won a court case to avoid an increase in local traffic. Animosity ensued when the neighbourhood also opposed the alternative proposal, by the Foundation in 2002, for moving to the centre of the city of Philadelphia with the anticipated improved access.

Pledges for substantial funding were immediately forthcoming for that move, specially from the very establishment that Barnes had scorned, and numerous legal hurdles were surmounted.¹¹ Supporters for keeping the Barnes in Merion kept on their fight and continued their protest even beyond January 2011 when the gradual closing down of the original collection had started in preparation for the relocation. As Barnes had despised the Philadelphia establishment, it is ironical that this unique legacy of art masterpieces is being relocated, under new management, from that discreet gallery within a suburban manor on a quiet residential street in suburbia to a modern museum in a specially commissioned building on a boulevard in city centre. Artworks should ideally be appreciated in their context and environment but for those who cannot visit, electronic access to this art collection is possible through the rich website of the Barnes Foundation, www.barnesfoundation.org, which has been complemented by a comprehensive CD-ROM entitled “A passion for art”.

The Barnes Foundation Art Education Center will open, around May 2012, on ‘Museum Mile’ on Benjamin Franklin Parkway, adjacent to the Rodin Museum and close to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. With this cluster of museums, Philadelphia will increase its popularity as a cultural destination and health professionals should not miss any opportunity for a visit to widen their perspectives on art.^{12, 13} The building will include gardens and seek to replicate the internal environment of the original gallery. The original site in Merion, less than eight kilometres away, will remain open with visits of the arboretum, with its greenhouse, magnolia tress and peony garden, enhanced programmes of the School of Horticulture and research access to the

archives. It will therefore be still possible to appreciate the original setting of the collection in its intimate and tranquil surroundings.

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