

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

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YOUR LUXURY

AFRICA



A Family PORTRAIT

FOR PARIS-BASED ARCHITECT AND DESIGNER ELLIOTT BARNES, ART AND DESIGN ARE GROUNDED IN A DEEP REFLECTION THAT HONOURS A STORY AND MIRRORS TRUTHS

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TOP RIGHT:
Elliott at home in front of *The Barnes Family* by Noah Davis, 2013; armchair designed by Elliott

ABOVE:
Salon Dom Ruinart at La Maison Ruinart

RIGHT:
Salon at Louis-Champagne Billecart-Salmon

Elliott Barnes has always lived between worlds. Raised in Los Angeles among books, art, and the discipline of piano lessons, his childhood was filled with gestures that only revealed their full meaning years later. As a boy, the American architect – who now calls France home – would redraw sailboat interiors and quietly recompose classical music during piano practice. “I’d change the score – not improvise, just change it,” he says. “It drove my teachers mad. But I think I was just wired to reimagine how things could be.”

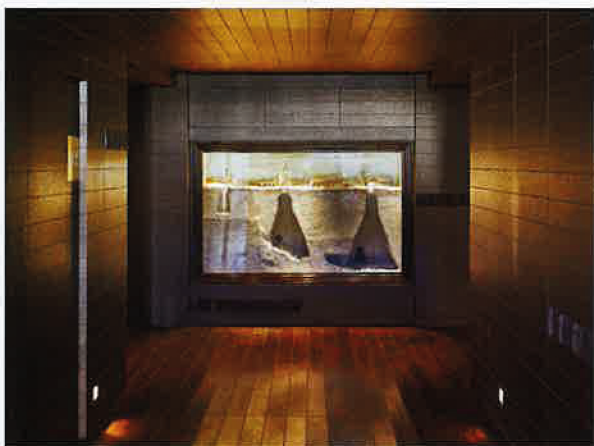
After graduating from New York’s Cornell University with a master’s degree in architecture and urban planning, he moved to Paris where he spent nearly two decades working with renowned French interior and production designer Andrée Putman before founding Elliott Barnes Interiors in 2004. Today, Elliott is a highly respected figure in global interior architecture, with projects spanning private residences, luxury hotels and Maisons, as well as cultural landmarks. But it is his private art collection, *Barnes Contemporary*, that reveals the true depth of his design philosophy.

For Elliott, designing and collecting are grounded in attention, trust, and a deep listening to what the subject – a person or a space – is asking for. “A home, a portrait, a project, they’re all mirrors. I’m not designing for myself, I’m reflecting someone else’s life back to them,” he says.

This approach shaped his recent work for the Champagne house Billecart-Salmon, where he created a new tasting centre rooted in the land itself: grape skins from the vineyard were pulped into bespoke wallpaper while dried chestnut leaves from a 150-year-old tree became decorative panels. “We called it wine paper. It can only be made once a year. It belongs to that place; it couldn’t exist anywhere else.”

This was a rare example of a commercial brief that aligned with his cultural values. “It’s an example of how you can tell a story without saying a word. The material speaks. The land speaks. That’s where real luxury lives.”

IMAGES: ELLIOTT BARNES; YVAN MOREAU;
NICOLAS BRASSEUR; FRANCIS AMIAND



THE BARNES LEGACY

Elliott comes from a lineage of boys – no sisters or daughters – which has shaped his art collection. It began in 2012 with a single commission: a portrait of the Barnes family by artist Kenturah Davis, using the text of Rudyard Kipling's poem *If* – a rite of passage memorised by every man in the family. "That's when I shifted from collecting serendipitously to collecting with intention," he explains.

The lessons from *If* – of resilience and self-mastery – anchors a growing archive initially intended as a gift for his mother (featured right), but now consists of more than 100 works that include paintings, drawings, and sculptures. "It started with that one portrait, and from there, it became a story I wanted to tell. These are works my family will inherit. There's no resale. No transaction. If something were to happen to all of us, it goes to an institution."

As a writer, I find myself pausing here. For centuries, portraiture has chronicled royalty, nobility, and white European families. Yet in all this history, there are so few archives that centre black families with this same degree of care and permanence. Elliott may not frame his project in racial terms – he insists this is not an "African American family collection" – but the gravity of the legacy he is building cannot be overlooked. "I didn't want to call it an African American family. That would create a layer of separation. This is just a family. A different family, yes. But a family, full stop."

Artists are selected with intention, with trust at the core. From Davis to contemporary sculptor Jordan Kelly and photographer Delphine Diallo, every work is a collaboration grounded in shared respect. "There's no creative brief. I don't micromanage. I ask them to trust their vision."

Each selection is deeply personal – some artists are introduced through friends, others discovered via exhibitions or social platforms. "This project is about perspective. About how we are seen, and how we choose to be remembered," he explains. When London-based artist Sahara Longe was commissioned to paint his brother, Elliott recalls, "There was a moment I saw it and thought, 'He's going to be so proud of this.' That's when I know it's right – when the work holds dignity and strength without explanation."

In 2022, *Barnes Contemporary* was exhibited at Septieme Gallery in Paris under the title *Portrait of an American Family*, a deliberate repositioning of the collection within universal rather than marginalised narratives. "The exhibition was important. It was the first time the work existed outside my walls. But it also reaffirmed something that these stories don't have to be rare. They just have to be told."

A recent sculptural commission, *Sex and Racism in America* by Jordan Kelly, inspired by a book his father read in the 1960s, signals a new chapter. "I'm always pushing myself to open doors I might not fully understand. The other side of fear is beautiful."

What Elliott values most is longevity – in materials, in ideas, and relationships. "The most valuable thing I can offer is care. I'm not trying to dazzle. I'm trying to build something that lasts."

While his design work spans continents and clientele, his most enduring project may well be the collection that lives quietly, deliberately, at home. For Elliott, art is not an accessory to design – it is its conscience. A space where memory becomes material, and lineage becomes form. "It's about presence," he says. "To be seen as we are, not explained, not categorised. Just seen."



ABOVE:
Glynell Barnes by Wangari Mathenge, part of the *Portrait of an American Family* exhibition in Paris

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TOP:
Salon at Louis-Champagne Billecart-Salmon

ABOVE:
Portraits of the Barnes family men, 2012-2016, by Kenturah Davis

LEFT:
Reception gallery of Billecart-Salmon