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# A Modernist Display at the Barnes Foundation: Curating Formalism, Primitivism, and Democracy

**Abstract** The collector Albert Barnes (1872–1951) put heterogenous objects—from African sculpture to modernist paintings to utilitarian ironwork—into contact with one another by carefully composing them into art "ensembles." This chapter examines three different ways to analyze one of Barnes's ensembles. It investigates the explicit ways that Barnes used aesthetic formalism to bring together objects in his display but, also, the implicit ways that his ideas about American democracy and primitivism undergirded the relationships that he structured between not only the objects in his collection but also the people that he brought together in his galleries.

**Keyword** Primitivism

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In the Barnes Foundation galleries in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which were installed first in Merion, Pennsylvania from 1924–1951 and locked into place at the collector Albert Barnes's death, unexpected sets of objects are arranged in such tight proximity that the viewer must grapple with them within multiple sets of relations. Barnes understood himself, in a sense, to be doing work akin to that of an artist as he brought objects together so that each wall functioned as a carefully arranged composition. Along a wall in gallery 22, the curve of the elongated neck of a Modigliani female figure rhymes with the shape of the handle of a nineteenth-century American ladle hung parallel to it. Two Kota reliquary sculptures, two Bamana masks, and two small Picasso heads are spaced along the center of the wall, which draws attention to repetitions in surface patterns across these objects: From the grid of hatch marks on the painted figures' noses and cheeks, to the linear striations that groove the faces of the wooden masks to the series of embedded almond shapes that delineate the eyes in both the Kota sculptures and the Picasso paintings. These relations multiply through the Barnes Foundation's tightly installed displays as they link across objects from different times, places, and mediums (▸**Canon**). While Barnes was arranging the heterogeneous objects he collected, he was simultaneously bringing unexpected groups of people together in the galleries. The foundation grew out of aesthetic courses that he and his staff taught to his factory workers in the 1910s—who were primarily African-American men and white women—and he refused entry to anyone he viewed as elite, arguing that the foundation was created only for the "common man." This entry briefly examines three different modalities by which to analyze how this display "ensemble" constructs contacts between the objects: Barnes' explicit use of aesthetic formalism, but also the implicit ways that his ideas about American democracy and primitivism undergirded the relationships he structured between both objects and people in this gallery.

Lecturing in the 1920s, Barnes insisted that students analyze the formal similarities, "the merely factual appearances of things," qualities such as "color, line, light, and space" of the objects that he had arranged so carefully and intentionally (Barnes 1937, 55). He argued for a purely aesthetic approach to art that was dominant especially in Anglo-American art criticism in the early twentieth century, often termed formalism. He emphasized how this approach to art, supposedly reliant only on the sense of sight, prioritizes the viewer's experience in front of art. The gallery discussed here was intentionally designed to be small; this was both to bring the viewer close to the artworks but also to bring the artworks close to one another. It was not content (a man with a large nose; a sculptural depiction of a face) or art history (Picasso painted the heads in 1907 and they have been analyzed in terms of the development of cubism; an artist from the Mbamba group of the Kota people created the reliquaries either to be part of a shrine or for the tourist market in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century and a sculptural element of each of them was mounted on wood around 1920) that Barnes wanted us to see, but similarities in plastic form across his display.

Figure 1: Barnes Foundation, ensemble view, room 22, south wall, Philadelphia, 2012.

The way Barnes placed these objects into contact with one another also depended, however, on the foundation's mission to provide democratic education based on the practices of the pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, its first head of education. The displays, therefore, manifest some of the particular social, cultural, and political dynamics through which those pragmatic ideas about democracy arose in the United States in the 1920s.

The foundation is most famous for its collection of modern art and the displays have been criticized for being random or chaotic rather than offering a coherent concept of modernism, especially in contrast to the linear mode of display made canonical at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Barnes' solution for a modern and democratic way to display art, however, depended on there being contingent relationships between objects, whereby it was the viewer's job to discover associations between them. Barnes grafted John Dewey's philosophy—that to create democratic citizens you needed to provide an open-ended education based on experiential learning—onto his own formalist aesthetic method. He believed that a student who "learned how to see" in his galleries could approach all of life with that same highly attuned critical awareness. According to the mission statement, the foundation was for "people who are ordinarily considered to be barred, by their race or station in life, from participation in any but mechanical and servile activities." The idea of democratic education was explicit in the foundation's program to educate working-class people in aesthetics with the intention that it would enable them to participate in the American project not just as laborers but as contributors to "the spiritual values in civilization" (Mullen 1925).

The promotion of democratic education can also be read more implicitly, however, in how this display itself collapses categories of high and low art. Hanging a humble iron ladle next to a Modigliani fine arts painting, a simple metal handle above a carved wooden crucifixion, or a "primitive" Bamana mask next to a Picasso can be seen as a welcoming gesture to the "common man" who, like these objects, would rarely elsewhere be found in an art gallery. Dewey wrote,

> Art is ceasing to be connected as exclusively as it was once with [...] paintings on the walls of the well-to-do. To my mind, one of the most significant phenomena of the present is recognition that art reaches into the lives of people at every point; that material wealth and comfort are in the end a form of poverty save as they are animated by what art and art alone can provide. A necessary part of this changed attitude is the breaking down of the walls that so long divided what were called the fine arts from applied and industrial arts (Dewey 1937, 95).

For Dewey, this new and "revolutionary" experience of art by a wide range of people required that they learn to engage with a more egalitarian spectrum of objects, such as those in this display.

A third modality for reading the relationships between objects on this wall, namely primitivism (‣**Primitivism**), is integral to, but also undermines, Barnes' vision for democracy in this gallery. Like democracy, primitivism was an organizing principle for how Barnes understood both people and objects to relate. Barnes collected works by primitivist artists such as those seen here by Modigliani and Picasso. More to the point though, through his display ensembles he forwarded a theory by which objects deemed "primitive," first and primarily African sculpture, could provide "joy and instruction" for artists and viewers who wanted to understand or create modern art. The foundation's catalogue, *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, which Barnes heavily edited, stated: "By 1907, the European art-world was ready to discover African Sculpture [...]. After catching the spell of its vigorous and seductive rhythms, no artist can return to academic banalities" (Guillaume and Munro 1926, 130; 134). The display makes the same argument as the catalogue. 1907 was the year that Picasso painted the two works found in this gallery, which are framed on the wall and in the vitrine below them by African sculpture. It was the same year Picasso famously described himself as being terrified by an encounter with a vitrine of African sculpture at the Trocadero museum. And the same year that Picasso painted *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*, for which these are probably studies, and which is now widely treated as "the first unequivocal twentieth-century masterpiece, a principal detonator of the modern movement" (Richardson 1991, 465). The term "discover," with all of its connotations of colonial exploration and exploitation, as well as the market savvy of a good collector, is also significant.[1] African sculpture ensconced in this display was intended to act as proof of the genius of modern artists like Picasso who "discovered" it and Barnes' understanding of its significance to modern art, and as a pedagogical tool for the viewer to be able to have a similar insight.

The idea that primitive art could provide "joy and instruction," however, was not limited to the objects in the collection but also mapped onto how people at the foundation were understood to relate to one another. Barnes spoke of his African-American students/workers as aesthetically and spiritually inspiring in terms that paralleled the role he assigned to the African objects in the collection.

> For twenty-five years I worked side by side with a group of Negros in a chemical laboratory, and I learned that I could depend upon them to do well what they should do, and I nearly always had the added aesthetic pleasure of seeing them make a vivid drama out of the task. If we learn the lesson that the obvious fact needed to give interest and color to our prosaic civilization is precisely the poetry

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1 For a critical analysis of this rhetorical construction in which modern Western artists "discovered" so-called primitive, folk, or indigenous arts, see Gikandi 2003 and Mitter 2008.

> and drama which the Negro actually lives every day, it is incredible that we should not consent to form a working alliance with him for the development of a richer life [...] (Barnes 1936, 386).

Barnes' paternalistic and demeaning impulse to see African Americans as "artists in living" (Barnes 1924) who brought color to modern American society functioned according to the same logic in which Barnes wrote that African sculpture provided a new "stimulus" and "access to energy" for modern European art (Barnes and De Mazia 1933, 16); and it reveals a fundamental hierarchy inherent in his notion of democratic education. Both African Americans as people and African sculpture as objects were treated as catalysts rather than as equal and equivalent actors at the foundation (▸**Agency**).

Barnes believed that bringing "primitive" and "folk" arts into relation with both his modern art collection and his ancient art and old master paintings would encourage a more open and democratic vision. At the same time, primitive and folk remained categories that were defined by and for a narrowly imagined subset of modern Western artists. A lineage of Western fine arts remained central to the foundation's narrative even when Barnes and his colleagues were challenging it. In this way, although Barnes invited previously marginalized arts into the collection, it was to put them in the service of a particular Western modern art and vision in ways that erased their own specificity (▸**Appropriation**). Analyzing this ensemble according to the multiple ways it put objects into contact with one another can, therefore, also show us the shortcomings of Barnes' promotion of democracy and a socially engaged modernism in the 1920s–1940s. His insistent idealistic assertion of the terms "democracy" and "modernism" papered over differences in how objects—and by extension people—were unevenly positioned according to their identities in his own galleries and the United States more broadly.

## Figure

Fig. 1: Photo: © 2020 The Barnes Foundation.

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