

ARTS AND LETTERS

Millions Saw His Paintings on TV. In the Art World, His Work Still Went Unnoticed.

In his lifetime, Ernie Barnes was largely dismissed and ignored by the industry. He became an icon anyway.



Ernie Barnes's "The Sugar Shack" (1976) sparked interest in the art world after selling well above its estimate at a Christie's auction in 2022. Courtesy of the Ernie Barnes Estate, Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps Gallery © Ernie Barnes

By Adam Bradley
Sept. 15, 2023

IN THE 1970S, buying a print of Ernie Barnes's "The Sugar Shack," the iconic 1976 dance club painting that adorns the cover of Marvin Gaye's album released that spring, "I Want You," and appears in the credits for the classic sitcom "Good Times" (1974-79), required nothing more than mailing a \$20 check to the artist's West Hollywood studio. In 2022, the second of two originals — inspired by a childhood adventure of sneaking into a famed dance hall to watch couples drag and sway to the live performances of Clyde McPhatter or Duke Ellington — came up for auction at Christie's, [selling for \\$15.3 million](#). The buyer was the Houston-based energy trader and high-stakes gambler Bill Perkins, 54, who won a bidding war against 22 other prospects. This vast divergence of price belies a convergence of spirit: The countless individuals hanging inexpensive prints on the walls of bedrooms and barbershops share with Perkins (and no doubt with the other wealthy collectors who bid the painting up to more than 76 times its high estimate) an ineluctable desire for the nostalgia and affirmation that Barnes's work conveys.

Barnes, who died in 2009 at 70, left a paradoxical legacy. He was an artist of the people — most especially of Black people — selling reproductions at prices that enabled everyone to own something beautiful. He was also an artist to the rich and famous; he sold many of his original works to athletes, movie stars and musicians, from Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to Grant Hill, Diana Ross to [Bill Withers](#), [Harry Belafonte](#) to Sylvester Stallone. He was among the most visible artists of the '70s, with millions seeing his paintings on television each week; yet his work was excluded from major museum collections. The unprecedented price paid for "The Sugar Shack," Barnes's most recognizable work, has changed everything — and nothing at all, inviting a wider (and whiter) audience to revisit an artist whose reputation among Black Americans is unassailable. More than a dozen years after his death, Barnes, long a popular painter, has become an important one, with all that term entails: a hot global market for his work (pricing out many of Barnes's original collectors); newfound interest from museums; and, most immediately, a major gallery exhibition scheduled for next year at [Ortuzar Projects](#) in New York, which will invite a deeper look at Barnes's varied career.

ERNEST EUGENE BARNES Jr. was born in Durham, N.C., in 1938, and grew up in a segregated neighborhood known as the Bottom. His father was a shipping clerk for Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company and his mother worked as a domestic. In his 1995 memoir, "From Pads to Palette," Barnes recalls using sticks as a child to sketch undulating lines "in the damp earth of North Carolina." By the time he was in high school, Barnes had grown close to his full height of 6 feet 3 inches and finally gave in to the football coach's entreaties for him to play offensive lineman. By 1956, he had 26 college scholarship offers; he enrolled at the historically Black North Carolina College (now North Carolina Central University), where he studied art. Though Barnes found support for his artistic endeavors on campus (he sold his first painting, "Slow Dance," a precursor to "Sugar Shack," for \$90, to the recent alum and Boston Celtics guard [Sam Jones](#)), he often faced bigotry beyond it, and this led him away from art. The Baltimore Colts selected Barnes in the 1960 N.F.L. draft, and he played for four other teams in a six-year career before leaving the game because of the physical toll of injury and the psychic toll of delaying his true calling as a painter.



Barnes's "Shootin' the Breeze" (1974). Courtesy of the Ernie Barnes Estate, Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps Gallery © Ernie Barnes

Prospects for a Black figurative artist were slim, and the modest salaries for professional football players at the time left him with little savings; Barnes worked for a short period in the off-season as a door-to-door salesman, and as a construction worker building crypts. Then, with the endorsement of the business mogul and San Diego Chargers owner Barron Hilton, Barnes crashed the American Football League owners' meeting to make a pitch to become the first official painter of a professional sports franchise. Many of the owners ignored him; one heckled him. But another, Sonny Werblin of the New York Jets, offered to pay him a player's salary to become the team's official painter. After a year, Barnes had built up enough of a portfolio for Werblin to sponsor Barnes's first solo show, at the famed Grand Central Art Galleries in Midtown Manhattan. Barnes was 28. His work, which rendered football as modern-day gladiatorial spectacle, was stylized and dramatic. One could see within it the stirrings of his mature aesthetic: his loose and gestural handling of human form, his passion for portraying bodies in motion.

His athleticism was far from incidental to his art. In football, he found the impetus to capture "the movement, the energy of it" on canvas, he explained to a small private gathering in Seattle in November 2001. In his early work, he was trying "to tell a real truth of what it feels like to get hit, to hit, to run, to turn, to backpedal." Barnes understood the human body not from the outside in, in the studied manner of a draftsman, but from the inside out, through his knowledge of how bone, muscle and ligament move in concert. "Being an athlete helped me to formulate an analysis of movement," he told an interviewer. "And movement is what I wanted to capture on canvas."

Barnes's 1966 New York show might have marked his triumphant emergence into the artistic mainstream. Instead, it was greeted with indifference. "It was a shock to me," Barnes said decades later. If the art world was going to reject him, then he would reject it. "When I found out that I didn't have to belong, really, to that world," he said, "that was much more assuring to me as a human being."

What does an artist do without the art world? Barnes, for his part, practiced the same initiative he once had as a salesman. First, he expanded his subject matter to suit a broader audience, directing his eye for physicality toward everyday life. What does it look like to walk down the street with swagger, to hoist a heavy bag at day's end, to jump double Dutch? Inspired in part by the Black Is Beautiful movement of the photographer [Kwame Brathwaite](#) and others, Barnes began producing works that would comprise a show titled "The Beauty of the Ghetto." It opened in 1972 at what was then known as the California Museum of Science and Industry and traveled the country for seven years. The second thing Barnes did was network. In 1973, he met with the television producer Norman Lear, who was preparing a new program provisionally titled "The Black Family." Lear was so taken with Barnes that he proposed not only using Barnes's paintings on the show but also making the family's eldest child, J.J. (who'd be portrayed by the actor Jimmie Walker), an artist himself.

A year later, on Feb. 8, 1974, "Good Times" debuted as a midseason replacement on CBS, with Barnes's paintings in a starring role. The show quickly built a loyal audience; by its second season, it was routinely in the Nielsen Top 10 alongside Lear's biggest hit, "All in the Family." At the peak of its popularity, during its first full year (1974-75), one out of every four televisions in the country was tuned to the program every week. The cultural historian Wil Haygood, 69, recalls watching the show in his early 20s, when he was living in an all-Black housing project in Columbus, Ohio. Haygood, most recently the author of "[Colorization: One Hundred Years of Black Films in a White World](#)" (2021), says that "Good Times" marked "a ritual," especially for Black Americans longing to see humanizing portrayals of themselves onscreen. A big part of that ritual was Barnes's art, so much so that Haygood describes searching out the artist's name in the closing credits. "Somehow the bending and swirling Black bodies in the paintings made my impoverished existence a little easier," Haygood says. "Barnes was the sole artist to introduce visual art to the overwhelming majority of Black Americans in the '70s, though most didn't even know his name," the community-engaged artist Rick Lowe, 62, says. "He defined what art was for Black people during that time."



“Blood Conference, a.k.a. Three Red Linemen” (1966). Courtesy of the Ernie Barnes Estate, Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps Gallery © Ernie Barnes

HALFWAY THROUGH THE first season of “Good Times,” in an episode titled “The Visitor,” J.J. stands before a tall canvas, brush in hand, painting a portrait of his younger sister, Thelma, who has agreed to pose in exchange for tickets to see Marvin Gaye in concert. She soon grows restless and stomps away, only to catch a glimpse of J.J.’s painting in progress. “Hey, are you crazy, J.J.? You got me seven feet tall,” she says. The camera cuts to Barnes’s stylized image of Bern Nadette Stanis (the actress who plays Thelma) in an orange short-sleeved shirt and jean shorts, bowed legs stretching to nearly half the height of the canvas. “You looking at a James Evans original,” J.J. says. “I paints part impressionistic.” “You made me ugly,” Thelma complains. But J.J. gets the last laugh: “That part is right on!”

Far from rendering them as ugly, though, Barnes made Black people beautiful. Stylistically, he classified himself as a neo-Mannerist, a callback to the late Renaissance style that favored elongated forms and theatrical gestures. “The main characteristic of Mannerist art,” Barnes writes in his memoir, “is the tension generated by conflict and paradox.” Though he was an avowed figurative artist, the impulse to abstract — to dilate anatomy, to luxuriate in gesture — runs throughout Barnes’s work. “He was actually creating his own language,” says [Gardy St. Fleur](#), 38, an art adviser and collector with a client base that includes professional athletes, many of whom collect Barnes’s work. “Nobody else was painting like him.” When you see a Barnes painting, St. Fleur says, “you don’t have to understand art; you just know it’s an interesting figure. There is this mystery about the work. It stops you: Why does it look like this? Why are the hands so long?”

Barnes’s figures are often playful, even cartoonish. Most of all, though, his work is (or at least it was until recently) attainable. Barnes would never have achieved such widespread recognition were it not for the passion of his collector base — the wealthy as well as the middle-class Black families who would, in Barnes’s words, pay “whatever your heart can bear.” However, it was his decision to sell prints that changed the trajectory of his career. “Had I not come up with the concept ‘The Beauty of the Ghetto’ and trying to show how and in what ways Black is beautiful, there would not have been any prints,” Barnes recalls. Or in the words of Derrais Carter, 39, a professor of gender and women’s studies at the University of Arizona and the curator of the Barnes exhibition at Ortuzar Projects, “Barnes was making work that people in his paintings could own.” This democratizing impulse had its rewards. “I used to come into my studio and I couldn’t open the door for checks,” Barnes writes. “People wanted to see themselves represented in art, and I was giving them that opportunity.”

“His work is really about joy and positivity,” says Ales Ortuzar, 47, who along with Andrew Kreps co-represents Barnes’s estate. “Those are two things that have traditionally been dismissed in the art world.” Indeed, irony has no place in Barnes’s artistic worldview. His canvases are domains of earnestness and striving, of unalloyed celebration and pride. This might mistakenly be read as unsophisticated or naïve, when in fact it is principled, even defiant. With the record sale price of the second original version of “The Sugar Shack” (the first is owned by Eddie Murphy), the work of an artist dedicated to uplifting as many people as possible has entered an art world economy predicated on exclusivity. But his distinctive style still circulates freely in the culture, appearing on murals and posters, inspiring a new generation of artists to center joy in times of pain. Look closely and you’ll see that Barnes’s celebratory canvases make ample room for suffering. The artist portrays almost all of his figures with eyes closed — symbolic, he would often explain, of his belief that we fail to see one another’s humanity.



Barnes in his studio around 1974. Barbara Dumetz

“There are a number of folks who will say, ‘Oh, his work has a \$15 million price tag on it,’” says Carter. “‘Let me pay attention to it.’ And I’m like, ‘Well, Black folks never needed no \$15 million to own that work.’ It’s been in dens, college dorm rooms, on faded album covers, the whole nine. These [paintings] are like talismans, anchors of home.”

Home is where you’ll often find Barnes’s paintings. They’ve rarely appeared at auction before, in part because so few people have sold his work. Jeanie Buss, the controlling owner of the Los Angeles Lakers, displays “Fastbreak,” a painting of the 1980s Showtime-era Lakers of Magic Johnson and Abdul-Jabbar commissioned by her father, Jerry Buss, in her office, alongside a row of championship trophies. The singer Melissa Manchester, best known for 1978’s “Don’t Cry Out Loud,” has a Barnes in her home. Ray Parker Jr., who sang the theme to “Ghostbusters,” owns one called “Red Guitar,” which hangs in his home in Reno, Nev. “We feel like we’re the custodians of our culture,” says Elliot Perry, a retired N.B.A. player and art collector, voicing a sentiment shared by many who purchased their work directly from Barnes. After Perry bought his first Barnes painting — “Lone Basketball Player” (1973), which portrays a spidery Black figure against a pale blue sky, extending his arm above the makeshift rim to dunk — he met the artist during a road trip. “We forged our relationship right then,” Perry says. “Every time I went to L.A., my first stop was Ernie Barnes’s studio.” Perry, 54, describes how, after the sale of “The Sugar Shack,” he was “getting calls almost every day,” inquiring about the availability of his four Barnes originals. His answer was always the same: He has no plans to sell. “I got the chance to know him, to

break bread with him, to laugh with him,” Perry says. “My relationship with Ernie Barnes is something that I’ll cherish for a lifetime.”

BARNES WAS CHOOSY when it came to the commissions he accepted. “If he didn’t like you, he wouldn’t do it,” says the documentary filmmaker Clarence Simmons, who goes by Coodie. “He only painted for you if he knew he could go to your house and see his paintings.” Now Coodie, 52, and his creative partner, the documentary filmmaker Chike Ozah, 45, who are known professionally as Coodie and Chike, are doing just that, visiting collectors and their paintings as part of a film about Barnes.

Coodie and Chike are best known for their 2022 docuseries, “[Jeen-Yuhs: A Kanye Trilogy](#),” which draws upon footage the pair obtained over more than 20 years of following Kanye West. It was through West that they first met Barnes, who painted “A Life Restored” (2005), a large-scale work reminiscent of a Renaissance-era fresco that depicts Black angels greeting mortals as they ascend to heaven, for the rapper after he survived the car accident that is the subject of his breakout single, “Through the Wire” (2003). Coodie and Chike were soon making regular visits to Barnes’s studio, where he sat for interviews. They talked about collaborating on a feature film. “He got sick right after that,” Coodie says, referring to the blood disorder that would claim Barnes’s life.

Barnes’s work is unerringly hopeful, but it’s never blindly optimistic; his subjects, like the artist himself, are well acquainted with hard times and with pain, with the toll of preserving one’s dignity. In his memoir, Barnes recounts visiting a recently desegregated museum as a college student and inquiring where he might find work by Black artists. “Your people don’t express themselves that way,” a white docent tells him. He’d hear some version of this for the rest of his life. “These paintings almost make you cry when you understand how much pain we have to go through as Black people for him to paint something like this,” Chike says. “That’s where the soul of his work is coming from.”