

The City Arts Interview: Will Barnet

by [CityArts](#) on Oct 25, 2011 • 6:02 pm

Will Barnet's eight-decade career is not only one of the most enduring of any living American artist, it is also one of the most varied. Over the many years, the renowned painter and printmaker has moved through phases of social realism, cubism, abstraction and lyrical realism before his recent return to abstraction. His numerous awards include the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters' Childe Hassam Prize as well as lifetime achievement awards from both the National Academy of Design and the College Art Association. His works are in the collections of virtually every major museum in the country.



Will Barnet ©Marc Royce, courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York

Born to Eastern European immigrants in Beverly, Mass., in 1911, Barnet attended the Boston Museum School and the Art Students League in New York, where he taught for nearly four decades. Now 100 years old, the artist is currently the subject of a retrospective at the National Academy Museum that features nearly 50 of his works on loan from private and museum collections. The artist recently talked with CityArts in his apartment in the National Arts Club.—
John Goodrich

Looking at your work, one sees all kinds of influences: of course, there's Native American, maybe Egyptian, Japanese.

From the time I was very young, I went to the library and absorbed every book I possibly could read about the history of art and what took place in different cultures—not just one culture but many cultures. I had a very broad education just from the Beverly public library. I loved it. It was my ideal home, actually, the library.

And your parents were supportive of you?

Not particularly. They were very good parents, but they were very hardworking and they had their own problems. I was the last one born, about 14 years younger, so I was an only child. I was on my own.

You got a scholarship to the Art Students League.

Yeah, a four-year scholarship. Stuart Davis was there and I liked Stuart Davis' work. So I worked with him for a while until he was fired from his job and then I went directly to the graphic department with Charlie Locke. That's where I did my apprenticeship, learning how to print so I could make a living during the deep Depression.

Of course, the Second World War was coming up and we were all aware of Hitler, very much so. We knew what they were doing to people, so we tried to help get people out of Germany. Some of them did get out, like George Grosz, who taught at the League. I was one of the guys who helped get him here.

All of those tumultuous things happening in New York—the Depression, strikes—I put them into my work. I covered the ball field, as they say. I began to change later on. I liked more classical work. It's very rare that you see a show like this [the National Academy Museum retrospective] today that deals with structure and a certain kind of analysis of nature and puts them together. It's more abstract in its thinking.

It seems it's abstract, but it's real.

It's real, yeah, but you have to be able to be abstract at the same time. You have to get rid of the superficial surfaces and find the underneath things that give it depth and strength, like Ingres does with beautiful women—you look underneath and you see that the elbow is so goddamned long, like an elephant's trunk. You see the exaggerations that took place to make it a work of art.

You keep the same philosophy even though your work changes a lot, from abstraction back to figuration.

And then back to abstraction. Abstraction is not too far away from the figure. I'm basically a figure painter, and portraiture is always something I've loved very dearly. I did quite a few portraits of people, but they're not commercial.

When you rework something, do you work from many studies?

Yes, hundreds of studies. Hundreds.

Do you change things on the canvas?

Most of the changes take place in the drawings, because by the time I've gotten to the point where I know what I want to say, I start putting it on a canvas. I may make a lot of changes, particularly in colors, but the actual work is done on paper.

It took quite a few years for the abstraction to have a certain reality for me, an ability to convey my thoughts. There is a language in abstraction, which is different from the language of realistic painting. You begin to see this flat surface has to be structurally understood and there's a certain amount of space taking place as you work, up and down, across. The Egyptians had their language. The Japanese had their language. The Chinese had their language. And they're all different. But they all relate if they're well done. They all relate in being aesthetically, you might say, acceptable, in terms of being a classical piece of work.

What other paintings do you find yourself going back to?

I lectured a lot about the paintings at The Met, but I also went to the Museum of the American Indian up on 155th Street and talked about Indian concepts. They had their own culture, too.

It's interesting that you like such a variety of work. There's Modigliani...

He was a big influence in the early work. I loved his work.

And Juan Gris?

Juan Gris was one of the great artists. I used to lecture on him. I used to have his dealer come and speak to my class—Kahnweiler, the famous Kahnweiler. Another great artist was Seurat. He was one of the great structural painters of his time. An amazing genius.

When you work now, do you find that sometimes you're in touch with the painting and sometimes you're not?

Well, when you get to be 100, you have the right to be in touch with anything.

Will Barnet at 100 is on view at the National Academy Museum through Dec. 31.