

Art, Literature, Storytelling, and Mrs. Whatsit

— AN ESSAY BY —

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When I was a little girl, I wanted to be an artist. My parents were accommodating, buying me paints and canvases, setting up a “studio” for me in a corner of our basement, and enrolling me in art classes at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Unfortunately, it became clear early on that this was not where my talents lay.

So I moved on to other things: the Beatles, the Flintstones, and reading every novel I could get my hands on. I read *A Wrinkle in Time* and decided I wanted to be Mrs. Whatsit, an extraterrestrial being who could bend time and space to her whim. When my mother gently explained that this wasn’t possible, I told her I wanted to write novels like Madeleine L’Engle. This, she assured me, was doable, but instead I became a sociologist.

Although I chose a more standard career path than that of artist or writer or centaur-like creature from the planet Ariel, my passion for art, literature, and storytelling never dimmed, and I’ve been a voracious reader, journal scribbler, and museumgoer my entire adult life. I was in my twenties the first time I visited the Barnes Foundation, a private museum in a magnificent beaux arts mansion outside of Philadelphia with arguably the best collection of post-Impressionist art in the world. As I stood in the main gallery, turning in a circle, taking in paintings by Matisse and Picasso and Cézanne, my first thought was that I could never be too rich. Why? Because nothing would make me happier than to be surrounded by great art. Particularly post-Impressionist art, vibrantly colored and emotionally charged, so brilliant and bold and free-spirited.

Although I was then in graduate school pursuing a degree in a completely unrelated field, I had an inkling that someday I would write a novel about

these artists and the man, Albert Barnes, who created this heaven on earth. Thirty-five years later, I finally have. *The Collector's Apprentice* is that novel.

When I returned to the City of Brotherly Love to begin researching the book, I was shocked to discover that the Barnes Foundation was no longer in its stunning suburban manse in Merion. It had been moved in its entirety to a harsh modern building on Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia. While I was pleased that the collection was now located in a more accessible place and open to the public, I was also taken aback. Albert Barnes's will stated that no piece of artwork could be removed from the wall on which he'd hung it, that each piece must remain in the same configuration within which he'd placed it—in Merion. And here it all was, in the center of the city.

Barnes chose his artwork with both genius and prescience in the first half of the twentieth century, when just about everyone in America believed Matisse and Cézanne to be madmen and their paintings to be rubbish. He planned to build a stately home for his derided masterworks and meticulously position them on the walls in unlikely groupings. His was a unique curatorial style that displayed art in a way it had never been displayed before—a way he hoped would allow visitors to see art as they had never seen it before.

But when he exhibited some of his post-Impressionist paintings in 1923—before his building was complete—disdain was heaped upon him by Philadelphia's high-society patrons and art critics, all of whom claimed the artworks to be “nonsensical clumps of nonsensical color” and “most unpleasant to contemplate.” Vindictive and stubborn, Barnes declared that his foundation would never be a museum where churlish and unsympathetic gawkers roamed. So instead, he opened a school. The entire building was his classroom and the entire collection his subject matter. But only a few Barnes-approved students were allowed to enroll—and only a few Barnes-approved individuals were allowed to visit.

How had this happened? How had a man's personal property been moved despite his clear intentions and written will? Who owns art? The person who buys it, or the worldwide community of art lovers who deserve to see some of the most masterful paintings ever created? Can you keep for yourself what belongs to posterity?

Now I was even more driven to write this novel, to dig into these questions and all the others I had. I immersed myself in the brilliance and

eccentricity of Barnes and his fascinating assistant, Violette de Mazia. De Mazia was a mysterious, passionate woman, and the tangles and intrigues of her relationship with Barnes were riveting, as were the multiple trials and legal proceedings that ultimately wrenched Barnes's beloved collection from his grasp. Even better, I lost myself in the study of post-Impressionist art. I visited museums and libraries, interviewed curators and art teachers and historians. I began to write.

It was all mesmerizing, to me at least, but unfortunately my initial pages were not. Too much legal jargon. Too many years covered. Too much repetition. Not enough action. Flat characters. I had a lot of details, but too little plot. Dispirited, I read historical novels and mooned around art museums, hoping to find the threads of my story and the depth within my characters. During this time, a friend was conned by a man similar to Bernie Madoff, and then another was left at the altar. I wondered how my friends—both smart, educated women—could have been so hoodwinked. How had they missed the signs that were right in front of them? And who were these men, so clever and charming and despicable, who had fooled them so easily?

As I wandered the galleries of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston one day, it struck me that this type of blindness happens frequently to many people, that seeing only what you want to see is an all-too-human failing. But more important, I realized that this notion underlay the story I was trying to tell: that despite an artist's intention, viewers see what they want to see in a work; that love is truly in the eye of the beholder; that passion, whether it be for a person or money or revenge or for art, can render the best of us blind. And then the most marvelous and villainous character came to me: George Everard, con man extraordinaire, who would wile his way into my heroine's heart and refuse to let go. When I read *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and envisioned 1920s Paris stretched out in front of me, suddenly it was all there.

Well, not really all there. It took another three years and dozens of rewrites to finish the damn thing. I fictionalized Barnes and de Mazia, collapsed time, added love triangles—one with Henri Matisse—and created a possible murder. Finally, the manuscript clicked into place. Although Mrs. Whatsit is nowhere to be seen, my love of art, literature, and storytelling certainly are. And like Mrs. Whatsit, doesn't every novelist bend time and space to her whim?