

# MontclairPatch

A Conversation With Artist Will Barnet—An American Master

By Carol Selman

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There was a time, not too long ago, when it seemed that every other dorm room or first apartment displayed a reproduction of a Will Barnet painting, and for good reason: His works are both powerful and accessible. Each work is self-contained, timeless. They universalize human experience. They explore our relations to our families and to the built and natural environment. And, they are profoundly beautiful.

Right now, Will Barnet's art is exerting a force field: It starts in the George Segal Gallery at Montclair State University, where a major exhibit of Barnet's work over the past 60 years is on view until December 1. The field extends south to the Montclair Art Museum, where a single but revelatory Barnet work can be seen in two of their current major exhibits, "Portraiture" and "Living with Art, Works from the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collections."

On Friday, October 22, Barnet's admirers and soon-to-be admirers can board a PATCH-sponsored shuttle bus and tour all three exhibits for free. The shuttle is a popular feature of the Montclair Arts Council's bi-annual *Gallery Walk, A Little Night Art VII*. The bus runs from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. and also stops at selected galleries, retailers exhibiting art, and restaurants in town. For more information about Friday evening's gallery walk, go [here](#). Barnet, 99, joined by Jane St. Lifer, his long-time graphic art representative and a New York City-based fine art appraiser, recently talked about his work. Listen in:

**Q. Mr. Barnet, your 1947 oil painting, "Old Man's Afternoon," is a great favorite at the Montclair Art Museum. It is currently on view there as part of their "Portraiture" exhibit. What are your thoughts now about that work?**

**A.** It's a transitional work that I like very much and was very important to my personal evolution as an artist. It is the beginning of my moving from the purely figurative to more abstraction. I was intensely probing how to put everything together on the canvas; how to play the forms and shapes both horizontally and vertically across the canvas and make the canvas dynamic and exciting.

The figures are my elderly father and my then young son Richard. The parrot is important here, as is the family cat. My father cultivated parrots; there was usually one perched on his shoulder. There is movement among all these characters. Grandfather and grandson speak to each other both as visual elements and as family figures. There is a visual tension across the canvas.

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All my portraits, in all styles, reveal the essence of the person I paint or draw. I go to the person's core—who they are, not just the surface.

**Q. You grew up in Beverly, Massachusetts and as a boy—12, 13, 14—you pored through all the art books at the local library. You studied the classics and honed the extraordinary draftsmanship that underlies all your work. The retrospective at MSU speaks strongly to these points. What can you tell us about that show?**

A. In the Montclair State show, there is a great variety of work from different periods, including many drawings. Some are drawings unto themselves; others are examples of the many, many sketches I do before painting. There are many works about women. Some were inspired by my New England background. That background is central to who I am and who I am as an artist. I'm deep in the tradition of real classical art and formal aesthetics. Picasso and Matisse understood this tradition. I carried on in my own way, made these my own principals, only more American and contemporary.

**Q. Mr. Barnet, you are not only a major artist but also a master printmaker and, for 43 years, you were a vital teacher at the Art Students League in New York City. You have influenced many artists through your work, your teaching, and the integrity of your artistic vision. What were your lessons to your students?**

A. I impressed on my students the need to study classical art and history. I remain a very good reader and student of history.

It was a very big struggle in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century when everything was being thrown away by the Abstract Expressionists and the dominance of the critics who supported them.

**Q. What is your greatest contribution?**

A. Keeping alive an idea of art as a visual expression of ideas in dynamic compositions. I've kept it alive for 80 years.