

Ernie Barnes (1938-2009) is considered one of the leading African-American painters and is well-known for his unique style of elongation, energy and movement. He was also a former professional football player and author.

Barnes was born during the Jim Crow era in Durham, North Carolina. His father worked as a shipping clerk and his mother oversaw the household staff for a prominent local attorney. Even though they lived in the “the bottom” section of the city, their home was always well-maintained and the Barnes family emphasized the arts, education and strong faith.



As a young boy, on days he accompanied his mother to work, Barnes had the opportunity to peruse the art books and listen to the classical music in the attorney’s study. By the time Barnes entered elementary school, he was familiar with the works of master artists. A self-described chubby and unathletic child, Barnes was taunted and bullied by classmates. He continually sought refuge in his sketch books, away from the other students in the less-traveled parts of campus. One day he was discovered by a teacher hiding and drawing. This encounter would change Barnes forever. The teacher taught him exercise and bodybuilding, which improved his confidence and outlook on life. Moreover, it instilled in Barnes the discipline and dedication that would permeate his life. By his senior year in high school, Barnes became the captain of the football team and state champion in the shot put and discus throw.

He graduated with 26 athletic scholarships but because of segregation, was prevented from attending nearby Duke or the University of North Carolina. He chose North Carolina College (now North Carolina Central University) and majored in art. Barnes was drafted by the Baltimore Colts football team in 1959, and played five seasons as an offensive lineman for the San Diego Chargers and Denver Broncos. In 1965, the New York Jets owner paid Barnes’ final season of football “to just paint.” A year later, Barnes debuted his art in a solo exhibition at a prestigious Manhattan gallery. The show sold out and he subsequently retired from football at the age of 28. His 1995 autobiography *From Pads to Palette* chronicles this career transition.

Barnes’ neo-Mannerist style of art has been admired and collected internationally. He has inspired countless artists and his images are always uplifting and humanistic. His critically-acclaimed exhibition *The Beauty of the Ghetto* traveled the country in the 1970s with hopeful and positive images. His famous *Sugar Shack* dance scene gained international recognition when it appeared on the television series *Good Times* and on a Marvin Gaye album.

He was appointed Official Sports Artist for the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics and also named “America’s Best Painter of Sports” by the American Sports Art Museum.

Barnes’ final public exhibition was in 2007 when the NFL and Time Warner sponsored a tribute to him in New York City. It was hosted by his former teammate, the Hon. Jack Kemp, Susan Taylor, Brig Owens and Donna Brazile. A traveling exhibition of his art titled *Liberating Humanity From Within* is being planned.

For more information, please visit www.ErnieBarnes.com.