

**Excerpt taken from *ART FROM CAPE COD*
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Co-authored by Deborah Forman and Edith Tonelli**

**Will Barnet
(1911-2012)**

Although Will Barnet may be best known for his figurative art, he has spent a good part of his career working abstractly. And, there is a definite link between the two. It actually works both ways because of the crossover between the two approaches. Like so many representational artists, he found an abstract structure was a vital part of the composition. In his abstract work, the shapes he composed were linked to real life.

Barnet, who lived in New York and died there at the age of 101, spent many summers in Provincetown in the 1950s and 1960s. He was born on the North Shore in Beverly, Massachusetts, and Provincetown was a convenient place to visit, and an inspiration for his abstractions. "I tried to capture the landscape, the light, the feeling of Provincetown in an abstract way," he said. "And my color was inspired by the town." He mentioned the blues, yellows, and purples. In his figurative art, he said, his colors are not realistic. He was "constantly inventing." His colors are not the colors you see in nature, but "the colors you see in paint," he said.

Studying at School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in the 1920s and early '30s, Barnet became committed to the tradition of classical French painters. Despite that interest, he said, "I was never really an academic painter. I was always a little on the modern side."

Barnet moved to New York in the 1930s, studied at the Art Students League, and became interested in printmaking; he was designated the League printer in 1935. In this medium, he worked in a variety of techniques, including lithography, woodcuts, and serigraphs. He went on to work in graphic arts for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project.

In the 1940s and 1950s when Abstract Expressionism was flying high, Barnet developed his own form of abstraction. In the 1950s, he became associated with the Indian Space painters who created geometrical abstract paintings with forms found in Native American art.

Barnet volleyed between abstract and figurative work throughout his career. His stylized figurative work, precisely linear, often focused on his family, his wife, children, and his cats. He said he never drew a figure realistically. "They may look realistic, but there's formal quality—that's the structure. And my abstract work is always figurative."

When looking at his representational works, it is important to pay attention to the shapes and the two-dimensionality of his flat forms. It is about developing the "the tension between forms," he said, and a tension between the colors. "It's very important for the color to support the form."

By reducing a figure or object and the background to flat planes of color, a composition develops, which can be translated into the basic shapes of an abstraction. Barnet sees the value of background spaces becoming positive elements, just as the figures and objects are. By emphasizing the flatness of the various forms, he increases the dynamics of his compositions. There is no negative space. It is all positive. And by simplifying his figures, he broadens their relevancy and connects them with the universalities of the human condition.

His women reading, holding a cat, climbing stairs, smelling a flower or simply musing are mostly composed, as they are in *Reflection*, in the Cape Cod Museum of Art collection. These images are not specific personalities, but rather timeless representations. You can easily

see how he has placed his forms and chosen his colors so that there is a sense of balance and composure.

Cats were a favorite of Barnet. In the museum collection are *The Sled*, of a child with a cat sitting on his sled, and the beautifully patterned *Cat and Canary*. Both works are fine examples of how Barnet flattened the image. Windows also play a role in his work, and *The Dream*, in the museum collection, is one of his more straightforward portrayals.

In 2003, Barnet returned to abstraction. These works consist of bold images of geometric and biomorphic forms, in which the influence of Native American art is apparent. These compositions are more complex than his figurative works and they are more animated and dynamic.

Barnet's works are included in the collections of major museums, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York; The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; Philadelphia Museum of Art; The British Museum; and The Vatican Museum.