

The Complete Guide to Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation

By Marla Cimini



Looming large on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in the center of Philadelphia, the [Barnes Foundation](#) is an expansive, modern art museum that houses the vast private collection of Dr. Albert C. Barnes. Barnes was a renowned chemist and art enthusiast who owned an extensive array of incredible and rare works until he passed away in the 1950s.

With over 12,000 square feet of stunning, light-filled gallery space, the museum is home to the largest collection of impressionist art in the world, with approximately 200 works by Renoir, and about 4,000 valuable and unique pieces by Picasso, Monet, Cézanne, Degas, Matisse—along with other famous and well-respected artists.

History

The Barnes Foundation is incredible inside and out. But it has a long, complex and storied history that involves city politics, mismanaged funds and art experts from around the world who were at odds with each other for years.

Dr. Albert Barnes created the foundation in 1922 to encourage art education and make art available to everyone, no matter their socio-economic status. He placed his impressive art collection in an expansive gallery in a residential neighborhood in Merion, Pennsylvania. The gallery was situated on a 12-acre arboretum and designed by highly-esteemed architect Paul Phillippe Cret.

Dr. Barnes intended to keep his priceless pieces together there in one collection, displayed in the same place, even after his death. However, due to a number of circumstances, the museum was moved to its current building in 2012, with much fanfare. Proponents of the move point out that the interior of the building is a replica of the original location and thus remained true to Barnes's wishes, while protestors insist that the museum should have remained in its original location. (Today, the original Merion building is surrounded by expansive gardens which are open for tours).

The current building, designed by Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, combines the modern and the traditional. The contemporary limestone exterior contains galleries that replicate the original space that Dr. Barnes commissioned in the 1920s, but with added elements, additional light, more space, and a dramatic perspective.



Highlights of the Barnes Foundation

The entire museum is filled with an incredible number of jaw-dropping highlights, as Dr. Barnes curated his collection to include over 4,000 pieces of the most highly-regarded impressionist, post-impressionist, and modern painters. A few of the many highlights include the following noteworthy paintings:

- "Bathing Group" (Renoir: painted in 1916)
- "Houses and Figure" (Van Gogh: painted in 1890)
- "Reclining nude from the back" (Modigliani: painted in 1917)
- "The Card Players" (Cézanne: painted between 1890 to 1892)
- "Bouquet of Flowers" (Rousseau: painted in 1910)

How to Visit

The Barnes Foundation offers a variety of excellent tours by incredibly knowledgeable and exceptional docents who are extremely familiar with the collection and share a passion for art. Although it's interesting to walk around the Barnes Foundation on your own, it's worth it to schedule a docent tour in advance. Just like many tourist attractions, it's best to plan your visit during the week and avoid holiday weekends, if possible.

There are several tours to choose from, including a tour for the special exhibition:

- **Daily Highlights tour:** The one-hour tour is ideal for first-timers. It provides an overview of the museum and points out some of the more noteworthy pieces (\$35 dollars per person).
- **Daily Premier tour:** This 90-minute tour takes place when the museum is not open to the public giving better access to the paintings (\$50 per person).
- **Daily Spotlight tour:** This one-hour tour focuses on a specific artist or theme.
- **Stroller tour:** Ideal for families, this tour is \$10 per adult (babies are free) and takes place once a month.



Dining at the Barnes

After viewing all the amazing artwork, you might want to relax and recharge at one of the Barnes Foundation's dining options. These include:

- **The Garden Restaurant:** Featuring an open kitchen and outdoor terrace in the summer, this restaurant serves up American dishes with French influences. Advance reservations are recommended. This restaurant is open to the public (you don't need to pay museum admission) and serves lunch until 3 p.m., daily.

- **Reflections café:** A casual eatery with light bites, this cafe offers outdoor seating during the warmer months.
- **Coffee Bar:** Located on the lower level, the coffee bar offers teas and fresh pastries.

Travel Tips

- The Barnes recently launched [Barnes Focus](#), a mobile guide that presents stories and information about the specific items in the art collection.
- The Barnes Foundation gift shop is not to be missed, so be sure to leave some time to browse around the store for jewelry, books, children's items, clothing, accessories, and other fascinating items.
- The Barnes Foundation is also an art institution, offering a variety of classes for adults and children. Check out the website for class information and schedules and click on their "take a class" section.
- Photography is allowed for personal use. Not permitted: flash, tripods, or selfie sticks.