

Celebrations of Will Barnet at 100

Over the course of his eight-decade-long career, Will Barnet (b. 1911) has defied categorization as an artist. He emerged as an innovative printmaker of realistic subjects in the 1930s and developed an original abstract style that distinguished him as an important modernist less than a decade later. The formulation of this style guided Barnet into the mid-1960s, when he created a type of figurative painting that struck an evocative balance between realism and abstraction. Returning to abstract painting in 2000, Barnet has once again beguiled the art world with the inventiveness of his latest work. A centenarian as of May 25, he continues to paint to this day. "It's so much a part of my life that I can't retire," he said recently. "Just touching that canvas is a wonderful feeling."

Born in the small, seafaring commu-



Two exhibitions celebrate the 100th birthday of Will Barnet. *Will Barnet at 100* is on view from September 16 through December 31, 2011, at the National Academy Museum, 1083 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York, 10128, 212-369-4880, www.nationalacademy.org. The exhibition is accompanied by a 128-page catalogue written by Bruce Weber, Senior Curator of 19th and early 20th century art at the National Academy Museum.

Will Barnet: Relationships, Intimate and Abstract, 1935-1965 is on view through December 31, 2011, at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 3501 Camp Bowie Blvd., Fort Worth, Texas, 76107, 817-738-1933, www.cartermuseum.org.

nity of Beverly, Massachusetts, Barnet came from a working-class background. His father was a machinist and his mother





ABOVE: *Self-Portrait*, 1981, o/c, 31 1/8 x 45 1/2, National Academy Museum, New York. (NY)

RIGHT: *Idle Hands*, 1935, o/c, 25 x 21, private collection. (NY)

ABOVE LEFT: *Singular Image*, 1964, woodcut, 36 15/16 x 23 3/4 (sheet), Amon Carter Museum of American Art, purchased with funds provided by the estate of Electra Carlin. (TX)

LEFT: *Fine Friends*, 1952, lithograph, 29 7/8 x 22 1/4 (sheet), Amon Carter Museum of American Art, purchased with funds provided by the estate of Electra Carlin. (TX)

FAR LEFT: *Self-Portrait*, 1952-53, o/c, 46 x 39 (framed), Amon Carter Museum of American Art, © Will Barnet. (TX)

was a homemaker who encouraged her son's artistic interests. Spurred by his own curiosity, Barnet frequented the Beverly Public Library to study their special holdings of books and portfolios on artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn and Honoré Daumier. He was intrigued not only by the humanity of their work but also by how they successfully balanced formal elements such as line and color with organizing principles such as harmony and proportion.





ABOVE: *Soft Boiled Eggs*, 1946, o/c, 36 x 42, private collection. (NY)

LEFT: *Croquet*, 1985, o/c, 65 x 48, Wendy and Hillel Tobias. (NY)

BELOW LEFT: *Makeshift Kitchen*, 1935, aquatint and etching, 10 x 10⁷/₈ (sheet), Amon Carter Museum of American Art, © Will Barnet. (TX)

RIGHT: *Woman and the Sea*, 1972, o/c, 51³/₄ x 41, private collection. (NY)

FAR RIGHT: *Old Man's Afternoon*, 1947, o/c, 45³/₄ x 38, The Montclair Art Museum, gift of Wyn and William Y. Hutchinson. (NY)

BELOW RIGHT: *Awareness of Dawn*, 1951, lithograph, 22¹/₂ x 30 (sheet), Amon Carter Museum of American Art, purchased with funds provided by the estate of Electra Carlin. (TX)



Inspired by these studies, in 1928 Barnet enrolled in the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where the curriculum focused on drawing the human figure in isolation. Barnet, however, wanted to understand how to organize pictures with figures in settings and decided to pursue his art education elsewhere.

In 1931, Barnet earned a scholarship to the Art Students League in New York, where he received a more liberal art education. He arrived in the city at the height of the Great Depression with ten dollars in his pocket. Having to support himself, Barnet learned all the techniques of printmaking at the League including intaglio and lithography. Prints were one of the few marketable art forms during the Depression, and Barnet dedicated himself to mastering each printing process. By 1935 Barnet was appointed League Printer, which earned him thirty-five dollars a week. A year later, he also began his illustrious teaching career at the Art Students League, remaining on the faculty for forty-three years.

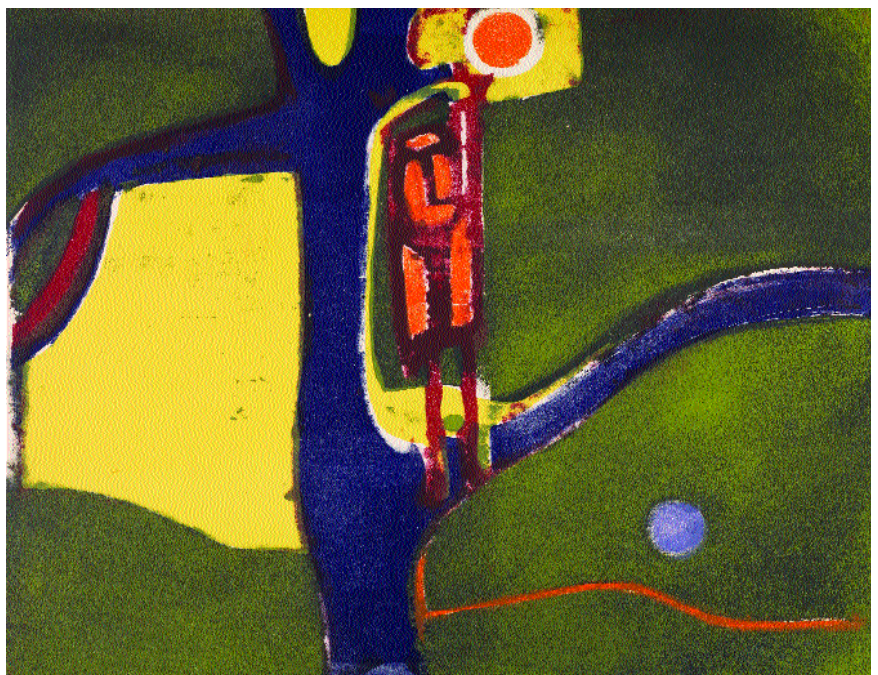


Teaching and working in New York during the 1930s and 1940s, Barnett was attuned to the modernist movement in visual art. Modernism was a revolt against realism and prompted progressive styles such as Cubism. The cubists rejected the Renaissance idea that art should copy nature and looked to the art of non-Western cultures, such as African tribal masks, for inspiration. Barnett similarly began exploring art from diverse cultures and discovered American Indian art, which he valued for both its unique artistry and indigenous heritage.

Turning exclusively to his family for subject matter in the 1940s, Barnett began adapting personal themes to the way Hopi artists expressed themselves and began using symbolic terms to depict family members. As he explained, "I began to take things around me, like my children, and I would use them as a take-off because they were in their primitive stage and it interested me a great deal."

During the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism, which celebrated spontaneity, improvisation, and most of all process, dominated the New York art world. Barnett and fellow artists whose abstract work was carefully calculated and structured were ignored by critics, museums, and patrons. Abstract Expressionism maintained its ascendancy into the 1960s, yet Barnett stayed committed to creating pictures methodically; he precisely organized the space, forms, colors, and lines of every image he composed.

In 1955, Barnett moved to New York's Lower East Side, where the surroundings
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Barnet *(continued from page 107)*

awakened his interest in the cityscape and landscape. He began experimenting with merging human figures and animals in abstract ways within landscapes. This foray into creating symbolic landscapes aided Barnet in realizing a new approach to figuration. Inspired by the flat, open and closed forms in perpendicular arrangements he used to evoke the landscape, Barnet began creating streamlined figures set within shallow spaces in both paintings and prints. Barnet said of his 1960s change from abstract to figurative work: "It took me more than a year to produce a figurative piece that worked. But without the abstract period, I could never have created what was to come."

—Text for this article provided by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art.