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Incarnated Curves: Ornamental Ironwork at the Barnes Foundation

by Alain Kirili

Strength and Splendor, Wrought Iron From the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen at the Barnes Foundation

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I always love going to Philadelphia because I perceive this town as a sort of capital of French art. With the Rodin Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Barnes Foundation, it is a place where you can really feel the roots of French Modernism

And Philadelphia is also a great center of ornamental ironwork. As a young sculptor visiting from France in the 1970s, I made a special trip to visit the greatest workshop in America for blacksmithing, founded by Samuel Yellin (1885-1940). I did my first sculptures in America there thanks to the hospitality of his son, Harvey. Some marvelous ornamental ironworks by Samuel Yellin are in the collection of the PMA.



Pair of Hand-shaped Wall Lights, 16th century. Germany. Rolled sheet iron, cut, repoussé, and curled; wrought iron; the whole fastened with rivets, each: 8-1/2 x 6-1/8 x 7-1/16 inches. Musée de la ferronnerie Le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen

It was a pleasant surprise to discover the collection of forged metal work hanging on the walls around the paintings on my first visit to the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pa. I remember that for most visitors, including art historians, this looked extremely eccentric. These ornamental works show a richness of execution, invention, and beauty. It should be admitted that the French themselves would have been as nonplussed to regard these metal ironworks around a collection of painting masterpieces. French tradition establishes a hierarchy where paintings and sculptures are part of the major arts and anything else gets gathered into a secondary category of decorative arts.

As a sculptor in forged iron, it is crucial for me to see the roots and traditions of my work. We tend to say that iron emerged in Western sculpture in the 20th century thanks to the great sculptor Julio Gonzalez. We could also add the names of Gargallo, Calder, Picasso, and Smith. The capacity of metal to be worked in extremely linear ways allows sculpture to become free of its mass and for emptiness to be exploited as solid volume. Additionally, the use of wire was a big breakthrough for freeing sculpture. Suddenly, we could draw: we could delineate the void.

But such a perception is extremely ethnocentric and limited to the history of sculpture defined by a western conception.

Furthermore, ornamental ironwork has always been a very linear calligraphic way to create. Judith Dolkart, the former Director of the Barnes and co-curator of *Strength and Splendor*, had this conception of ironwork in the back of her mind when she conceived of the show, she told me. The idea of seeing a union of their own and the Barnes ironwork collections

was warmly received at the Musée de Rouen. In the selection from Rouen's Le Secq des Tournelles collection we can appreciate some pieces done in *repoussé* sheets of metal, seen fully in the round. For instance, there are extraordinarily beautiful roosters in metal located on the roof of churches. There are superb masterpieces of andiron (firedogs) that can be perceived today as sculptures. In French tradition, the major arts have their statute mostly because they're non-functional. I do appreciate enormously the fact that a

culture supports non-functionality in art. It stimulates the artist to be free and to transgress. But I regret that we would deny and not perceive some major creativity in some functional and decorative works like those ornamental ironworks and in ivory carving.



Installation shot, permanent collection, Barnes Foundation, showing examples of ironwork and paintings hung together by Albert C. Barnes

I really admire Albert Barnes for arranging painting, furniture, and ornamental ironworks all on the same level of importance in very creative ensembles. It gave him the freedom to collect masterpieces of Native American Indian carpets, jewels, and extraordinary potteries. In his installations we can perceive a world of signs, a *musical suite* in which the decontextualized functional objects resonate with the pictorial signs composed in each painting. This emerges forcefully, for instance, in the juxtaposition of Matisse's *Music Lesson* and the ornamental work Barnes chose to place around the painting. The metal forged balcony in the painting dialogues with the painted curves of the piano and the metal motives on the walls. Barnes installs the arts with a sense of symmetry belonging to the classical tradition as we see with the Medici at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. With the addition of the metal works, he develops a sense of humor that was never shown before. In my opinion, the collection reveals a taste of Barnes for the female body and the arabesque. The whole collection emits a tension between a world of verticality and a love of incarnated curves.

I do not always know for sure what used to be the function of some of those metal works. I don't really care because they free me and allow me to enjoy the extreme beauty, the powerful inventiveness of those great artists of the past. They're more than craftsmen because they don't repeat and they're innovating through their execution.

The opportunity at the Barnes to compare two great but distinct collections of wrought iron works revealed the different spirits of each collector. The very beautifully selected collection of Le Secq des Tournelles presents an accumulation of functional objects whereas Barnes's intention, as I have said, in decontextualizing those objects, is essentially a kind of musical semiology. We can also savor the way that pieces in Le Secq des Tournelles kept the blackness of the metal patina and how Albert Barnes took it off. These are two different approaches of appreciating these works. The Barnes Foundation is really a place that breaks hierarchy through a powerful sense of humor and *joie de vivre*.



Locksmith's Sign, "The Dog," 19th century. France. Rolled iron and wrought iron, polychromed, 22-1/2 x 35-3/4 x 1-1/4 inches. Musée de la ferronnerie Le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen



Cabaret Sign "Bat," late 18th century–early 19th century. France. Wrought iron and rolled iron, repoussé, fastened with rivets; glass, 24-3/4 x 24-1/4 x 2 3/8 inches. Musée de la ferronnerie Le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen