

HISTORY RECLAIMED

As the vibrant, impressionist pastels of **John Pierce Barnes** resurface, so too does an important chapter in American art history.

BY KATHRYN SCIMONE STANKO WITH SARAH A. STRICKLEY



JOHN PIERCE BARNES MAY NOT BE A NAME THAT SPRINGS TO MIND when considering the tradition of American Impressionism, but as a once-hidden collection of paintings reveals, the artist was a talent deserving of recognition.

Like Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), Robert Henri (1865-1929) and scores of other famous painters, Barnes' impeccable artistic pedigree includes an ambitious course of study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he won several scholarships allowing him to study in Europe and marking him as a rising star.

Upon graduation, Barnes settled near Philadelphia and commuted daily to a job in New Jersey as a designer in the Victor design division of RCA, where he worked until his death in 1954. He never sought public recognition for his artwork during his lifetime, which is why the 200 paintings he left behind fell into absolute obscurity.

Recently, these important impressionist works—among them 24 small pastels—were uncovered, revealing a window into the intriguing story of the artist as a young man and the often overlooked shift from Impressionism to Modernism that took place in early 20th-century American art.

Impressionist Influences

Barnes was born in Philadelphia in 1893 and grew up in the Germantown area of the city. Upon returning from service in World War I, he studied at the Philadelphia School of Industrial Design (now the University of the Arts), where he won several awards. He then continued his studies at the Pennsylvania Academy, where he became one of the most promising students of longtime Academy instructor Daniel Garber (1880-1958).

Like many impressionists, Garber painted landscapes—often the nearby Delaware River—*en plein air*. Known for his use of vibrant, shimmering colors, the artist was no doubt an important influence on Barnes. Garber's insistence that his students "see the light," for example, is evident in Barnes' water reflections and use of sunlight, as seen particularly in *No. 5*, *No. 20* and *No. 25*, on the following pages. Barnes' use of line gives directional movement to all of these compositions.

Garber's influence can also be felt in Barnes' use of the "curtain effect" (see *No. 18* above) in which trees are used to screen and frame buildings. According to members of the Barnes family, the artist went on numerous sketching outings with Garber, and New Hope, Pa., themes and influences are clearly present in his pastels.

No. 18 (9x11)

Figurative works, such as *No. 25* (opposite), take viewers inside the anatomy courses at the Academy and reveal the strong emphasis placed upon the subject in coursework. Students painted and sketched from live models—including fellow students in costume—as well as from casts. Portraits were an integral part of study, but the rivers, streams and canals of eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey were undoubtedly the most popular subjects. Pastels such as *No. 5* (below) show the sunlight and landscape reflections reminiscent of these themes.

Pastel wasn't formally taught at the Academy, but students were exposed to informal instruction

and several of the faculty—including the modernist Hugh Henry Breckenridge (1870-1937)—were pastelists and powerful presences. Breckenridge's modernism was a particularly strong influence on Barnes' style, as is evident in the vivid Fauvist colors seen in the collection.

Forging Ahead

As much as Barnes was a product of his education, his work also reveals an artist forging his own path. Such was the Academy's expectation. According to the school's own circular, "the individuality of the student is not repressed by fixed methods."

The artist certainly heard the call to individuality.

Barnes' pastels, for example, are fresh, spontaneous interpretations done *en plein air*. The works reflect the influence and popularity of the European landscape tradition of drawing inspiration directly from nature. The visible strokes, in bold hues, emphasize the natural light. The quickness of his pastels provides an interesting contrast to his deliberate and time-consuming pointillist oils.

In paintings such as *No. 18*, we find the buildings, mills and farmhouses that the New Hope area impressionists are known for painting, but Barnes also employs bold strokes of color, loosely done with hatching and cross-hatching as part of the composition.

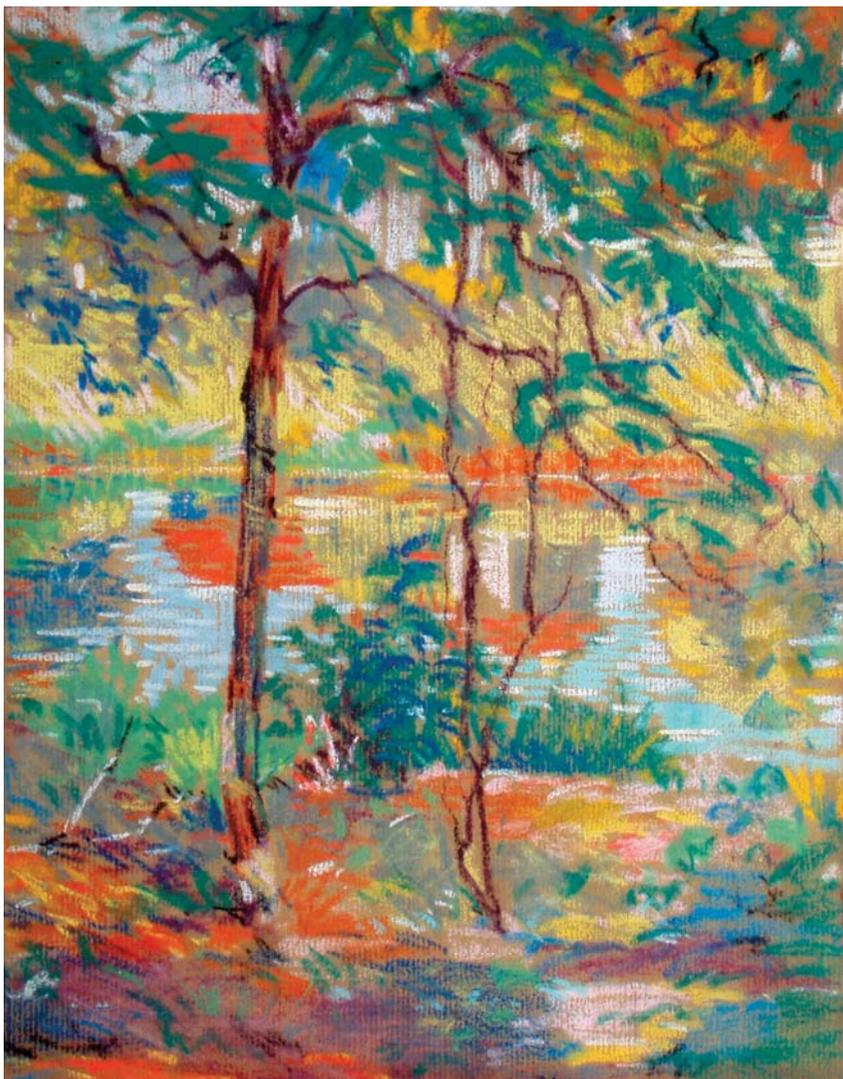
Here the viewer finds Barnes rejecting a realist, formalized type of art in favor of a more expressive interpretation. The paintings are quiet yet high-impact demonstrations of his prowess as a true *plein air* talent.

In this way, Barnes' pastels are a window into a period of changing trends and often turbulent transition. Given today's love affair with Impressionism, it's difficult to recall that it fell out of favor during the early 20th century. Modern and cubist trends were soon to play out in the classrooms of the Academy, which

No. 5 (below;
10x8)

No. 20 (opposite,
top; 9x11)

No. 25 (opposite,
bottom; 8x10)





was often a battleground for new movements in art. Like so many of his colleagues, Barnes was influenced by these controversial trends.

Enduring Pastel Beauty

Following their recent rescue from obscurity, Barnes' pastels were exhibited at The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, and Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia. Audiences continue to marvel over the beauty of the subject matter and the vibrancy of the pastel.

The collection tells the backstory of the education that formed artists such as Barnes and also serves as a reminder of the importance of Pennsylvania art in the larger context of American art history. After all, the Academy was the first art school and museum in the United States; it boasts a long history of celebrated students and professors. 📖



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TO SEE MORE OF THE RECENTLY UNCOVERED PASTELS OF JOHN PIERCE BARNES, VISIT WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/JOHN-PIERCE-BARNES-GALLERY.