

ELLSWORTH KELLY

b. May 31, 1923

d. December 27, 2015

CELEBRATED ABSTRACT ARTIST

“I believe people have to be open to what’s happening when they’re alive.”

He was one of the leading abstract artists of the 20th century.

Ellsworth Kelly was an American sculptor, printmaker, and painter. As one of the preeminent abstractionists of the 20th century, he significantly influenced the Minimalist, Color Field, and Pop Art movements.

Born in Newburgh, New York, Kelly moved with his family to New Jersey in 1929. He studied art at the Pratt Institute before serving in the Army during World War II. Following his discharge, Kelly attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and then the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris under the G.I. Bill.

Kelly’s time in France exposed him to experimental, abstract, and surrealist art— influences reflected in his 1951 paintings “Colors for a Large Wall” and “Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance.” His work was included in several group shows before the Galerie Arnaud in Paris mounted his first solo exhibition in 1951.

Kelly returned to New York in 1954, where he encountered an art scene dominated by abstract expressionism. Unwilling to conform, he further developed his own style: hard-edged and geometric. He settled in lower Manhattan’s Coenties Slip, where he joined a community of emerging art luminaries, including Robert Indiana and James Rosenquist.

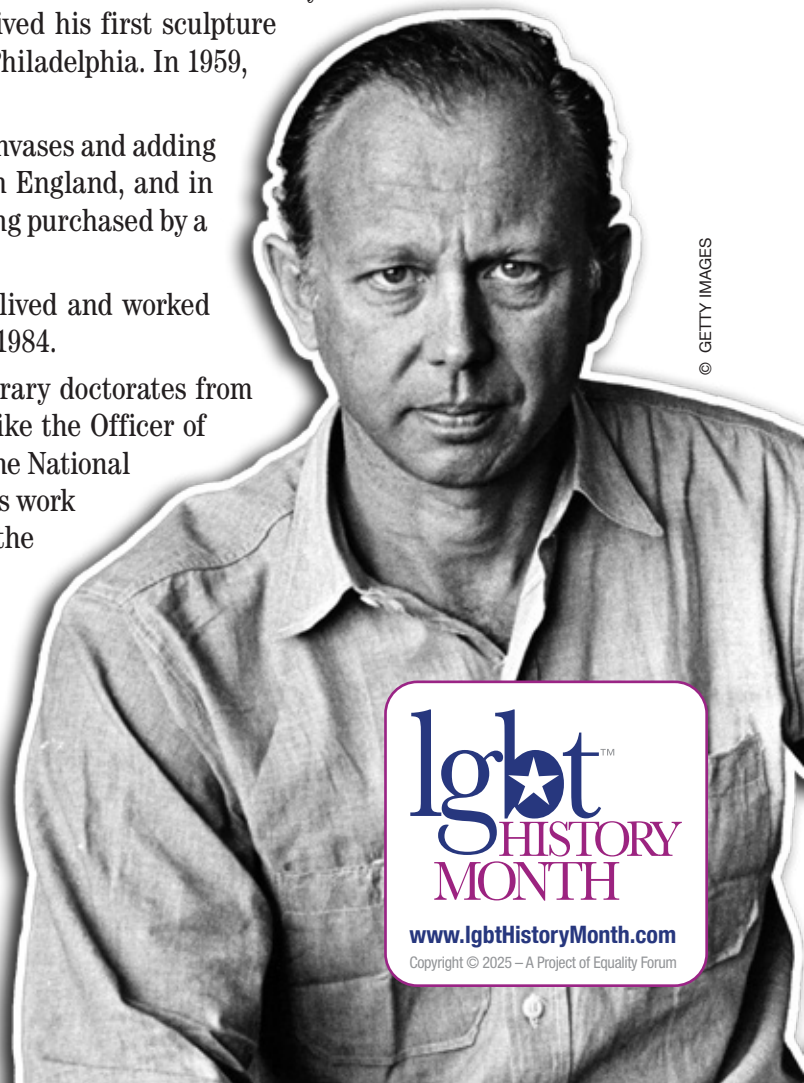
In 1956, the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York presented the first solo exhibition of Kelly’s paintings in the United States. The following year, he received his first sculpture commission for the lobby of the Transportation Building in Philadelphia. In 1959, the Parsons Gallery presented his first sculpture exhibit.

In the 1960s, Kelly began working with irregularly shaped canvases and adding curved shapes to his art. He held his first solo exhibition in England, and in 1962, the Tate Gallery acquired “Broadway”—his first painting purchased by a museum in the United Kingdom.

In 1970, Kelly moved to Spencertown, New York, where he lived and worked until his death. His partner, Jack Shear, joined him there in 1984.

Kelly received numerous prestigious honors, including honorary doctorates from renowned institutions like Harvard University and awards like the Officer of the Legion of Honor, the highest distinction in France, and the National Medal of the Arts, presented by President Barack Obama. His work resides in the permanent collections of major museums in the U.S. and Europe.

Kelly died of natural causes at 92. Two years later, the University of Texas at Austin’s Blanton Museum of Art unveiled his final work, “Austin” (2015), a 2,715-square-foot pavilion. The Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, established in 1991, continues his philanthropic contributions in support of art, education, and cultural and environmental preservation.



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