Mother and Child

It does something which no other book on art criticism . . . accomplishes. It provides an intelligent objective criterion for perceiving the values of paintings. It does this not by laying down rules, but by showing what one should look for and what is irrelevant to his seeing.

John Dewey on The Art in Painting

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lbert Coombs Barnes (1872-1951), a physician-scientist best known as the codeveloper of the antiseptic Argyrol (silver vitellin), had a longstanding interest in psychology and art. He was an early advocate for Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and avidly studied Pragmatism, the psychology of William James, before turning in 1917 to John Dewey and enrolling in his courses at Columbia University, which emphasized a scientific approach to education. Workdays at his business lasted 6 hours and were followed by an education seminar for all employees that focused on psychology and aesthetics; he installed artwork in his factory. Barnes was particularly interested in the art education of the average person. In 1922 he established the Barnes Foundation for the advancement of the appreciation of the fine arts. Dewey joined him as its director of education in 1923. Barnes is recognized today as an art educator and for the art collection that he amassed in the beginning of the 20th century, which is valued at more than $6 billion today.

The son of a Civil War amputee, Barnes was reared in poverty, graduating from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine at age 20 years. Soon finding that he preferred research to clinical practice, in 1900 he went on to study pharmacology at the University of Heidelberg. There he met a German chemist, Herman Hille, who eventually became his partner in the pharmaceutical business. Hille used wheat protein to formulate a nonirritating, silver-based antiseptic that was not too toxic to apply to mucous membranes. Argyrol had many uses but dominated the topical ophthalmic antimicrobial market for the first half of the 20th century and became the standard treatment for ophthalmia neonatorum.

In 1926 Barnes received France’s highest decoration, chevalier (knight) of the National Order of the Legion of Honor. That same year Giorgio de Chirico completed his portrait (Figure). Barnes eventually purchased it and about 20 of the artist’s paintings, making him de Chirico’s major American patron; 13 remain in the collection. Barnes wears a gray business suit and is depicted as a thinking person, reflecting his independent pragmatism. In the background is an enigmatic mannequin, a reminder of de Chirico’s metaphysical period. The faceless mannequin originally suggested endless possibilities, but after the first World War it came to represent the loss of individual identity. The architectural background also is drawn from the metaphysical period. These elements may have been introduced to emphasize Barnes’ patronage of de Chirico’s progressive ideas.

Barnes sold the A. C. Barnes Company for between $4 million and $5 million in 1929 just months before the stock market crash. His collection is best known for acquisitions of art.

REFERENCES